

**More Than an Athlete:**  
**A Qualitative Analysis of How Student-Athletes Develop Self-Authorship Through Their**  
**Experiences in Athletics**

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Honors Thesis

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November 5, 2021

## **ABSTRACT**

Within the context of the newly instituted NCAA Name, Image and Likeness legislation, student-athletes are able to profit from their personal brands. This legislation presents newfound exposure to student-athletes. In order to assess the preparedness of student-athletes to benefit monetarily from their personal brands, an analysis of student-athlete development provides beneficial insight regarding their cognitive development. Using self-authorship theory as a guide, this qualitative research used long interviews to explore how student-athletes are developing their identities through their journeys with athletics. The research analyzes the lived experiences told by five athletes from a medium-sized faith-based NCAA division II university. The student-athletes who participated in the study elicited a desire to be valued as more than an athlete. The student-athletes began their athletic careers embodying a dependency on perceived expectations and an identity grounded in athletics. As the student-athletes were introduced to failure, they became aware of the need to take responsibility for themselves, their decisions, their futures and their identities. The student-athletes began actively taking steps to embrace their individuality, establish themselves outside of the arena of athletics, foster meaningful relationships rooted in respect and share their stories to impact the lives of others. In conclusion, the older participants reflected on their journeys through athletics, describing a sentiment of pride in who they had become through the process and a sense of peace as they prepared to transition away from their sport into adulthood. For these student-athletes, they had begun the evolution of self-authorship, successfully distancing themselves from the external authorities of athletics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed to the completion of this undergraduate thesis. First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Jim Miller for his extensive guidance and support. Dr. Miller walked alongside me throughout this process from beginning to end. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without Dr. Miller's constant encouragement and advice. I would also like to thank Dr. James Huff for sparking my interest in research and for encouraging me to pursue the completion of an undergraduate thesis. Dr. Huff was instrumental in the early stages, familiarizing me with the inner workings of completing a research project of this caliber. I would also like to thank my thesis committee: Dr. Ginger Blackstone, Dr. J.D. Yingling and Mr. Tim Hamilton. Each of these individuals supported me throughout the process. I would like to thank my family for joyfully listening to my extensive thesis related discussions for the past year. They served as an outlet to discuss ideas, struggles and findings. Lastly, I would like to thank the five student-athletes from Harding University that graciously sacrificed their time to discuss their journeys with athletics. Each one of the individuals listed helped make this research possible.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

“Who am I?” is a question that many students ask throughout their collegiate years. From the moment they step foot on university campuses, young adults are continually searching for the truth behind the question, “Who am I?” The answer is often dependent upon environmental variables such as peer relationships, family relationships, time, location, social performance perception and academic performance. Each of these factors plays a role in the introspective exploration of determining a sense of self.

For collegiate student-athletes, the university experience has additional layers of developmental intricacies. These individuals are faced with challenges that expand beyond the typical academic and social performance expectations. Student-athlete success at the collegiate level is determined by their performance in their sport partnered with their performance as an individual. This process of introspective exploration causes student-athletes to determine how they view themselves as individuals and how they perceive they are viewed by their teammates and coaches. Lisa Salgado (2011), an adjunct lecturer in sports management at the University of Arizona, said “The student-athlete is just that, a hyphenated individual, two parts in existence in an effort to create one whole entity. Both parts are complete in their own right” (p. 23).

Throughout their collegiate years, student-athletes are continually developing physically, emotionally, and mentally. They are in the critical stages of developing their internal personal identities, becoming their own self-authors. According to Robert Kegan (1994), a developmental psychologist, the evolution of self-authorship impacts individuals’ processes of meaning-making in ways that recognize the socially constructed nature of knowledge while also their own beliefs, values, and goals.

The collegiate athletics industry is a multi-billion dollar enterprise entirely dependent on the presence and performance of amateur athletes. Formerly, in an attempt to preserve student-athlete's amateurism, the NCAA prohibited collegiate student-athletes from profiting from their personal performances in any capacity. The NCAA allowed the student-athletes to receive university compensation strictly regarding cost of attendance. According to NCAA legislation, cost of attendance included scholarships for living, limited dietary funding, coverage of athletic injuries sustained through University participation, and mental health treatment. All other forms of monetary profit were excluded. In short, student-athletes were unable to be paid beyond the cost of attending a university.

However, revisions to the current legislation have recently been passed. These revisions dissolved the NCAA's strict restrictions on student-athletes. The current legislation now allows players to hire agents and partake in endorsement deals, as well as monetarily profit from their personal brands. The legislative adjustments certainly promote financial benefits for student athletes. However, the implications of these legislative changes have yet to be explored. Significant concern has been raised regarding the far-reaching and long-term effects of such changes. Among those consequences are concerns regarding the individual preparedness of collegiate student-athletes to profit monetarily in this capacity.

Billy Witz (2019), a writer for The New York Times, addressed a series of questions in his article titled *California Lawmakers Vote to Undo NCAA Amateurism*. Witz efficiently addressed the potential issues with the legislation with his series of questions in which he stated, "What if a quarterback reaches a marketing agreement with a casino? Or a basketball star has a deal to promote a marijuana dispensary when cannabinoids are on the N.C.A.A. 's list of banned substances" (para. 24).

What happens when the young developing minds of student-athletes are faced with an abundance of new experiences and interactions that challenge their methods of creative expression, their value of personal ethics, their knowledge of financial management, their value of community engagement, and their foundations of critical thought? Likewise, what are the implications of the continual identity formation of collegiate student-athletes that occurs through the process of self-authorship?

Through my research, I intend to use thematic analysis to study qualitatively how student-athletes experience their personal identity in relation to the surrounding environment of collegiate athletics. Additionally, I hope to address the impact, or lack thereof, of an academic year on the developmental process of self-authorship. These questions will be explored and the responses presented in a moderated free-flowing discussion. This qualitative analysis of identity construction within the context of collegiate athletics will contribute to a better understanding of student-athletes' preparedness to profit from their personal brand as individuals who are developing self-efficacy through self-authorship. It is my hope that this research will assist universities as they strive to better prepare their student-athletes for the new experiences and opportunities that will come with the NCAA's Name, Image, and Likeness legislation.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The foundational terms for my research are amateurism, self-authorship, and identity. For the purpose of organizational flow, the literature review section follows a framework based upon defining these principle terms.

#### **Amateurism:**

Within the context of collegiate athletics, amateurism is defined as “the practicing of an activity, especially a sport, on an unpaid rather than a professional basis” (Simpson, 1989). The National Collegiate Athletic Association states in NCAA Principle 2.9 - The Principle of Amateurism:

“Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises” (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021, Constitution 2.9)

According to the NCAA, the principle of amateurism is intended to benefit student-athlete welfare, foster competitive equity and preserve a commitment to education as a primary goal. The primary determining factor of amateurism is whether or not the student-athlete has been the beneficiary of direct monetary compensation, pay-for-play, at any point throughout his or her athletic career.

Surface level understanding of the term amateurism is necessary for complete understanding of the NCAA’s former legislation. Likewise, an understanding of the concept of

amateurism accentuates the NCAA's motives behind legislation that strictly prohibited direct monetary compensation. The NCAA's desire to maintain the amateur status of collegiate student-athletes provided and protected a sense of purity and innocence within the athletic competition. It was intended to eliminate any potentially unnecessary distractions from the playing field, maintaining a strict focus on athletic competition.

### **Self-Authorship:**

The magnitude of the potentially unnecessary distraction of monetary compensation is determined primarily by the maturity of each individual student-athlete. In turn, this level of maturity and preparedness is driven by the developmental process of self-authorship. The developmental process of self-authorship is a theoretical concept that was fostered by the research and analysis of Kegan (1994) and Magolda (2001). Kegan (1994) defined self-authorship as an “ideology, an internal personal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states.” Self-authorship claims that individuals experience external factors and then assume responsibility for individual formation of thoughts, beliefs, and actions.

Kegan's (1994) analysis of self-authorship encapsulated three dimensions of personal identity development. These three dimensions included a cognitive dimension, an intrapersonal dimension, and an interpersonal dimension. Self-authorship relies heavily on individuality of thought separate from the direct influence of choices maintained by outside sources. A self-authoring mind utilizes personal beliefs, values, and ideas in order to efficiently navigate relational, cultural, and social situations. Pizzolato and Ozaki (2017) stated that self-authored people employ complex cognitive processes of meaning-making. Pizzolato and Ozaki (2017)



said individuals recognize the socially constructed nature of knowledge (cognitive) while also keeping in mind their own beliefs, values, and goals (intrapersonal), as well as those of others (interpersonal).

In her research, Magolda (2001) claims that self-authorship begins to evolve as an individual distances themselves from depending on external authorities. Magolda (2001) determined four stages of self-authorship progression throughout her study of the development of college students. These four stages include following external formulas, crossroads, self-authorship, and personal foundation. The first stage, following external formulas, highlights a dependency on the external environment for the construction of personal beliefs. The second stage, crossroads, is a transitional period in which the individual becomes aware of the need for self-authorship. The third stage, self-authorship, is the pinnacle stage in which the individual actively assumes the role as the author of and authority within their own story. The final stage, personal foundations, produces a sense of peace within the individual as they experience a grounded sense of their decision-making ability based on their fully established belief system.

In correlation to Magolda's (2001) first stage of self-authorship, developmental theorist Henry Stack Sullivan also researched the impact of external environments on the construction of personal beliefs. In his book *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, Sullivan (1953) posits that childhood experiences directly influence adulthood development. These childhood experiences jump start the self-authoring process, forcing the commencement of cognitive development.

Athletics serves as an example of an external environmental force that impacts the construction of personal beliefs. Throughout the self-authorship maturation process, student-athletes must navigate the environment of athletics. Ryska (2002) determined that the student-athlete experience had a direct impact on an individual's outward perception and

personal motivation. The researcher claimed that a student-athlete's universal outlook and personal drive was determined by their athletic performance and sport affiliation. This research provides an example of dependency on external environments. The research highlights the need for cognitive development, maturing an individual from one stage of the self-authoring process to the next.

The theoretical framework of self-authorship relies on the assumption that individuals are continually developing cognitively. From birth through adulthood, individuals are assessing personal experiences while simultaneously partaking in meaning-making that is dependent upon personal perspective. Erik Erikson (1968) illustrated this continual cognitive developmental process in eight stages. The stages include:

1. Trust vs. Mistrust
2. Autonomy vs. Shame Doubt
3. Initiative vs. Guilt
4. Industry vs. Inferiority
5. Identity vs. Role Confusion
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation
8. Integrity vs. Despair

Valiant and Milofsky (1980) studied Erikson's stages of development and concluded that this cognitive developmental process is a stage dependent process. In order for an individual to progress, they must first fulfill the psychosocial development of the previous stage.

Throughout this cognitively formative process, individuals develop increased awareness and openness to background diversity, they establish a basis for beliefs, and they develop a sense

of identity used to influence deliberate decision making. The previously listed techniques contribute to the self-authoring maturation process.

### **Identity:**

Identity formation and its surrounding environmental factors are a primary piece of the foundational basis of the research. Knowledge of identity formation is a major contributor to sufficient understanding of the research conducted to elicit how student-athletes experience their personal identity in relation to the surrounding environment of collegiate athletics.

In order to better understand and explain the identity development of college students, Chickering and Reisser (1993, 2011) developed the theory of psychosocial development. Chickering and Reisser (1993, 2011) illustrated the process of identity formation as a journey in which an individual discovers one's true self on their own and within relationships, communities, and society at large. The researchers claimed that research regarding identity formation required a holistic approach that must consider emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and intellectual development. All of the following aspects of identity formation contribute to the process of developing competence, managing emotion, connecting to others, developing autonomy and independence, and discovering personal values (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, 2011).

Identity formation is an inherently relational process. Identity cannot be analyzed independently. Instead, it must be observed in the context of the multitude of external influences that embody the formational process. Within the context of collegiate athletics, several external factors that influence the identity formation of student-athletes include digital presence, networking, internal passions, personal career goals, external abilities, community engagement, family history, peer relationships, and mentor relationships. When thematically analyzing the

subjective and introspective nature of identity within student-athletes, a hybridization of multiple external influences must be established, acknowledged, and analyzed.

A significant amount of existing literature and research addresses the abundance of external factors that impact the identity formation of student-athletes. Student-athletes often first encounter thought processes correlated with identity formation when they are faced with the personal assumptive perception that those around them view them as an athlete only (Shriberg & Brodzinski, 1984).

Student-athletes are then challenged to respond to these formative thought processes. The interpersonal process of identity formation is impacted by the presence of athletics. Several researchers believe that the identity formation of student-athletes is directly dependent upon their athletic performances.

Brewer et. al (1999) suggested that the outcome of an individual student-athlete's respective sport season is the primary determinant regarding their perception of self-identity. For example, the researchers claimed that if the student-athlete perceives poor performance or experiences a losing season then they will correlate that lack of success to their view of themselves, possessing a negative outlook on self-identity.

Lanning and Towe (1993) expanded upon this idea stating that student-athletes search for acceptance through their athletic outlets. It is their claim that athletic competition creates a hierarchy amongst the counterparts of any given sport that then impacts and determines self-perception.

Likewise, Brewer et. al (1993) concurred that many student-athletes associate their personal identities with athletic participation. The researchers developed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) to determine the strength of one's sense of identity tied to athletics.

The scale was a 10-item scale evaluated utilizing a 1 to 7 Likert scale. The components of the scale included the following items:

1. I consider myself a student-athlete.
2. I have many goals related to being a student-athlete.
3. Most of my friends are student-athletes.
4. Being a student-athlete is the most important part of my life.
5. I spend more time thinking about being a student-athlete than anything else.
6. When I'm a student-athlete, I feel good about myself.
7. Other people see me mainly as a student-athlete.
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly when I'm not a student-athlete.
9. Being a student athlete is the only important thing in my life.
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not be a student-athlete.

Brewer et. al (1993) stated their belief that a sense of identity strongly tied to athletics can foster difficulties during the transition away from athletics. The researchers added that the transition can prove to be particularly difficult when it is a forced transition out of the athletes control. An example of this would be a career ending injury.

Regarding the transition out of athletics, Coleman and Barker (1993) addressed the potential barriers that these student-athletes might encounter. The researchers stated that both external and internal circumstances and perceived expectations complicate the career seeking and career developing transition for student-athletes following the conclusion of their athletic careers. The researchers claimed that student-athletes tend to rely heavily on their athletic histories, and thus corresponding athletic identities, as a springboard for success within their

professional careers. The researchers claimed that there are many factors outside of former athletic participation and performance that have the potential to lead to success.

The existing research generally concludes that student-athletes are in fact developing their personal identities through the process of athletics. However, the current body of knowledge is lacking sufficient information regarding that formative process. I intend for my research to add specifics to the body of knowledge regarding how student-athletes are developing their identities through their athletic journeys. Additionally, this research will provide further understanding of the self-authoring process of student-athletes as they assume the role as the authors of their own stories.

**Research Question**

How are student-athletes developing identity and self-authorship through athletics?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

This study explored the self-authoring processes of collegiate student-athletes through the qualitative method of long interviews. Aspers and Corte (2019) define qualitative research as “an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied.” Long interviews provided an avenue of intimacy with the phenomenon studied. This form of research and data collection provided a forum for understanding of identity formation to flow from the narratives of lived experiences. The analysis of the qualitative data contributed to the understanding of student-athletes personal development as they pursue their athletic careers.

Five student-athletes participated in the study. The participants included athletes from basketball, volleyball and tennis. Three of the participants were female. Two participants were male. The participants included both caucasian and African-American individuals.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Traditionally, similar qualitative interviews take place in person. However, due to the unprecedented circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, this qualitative research was conducted via videoconferencing.

I contacted and recruited the student-athletes. The interviews were conducted via a live recorded Zoom session. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, no names were used in the analysis and description of the study’s findings. All references to the discussion were anonymous. The student-athletes were informed of the intent for confidentiality prior to the commencement of the interview process.

I used an open-ended question guide to structure the qualitative research data collection. The questions included in the guide were intended to provide insight regarding the four primary interview goals. The four primary goals were to:

1. Understand who the student-athletes are and what is important to them.
2. Explore the social expectations perceived by student-athletes.
3. Understand how the student-athletes identify with perceived stereotypes.
4. Gain personal insights and opinions on the implications of the Name, Image, and Likeness legislation.

The four previously stated primary interview goals were designed to gain insight into the personal experiences of collegiate student-athletes as they author their own stories.

Following the long interviews, I analyzed the qualitative data using thematic analysis. The conduction of thematic analysis followed a six step process. In their article *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested a six step process for thematic analysis. These six steps included familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing. In order to complete this six step process, I transcribed the interview content using an automated online program. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis, I actively familiarized myself with the transcribed interviews. Then, I identified patterns and themes within the data, defined and elaborated upon the themes, and wrote a final conclusive analysis of the data.

Throughout the qualitative research, it was my intention to create an open forum in which the collegiate student-athletes could speak authentically about their lived experiences. Through the description of lived experience, it was my expectation that the collegiate student-athletes would express themes regarding the influence of athletics on their personal identity development.



Prior to conducting this research, I was expecting to observe a distinction between the self-authoring stage embodied by a freshman student-athlete and that of a senior student-athlete. My anticipation was that a majority of underclass student-athletes would elicit a feeling of dependence on external formulas. On the contrary, I anticipated that the upper class student-athletes would portray a further developed sense of self, independent from the surrounding environment of collegiate athletics. Likewise, I anticipated that these upperclassmen would further embody the role as author of their own story. I would like to emphasize that these were merely pre-data collection expectations. It was highly expected that, after conducting the research and analyzing the data, the analysis of the data would elicit richer and more robust findings.

Throughout this research, I hope to provide a better understanding of the impact collegiate athletics plays on the personal identity construction of its student-athletes. The process of self-authorship has direct implications on the preparedness of student-athletes to successfully handle and manage the changes and experiences brought about by the proposed NCAA Name, Image and Likeness legislation. The previously stated NCAA legislation creates increased exposure of student athletes to public endorsements, monetary benefits, community engagement, and the hiring of agents. Likewise, it raises questions regarding ethical components and financial management. In order to fully understand the implications of the proposed legislation, I believe we must first develop a better understanding of the self-authoring process of student-athletes as they navigate the environment of collegiate athletics.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The student-athletes who participated in the study began by answering the question, “Who are you? What makes you you?” The participants described themselves as a myriad of titles including, a listener, a learner, a hard worker, a child, a brother, a friend and even a lover of the people around them. In addition, every participant made reference to athletics in their description of self. Each contributor said their athletic careers began at a young age, at the encouragement of a relative. Participant #4 summarized the common sentiment with the statement, “It [my sport] has been something I’ve done my whole life. I’ve never known a life without it.” The student-athletes have lived the majority of their lives embodying the title “athlete.” Therefore, who they are and who they perceive themselves to be has been impacted by their journeys through athletics.

As stated by Chickering and Reisser (1993, 2011), identity formation is a relational process of psychosocial development. It must be studied using a holistic approach, accounting for emotional, interpersonal, ethical and intellectual aspects. All of these components were evident in the stories of lived experience narrated by the student-athletes.

Though the specifics of the student-athlete’s journeys differed, the lessons learned and the trials faced elicited significant similarities. The student-athletes developed their personal identities by persevering through failures derived from unmet expectations, shifting their perspectives and realigning their priorities, fully assuming responsibility for themselves, embracing individuality, investing in relational growth and valuing their journeys and corresponding growth.

**Student-athletes are developing their identities through athletics by persevering through failure derived from unmet expectations:**

The driving force of maturation for the participants was the presence of hardships and failure. Participant #3 said, “Failure as an athlete is gut-wrenching.” Failure and hardships appeared in a variety of forms. For some student-athletes it was academic, for some it was relational, for some it was performance based and for some failure and hardships came in the form of injury. The research showed that failure and hardships stemmed from a form of unmet expectations.

Participant #1 described unmet personal expectations.

“I came in with these expectations of being the man on campus,” he said. “I wanted to be the guy that everybody loves, the guy who’s amazing at [sport]. I got injured a couple weeks into preseason and I was devastated. I asked why? Why am I injured? Without [sport], who am I? Do I have a purpose? It was good to work through that.”

Participant #2 described similar performance-based unmet expectations.

“A couple of years ago I didn’t really play a lot,” Participant #2 said. “I wouldn’t say I was devastated, but it was definitely hard to be on the sidelines and not a part of the action.”

Participant #3 described failing to meet the expectations held by teachers and coaches.

“I feel like teachers just have this expectation that you’re always on top of things,” Participant #3 said. “I think that there’s an expectation that you should be giving 100% all of the time because athletes are people who have a good work ethic and good time management. A lot of times our coaches can expect us to have everything going perfectly, meaning we’re not really struggling. We’re expected to almost just have our life together and expected to be okay.”

Participant #5 echoed this feeling of pressure derived from external expectation.

“We’re expected to push ourselves and to not mess up and to make good grades,” Participant #5 said. “It’s difficult to find time between studies, practice, conditioning, and everything else and even getting away from your team, making friends outside of your team. It’s a challenge for me, but I feel like that’s an expectation for student-athletes.”

All of the participants mentioned the struggles that came along with perceived failure, fostered by the pressure of expectations. They also all included the lessons they learned from persevering through these failures and hardships.

Participant #1 said that failure taught him how to “push through adversity and how to deal with fears and anxiety and how to push through times when things are hard and uncomfortable and you don’t know what’s next.” Participant #1 added, “I could have quit already, just because of all of the hardships and injuries and expectations not being met. I think something that I wanted to be really intentional about was commitment. How do you stay committed to something even when it doesn’t go the way that you want it to go? It doesn’t matter what you do in life, when I get married or when I take a job, are my expectations going to be met? How do you still work through that and not quit or give up?”

Participant #2 said, “I’ve definitely learned to be mentally tough going through the hard trials of pre-season, postseason and even sometimes during the season. You have to be mentally tough to be able to want to continue to do it. I think in my future job, whenever stuff gets hard, I may want to stop or quit or not go a hundred percent, but I just have to remind myself that I’m more than capable of giving it my all at everything I do. I just need to believe in myself. I don’t really need anyone else’s approval because I know how good I can be, even if no one else can see it.”

Participant #3 said, “You’re there to get better. I think that having that mindset towards failure is a beautiful thing because it really does help. Wisdom comes with experience and that teaches you how to treat people.”

Participant #4 said, “At first if I had a bad day at [sport], the world was falling apart. Then, I realized that, through the struggle, I can do really whatever. I have confidence when it comes to a full night of homework or anything else, just chip away, keep doing the little things, put in the work.”

Participant #5 said, “College [sport] is really hard, but I know there are things that are going to come in life that are a lot harder in the grand scheme of things. College [sport] has taught me my strengths, my weaknesses and taught me how to push past boundaries that I didn’t even know I had. It’s tested my mental health, my physical health, spiritual health, everything, but it’s made me the person I am and I’m really proud of that person. I think that college [sport] is going to teach me how strong I actually am.”

**Student-athletes are developing their identities through athletics by shifting their perspectives and realigning their priorities:**

The research suggested that through these trials the student-athletes realized the finality of athletics. This realization fostered a change in perspective and realignment of priorities. For many of the student-athletes, this led to a discovery of greater purpose, a step in determining who they are and what they want to live for.

Many of the student-athletes specifically stated their understanding that “your sport isn’t forever.” Participant #2 elaborated on the finality of athletics saying, “I think your priorities should be more geared towards your education because your sport isn’t forever. At the end of the day, either you’re going to get tired of it or want a job.” Participant #3 took the idea a step

further, stating a belief that student-athletes should strive to show people that there is more to life than sports.

The topic of the finality of athletics was the one area in which the research showed a notable difference between the perspective of the freshman student-athlete as opposed to the junior, senior, and graduate student-athletes. The freshman student-athlete made no mention regarding the finality of athletics. Additionally, the sport drove the conversation for the freshman. The sport of the freshman student-athlete was mentioned in every response during the discussion. For the older student-athletes, the conversation would continue for 10-15 minute increments without even mentioning their sport.

The research showed that as the student-athletes journeyed through their athletic careers, their perspectives shifted as they reestablished their priorities and found greater purpose. Participant #3 was encouraged by a coach to establish a hierarchy of priorities.

“My coach has this saying that you’re a Christian, then a student, then an athlete,” Participant #3 said. “[My sport] is not a long-term thing. What you are going to do with your career and how you study and prepare yourself for the future are the things that are important. I think the percentage is like 2% of athletes who play in high school get to play in college. You have to remember that just standing here in this jersey is a rare opportunity.”

Participant #2 echoed a similar realization stating, “Sometimes I catch myself consumed and focused on [sport] and how I did in practice. It’s an adjustment you have to make but you have to realize the importance of stepping back and understanding first who you are in Christ day by day.”

From this realization of priorities, the student-athletes were able to understand the potential for greater purpose within their athletic careers. Participant #3 said, “The sports world

has given me a unique opportunity to search who I am, in order to find what I really live for and what I want my morals to be as a person. We're really not here to get materialistic things or achieve certain things that make us look better but simply to be seen as amazing in God's eyes. My goal is to share that journey and that purpose to impact lives."

Participant #1 shared a similar passion for utilizing the platform sports had provided to influence the lives of others.

"My desire and hope is just to encourage other people to just keep going," Participant #1 said. "I want to be that person who stuck it out. I don't want to quit when times get tough. I hope that translates into other areas of my life. I hope other people see that and that stories can be told about my perseverance."

**Student-athletes are developing their identities through athletics by fully assuming responsibility for themselves:**

The research showed that as the student-athletes persevered through hardships, handled failure, managed expectations and reestablished perspective and purpose, they discovered the importance of embracing who they are, assuming responsibility for self and establishing a sense of individuality outside of the arena of athletics.

The research showed that an instrumental step for the student-athletes in developing their identities through athletics was embracing who they are as individuals. Participant #1 discussed and discouraged the practice of code switching, a process in which an individual changes their identity based on the surrounding environment. Participant #1 said that learning about code switching played a major role in the process of embracing who they were.

"You have to realize that people love you for you," Participant #1 said. "People want to have a relationship with you, and you don't have to be what everybody else wants you to be. You

don't have to overcompensate for something or live in fear. Embrace yourself. Embrace everything about you, the good and the bad. It doesn't matter. People love you and you need to learn to love yourself as well."

The student-athletes narrated a common sentiment, highlighting how their journeys with athletics forced them to assume responsibility for themselves, their decisions and their futures. Participant #1 described the feelings felt after suffering a season-ending injury.

"I can't blame this on my parents," Participant #1 said. "I can't blame this on my coaches. I can't blame this on my teammates. I will have to look at myself in the mirror. If I don't learn anything from this injury, if I don't learn anything from my upbringing, then I consider that to be a failure."

Participant #3 described their mindset regarding decision making.

"I'm paving the way in all aspects of my life," Participant #3 said. "I'm independently going through this. In the end, it's in your own hands whether or not you skip out on reps or if you have those intentional conversations with your teammates. There's going to be people behind me, but in reality all the choices and decisions I make I'm leading the way."

Despite their academic classification, the importance of assuming responsibility for self was a realization that all of the student-athletes alluded to. Participant #5, a freshman student-athlete, said the life of a student-athlete forces the individual to learn how to make decisions for themselves.

"Being a student-athlete teaches you how to have self-motivation and be able to push yourself through those boundaries that you hit," Participant #5 said. "You have to learn how to make the decision for yourself, not only when it comes to sports but also life. You have to know who you are, what you desire, and then how to get through whatever wall you're hitting."



**Student-athletes are developing their identities through athletics by embracing individuality:**

The research showed that as the student-athletes began embracing who they were and assuming responsibility for themselves, they developed a desire to establish themselves outside of the arena of athletics.

“The biggest compliment I can get is someone not realizing that I’m on the [sport] team,” Participant #4 said. “Then, I know I’ve done a good job of not making that my personality but just one aspect of stuff I do.”

The student-athletes described the efforts they took to get away from their given sports. For participant #4, this effort to get away came in the form of choosing to live apart from the team.

“I tried to leave [sport] at [sport] and just put my racquets away and go hang out with different people when tennis practice was over,” Participant #4 said. “I have tried to live a double life to just be able to get the [university] experience along with the student-athlete experience. I’m more than an athlete but I can be an athlete whenever I need to be.”

The student-athletes discussed the difficulties that accompanied striving to experience both the traditional university experience and the athlete experience. Participant #3 said that student-athletes feel a constant pressure to perform at their very best and that there is no “buffer period” when you come off of the courts or field and become a student. Participant #5 described the feeling further correlating the difficulties to the social aspect of university life.

“[Sport] has really consumed a lot of my time, and because of that I really talk about basketball a lot,” Participant #5 said. “Whenever I’m in a class or trying to make friends with new people I talk about [sport], and because of that they’re like, ‘How’s practice going,’ or ‘Did

you run this morning?’ That is really difficult for me. I’m grateful that it’s a gateway to making friends, but sometimes that is the first thing normal students in my class think of when they think of me.”

Participant #1 took the element of establishing an identity outside of the arena of sports a step further. Participant #5 addressed the transition away from sports after college and the corresponding need for an identity not tied to athletics.

“Why can’t I be successful in other arenas of life,” Participant #1 said. “Athletes don’t have to come back and become a coach. They can be successful in different things in life. They can do much more than just sports. With the transition away from [sport], I am fearful and it is uncomfortable because it’s the first thing I’ve ever been passionate about. I’m having to find new things that I’m passionate about. However, I’m excited about the next 10 years of my life and being able to apply all the things I’ve learned from the game of [sport].”

As the student-athletes realized the need for an identity outside of athletics and strived to establish that identity, they encountered many stereotypes. The student-athletes worked to fight against these stereotypes, desiring to be seen as more than simply just an athlete.

Participant #4 describe one of the many stereotypes student athletes face stating, “I see the stereotype of just sitting in the back of class, getting through it, going to practice, doing the bare minimum of studying and homework. I know that stereotype, but I would like to think I’m an outlier for that. A lot of people want people to respect their status as an athlete, but my status as an athlete doesn’t matter as much to me. I don’t go out of my way to make someone think I’m any higher than them because of a sport or hobby kind of thing.”

Participant #1 said, “I want people to know I’m smart. I want you to know that I can articulate my thoughts. I want you to know that I’m just as valuable. I feel like athletes get put in

a box sometimes. Sometimes you're only seen as valuable if you perform well on the court. Once that is taken away, then who am I? Do you still value me? That has been the story of my life in some ways, people telling me you can't do this or that. For so long, you believe those things. I had the chance to recreate myself. If basketball and my expectations would have went the way that I imagined, I wouldn't even be here talking to you right now. I wouldn't have learned anything, and I would be the same guy."

**Student-athletes are developing their identities through athletics by investing in relational growth:**

The research showed that as the student-athletes sought to establish themselves as more than an athlete, they began to comprehend the relational aspect to identity formation. The student-athletes realized the importance of learning from external influences, building meaningful relationships, learning to respect others, valuing vulnerability, and participating in open conversations.

The participants addressed the many external influences that their sport introduced to them. The student-athletes also mentioned the lasting impacts that these external influences had on their lives.

Participant #1 said, "I don't think that I would be the man that I am today if I wouldn't have played [sport]. I've made some really good friends. I was in really good relationships with people who have helped me embrace myself. I have some great people I have crossed paths with. They were able to encourage me and just be like, hey, I don't think you're living up to your full potential."

Participant #2 echoed the influence and importance of teammates saying, "With everything that we go through, we go through it together. It's not really an individual thing."

Participant #3 added mention to coaches as impactful external influences. Participant #3 said, “Whenever I’m asked who the most influential people in my life are I could name five of them and they’re all coaches.”

The research showed that as the student-athletes journeyed through athletics, they desired to be seen and known as more than just an athlete. From this desire, stemmed a realization that other people deserve a similar level of respect.

Participant #5 tied this realization to their religious worldview. Participant #5 said, “That’s God’s greatest commandment, to love our neighbors first. I think that’s probably the most important thing, to be able to put yourself last even when you are dealing with day to day struggles. I think being a good teammate will 100% carry on to later in life.”

Participant #2 said, “Respect is a mutual thing that you have to have in relationships. I think that in any type of situation, whether it’s a coach on player, teacher with a student, or boyfriend with a girlfriend, if you take respect out of the equation a lot of the core moral values start to fall apart. You realize, with maturity, that nobody thinks the same as you. If you do come across that person, it is so rare. In sports, you have to realize that each person needs respect because each person is going to have their own opinion.”

Participant #1 said, “In every encounter you have, in every conversation and every relationship, somebody has something to offer you. It might not necessarily be something you can touch or feel, but it might be something that changes your life forever.”

The student-athletes described valuing vulnerability and participating in open conversations as important elements to relational growth and development. As the student-athletes learned from external influences and grew in respect for their counterparts, they

relayed that this relational aspect of identity formation would not be possible without openness and vulnerability.

“You don’t have to be tough,” Participant #1 said. “It’s okay to cry and it’s ok to let out emotions.”

The student-athletes also addressed the aspect of mental health within the context of vulnerability, open conversations and relational development as well.

“There’s a lot of internal struggles that come with being a student-athlete,” Participant #5 said. “It is important to be able to share those with other people, not only for your own wellbeing but also to help others.”

Participant #3 echoed the importance of openness for mental health saying, “My coach does a great job of talking about mental health and just how important it is that you’re able to talk about those things and have those tough conversations.”

**Students-athletes are developing their identities through athletics by valuing their journeys and the corresponding growth:**

The student-athletes concluded by speaking about the good they have seen through their lived experiences with athletics. The perspective and corresponding vocabulary shifted in relation to the academic year of the participants. The older student-athletes were reflective in tone, while the younger students were more futuristic in thinking. The older student-athletes spoke about how their athletic journey had shaped who they are. The younger student-athletes, particularly the freshman, elaborated on the impact they hoped their journey in sports would have.

Participant #1 said, “You’ve overcome so much and you need to take time to celebrate that. You need to take some time just to enjoy where you are and enjoy where you’ve come from.”

Participant #3 said, “You strive for what you want. You work hard for it, nothing’s given to you. That has a lot to do with how I’ve grown as a person and the type of morals I want to live by and the character I set for myself.”

Participant #4 said, “I try not to get my pride wrapped up in tennis. I’ve never been the biggest guy in my early stages of tennis. My way was playing just to stay on the court for however long it took to win and just touch every ball and just never miss. My parents would say, ‘You know we never underestimate you.’ Whether it be in school or any small thing, you just look at it as a competition and just never see anything as impossible. It’s really shaped who I am and the way I approach things.”

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS**

In an attempt to address the preparedness of student-athletes to profit from their personal brand within the context of the new NCAA legislation, I researched the lived experiences of collegiate student-athletes to see how they were developing their identities through athletics. The previously stated results derived from the research highlight the relational process of identity formation for student-athletes as they journey through their athletic careers. The identity formation process and corresponding data mirror Magdola's theory of self-authorship. As stated by Magdola (2001), "...as one continues to distance themselves from depending on external authorities for beliefs, identities and social relationships, self-authorship begins."

Magdola's theory of self-authorship revolves around the concept of developing individuality of thought. The maturation process is a four-step process. All four steps of the process were described in the lived experiences of the student-athletes.

The first step is following external formulas. This step is driven by a dependency on the external environment. For the student-athletes, this came in the form of being defined and driven by stereotypes and perceived expectations.

As the student-athletes began to experience hardships, failures and shortcomings, they became aware of the need to take responsibility for themselves, their decisions, their futures and their identities. This intellectual process represented the crossroads step in Magdola's (2001) process of self-authorship, the step in which the individuals became aware of the need for self-authorship.

Following this realization and raised awareness, the student-athletes began actively taking steps to embrace their individuality, establish themselves outside of the arena of athletics,

foster meaningful relationships rooted in respect and share their stories to impact the lives of others. These actions were a representation of the third stage of self-authorship, the pinnacle stage in which the individual actively assumes the role as the author of and authority within their own story.

Based on the research, I would argue that the final stage of self-authorship, the personal foundations stage, was not evident in the narratives of all of the student-athletes. However, I do believe it was seen in the lives of the majority of the student-athletes, especially the upperclassmen. The final stage of self-authorship, in which the individual discovers a sense of peace as they experience a grounded sense of their decision-making ability based on their fully established belief system, was evident in the dialogue of older participants as they reflected on their journeys through athletics, cherished the lessons they had learned and the relationships they had developed, stated pride in who they had become through process and as they described the peace they felt as they prepared to transition into adulthood. For these student-athletes, they had successfully distanced themselves from the external authorities of athletics in order to evolve through the process of self-authorship.

The research from this study is not intended to serve as a generalization defining the identity development process of all student-athletes. This merely highlights the lived experiences and corresponding development of a group of collegiate student-athletes. A potential limitation of the research could be that the student-athletes who participated in this research all experienced their collegiate careers within the same environment. Additionally, it is possible that the student-athletes had similar upbringings due to the nature of the religiously-affiliated university in which they were enrolled. Subsequent analysis could be done with a broader demographic to further understand the identity development of student-athletes nationwide.



Within the context of the newly passed NCAA legislation allowing student-athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness, I hope that this research can serve as a resource for universities as they partner alongside student-athletes throughout this process.

I hope that the results of this research will give universities an idea of the cognitive journey that student-athletes embark upon as they navigate the environment of collegiate athletics. I hope that it shines light on the struggles they face and the factors that influence their decision making.

The NCAA legislation exposes student-athletes to a myriad of opportunities and experiences, all of which are tied to their personal brands. Their personal brands have two components, that of the athlete and that of the individual. As student-athletes develop their brands and navigate public endorsements, monetary benefits, community engagement and the corresponding ethical components, I hope this research will serve as a guideline to assess the preparedness of the student-athletes as they develop self-efficacy through self-authorship.

Most importantly, I hope that this research will remind universities, corporations and the student-athletes that they are more than just athletes. They are listeners, learners, children, brothers and friends. Though their sport has given them a valuable platform, they are equally as valuable as an individual outside of their sport.

**APPENDIX A**  
**PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>
#1	Graduate Student	Basketball	Male	African-American
#2	Senior	Basketball	Female	African-American
#3	Junior	Volleyball	Female	Caucasian
#4	Sophomore	Tennis	Male	Caucasian
#5	Freshman	Basketball	Female	Caucasian

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