

**Examining the phenomena of eating habits and body image satisfaction: An in depth study
of the elite rhythmic gymnast as they transition into retirement from the sport.**

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DECLARATION

I, Amy Di Palma, declare that this dissertation, entitled Examining the phenomena of eating habits and body image satisfaction: An in depth study on the elite rhythmic gymnast as they transition into retirement from the sport, submitted as the completion of my Masters in Psychology by dissertation, at Department of Psychology, University of South Africa (UNISA), is my own unaided work and that all sources have been accredited within the text, as well as in the reference list.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research and my work to a former Canadian National Rhythmic Gymnastics coach and member of the Bulgarian National Team, Mrs. Nadia Mihaylova. Nadia encompasses the true meaning of amateur sport and demonstrated what it means to be more than a coach to her athletes. Nadia was a friend as well as a second mother to her gymnasts and today she continues to support and encourage her former 'babies' all over the world.

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ABSTRACT

Rhythmic gymnastics is a demanding sport that requires the athlete to not only execute the moves and elements required with perfection, but also demands a very specific lean body type in order to compete and be successful within the sport. This study explores retired gymnasts' experiences of competing in rhythmic gymnastics at an elite level, as well as, exploring their experiences in relation to personal body image satisfaction and eating habits when they enter into retirement from the sport. The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of the athlete's experiences as a rhythmic gymnast, as well as aspects of body image satisfaction and eating habits, following retirement from rhythmic gymnastics. The study provided a semi-structured interview to seven retired elite rhythmic gymnasts from Canada that had competed at provincial, national, and international levels. The data for this in-depth phenomenological study was obtained through the means of the semi-structured interviews to allow for the researcher to obtain an understanding of each of the gymnasts own personal experiences in their retired years. The transcription of each interview was then analysed and coded, first manually and then electronically using the qualitative coding software program ATLAS.ti, into various categories as well as themes found within the data. Findings were interpreted utilising the method of phenomenology explored themes relating to negative body image and poor eating habits both during their athletic career and after they had transitioned out of the sport and into retirement. In addition, the themes suggested that most of the former athletes still related to their elite rhythmic gymnastics identity with respect to their body image even after years of being in retirement. Participants seemed to highlight difficulties with lower self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as struggles regarding the acceptance of their body type and body image, themes also spoke to some participants' dissatisfaction towards their new body post gymnastics. Ethical approval was obtained and all ethical standards were maintained throughout the duration of the research.

Keywords: Elite rhythmic gymnasts, phenomenology, body image, eating habits, females, transition, retirement.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter one provides an overview of the research and an introduction to the subject area, as well as the key concepts pertinent to the research. Chapter one also outlines the research aims, as well as the research rationale. Thereafter this chapter explores the structure of the research dissertation.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Retiring from an elite level of sport can be a difficult transition for many former athletes (Alfermann, 2000; Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997). There have been numerous reported difficulties associated with the retirement transition of female athletes including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and disordered eating habits (Blinde & Strata, 1992; Papathamas & Lavalley, 2006; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Athletes are often more susceptible to disordered eating or negative body image throughout their athletic career (Quinn, 2013). More specifically, rhythmic gymnasts may be even more susceptible to encounter these difficulties, as well as other physical and mental challenges, due to the aesthetic nature and body specific demands associated with the sport. The aim of the study is to enlighten on these sport specific difficulties that affect the rhythmic gymnast during their transition into retirement from the sport. The purpose of the study is to explore the high level training demands involved in rhythmic gymnastics and how they influence the retired athlete's body perception, emotions towards weight gain and muscle loss, as well as eating behaviours.

Rhythmic gymnasts are faced with intense demands to have a 'slim' figure, a long and lean body type, to be goal oriented, and to possess a strong desire to be perfect in all aspects of the sport in order to achieve their greatest potential. Rhythmic gymnasts often base success on their aesthetic appearance as well as their athletic abilities, which could result in excessive exercise, limiting their food intake, and increased levels of anxiety and stress depending on their

level of body image satisfaction (Borrione, Battaglia, Fiorilla, Moffa, Despina, Piazza, & Di Cagno, 2013). This mentality associated with perfectionism in athletic ability can be considered in relation to the risk-factors of unhealthy eating based on their individual body image satisfaction levels, concerns with weight, and behaviours, such as restricting food intake (de Bruin et al., 2007). Research highlights that such perceptions of body image dissatisfaction can be associated with unhealthy eating habits and weight control behaviours (Borrione et al., 2013). These behaviours, even though they may seem acceptable, or even normal for the gymnast, can lead to extremely unhealthy practices, often maintained in the name of the sport and their commitment to competing at the elite level (Thompson & Sherman, 1993). Gymnasts in particular, may be satisfied with their body image in their daily lives; however they believe that in competition they need to be thinner in order to enhance their skills (de Bruin, Oudejans, & Bakker, 2007). According to Thompson and Sherman (1993), a rhythmic gymnast may develop these negative feelings because of the stringent judging criteria to be thin when competing at an elite level. For some athletes, this awareness leads to the development of negative eating habits and/or an inaccurate body image, usually while they are still in training. All of these demands associated with the sport begin at a young age and are carried through adolescence and into retirement as most gymnasts peak between the ages of 16-20 in their pre-pubescent years (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). It is during their adolescent years that the athletes will undergo the physical challenges involved in puberty, which will result in a personal struggle with the ideals of body type involved in the sport that can be carried through as they transition out of the sport and into the formation of a new non-athletic identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). This may result in the development of a negative body perception which may become significantly more evident when they have entered into retirement as a result of the absence of such a strict and intense training regime. It is at this point in their lives, upon retiring, that it could be possible that the athlete is still comparing themselves to their competition body, which may result in a lower body image satisfaction level in their daily lives. As a result of the intensity of their training and the aesthetic nature of the sport, such athletes are very conscious of their body weight, muscle mass and tone, body fat percentages, and their overall body image (Vieira, Amorim, Vieira, Amorim & Rocha, 2009). This concern carries through into their retirement as the former athlete develops a concern in regards to the physical changes that their body is undergoing, due to lack of intense training

and a change in nutrition, which can result in a more negative body image as well as negatively affect their self-esteem (Stephan, Torregrosa & Sanchez, 2007).

1.2 RESEARCH AIMS

The central aim of this study is to gain general insight into the lived experiences of former elite level Canadian rhythmic gymnasts in order to gain a better understanding of the transition process from sport and competition into retirement. The research explores the meanings and subjective experiences of retired rhythmic gymnasts, aiming to contribute to the field of gymnastics and in particular rhythmic gymnastics. The research aims to supplement existing literature, with a particular focus on body image and the nutritional habits of a retired rhythmic gymnast, and thus to explore understanding of this transition and process. Furthermore, the research aims to explore participant's experience of any current methods of support to aid the retiring rhythmic gymnast, if any. Moreover the research aims to explore the lived experiences of the retired rhythmic gymnast in relation to body image and nutritional habits, as well as to identify a support system for the retired rhythmic gymnasts based on the lived experiences of rhythmic gymnasts to aid in the transition out of sport and into their retirement. In this manner the research aims to obtain an in-depth phenomenological understanding of experiences of retired rhythmic gymnasts, and it is through this the research aims to create an awareness regarding the transition from elite level of sport, particularly within aesthetically based sports. Finally, the research aims to contribute and highlight the need for further engagement with transition and retirement processes in elite sports.

1.3 RESEARCH RATIONALE

The aim of the research is to explore female athletes who are no longer training or competing in aesthetic sports or activities at an elite level, more specifically rhythmic gymnastics and to explore the retired gymnasts' experiences, particularly exploring aspects relating to body image and eating habits. The research will provide an insight into and hope to gain a better understanding into the difficulties experienced by retired rhythmic gymnasts in hopes of assisting with the difficulties experienced in relation to body image and eating habits. This research will also provide insight into specific means to provide interventions and support systems for retiring rhythmic gymnasts that are tailored to their individual needs as they undergo the transition out of competitive sport at the elite level, an area that hasn't been sufficiently explored or developed.

The main rationale of this research study is to explore and understand the body image satisfaction levels and eating habits amongst former elite level rhythmic gymnasts after they have transitioned into retirement from the sport as a means to develop and create interventions into this space to assist and develop. This area of research is important because the majority of the current research focuses on body image and eating habits of the athletes while they are still involved in an aesthetic sport that encourages a specific slim and thin body type in order to be successful within the sport, as well as the pressures and influences on the female that come along with trying to achieve the ideal body type. For example in aesthetically judged sports, such as gymnastics, an athletes body composition is believed to influence the judges decisions which results in added psychological stress on the athlete to diet in order to achieve a specific body type (Sungot-Borgen, Meyer, Lohman, Ackland, Maughan, Stewart, & Muller, 2013). In addition Vieira, Amorim, Vieira, & Rocha (2009) studied 48 competing rhythmic gymnasts at both the junior and senior categories, and concluded that the aesthetic nature of the sport is a main factor in the presence of distorted body image and eating behaviours found in the elite athletes. Thus previous research focuses on athlete's experiences in aesthetic oriented sports and the relationship it has with their eating habits and body image while still involved in competition. In this manner, this research provides insight into a less explored avenue that is of particular importance in terms of the adjustment of the retired athlete following their retirement. This research provides an opportunity to explore concepts related and obtain further insight to try to

facilitate development of programmes that assist with such into retirement. Previous literature that focused on retired female gymnasts and body satisfaction was conducted by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), and Lavallee and Robinson (2007). Both of these studies were comprised of mostly former artistic gymnasts, highlighting the limited previous research and literature dedicated to retired rhythmic gymnasts. This is particularly relevant as artistic and rhythmic gymnastics require very different body types in order to reach the optimal level of competition, as artistic gymnasts tend to be shorter and lighter while rhythmic gymnasts appear to be taller and leaner during the competitive years (Klentrou & Plyley, 2003). In addition, artistic gymnastics is offered at various collegiate institutions within North America which would allow the former gymnast to compete at a lower level upon the initial transition into retirement, as opposed to the former rhythmic gymnast who does not have such opportunities to compete following retirement (Stirling & Kerr, 2012). This reiterates the importance of engaging and exploring eating habits and body image in the rhythmic gymnast post retirement.

This study aims to provide insight into this less explored area of an elite athlete's life as they are transitioning from high levels of training and competition into a more non-athletic lifestyle and how this transition can affect their well-being. This research aims to shed some light on the specific challenges faced by the retiring elite rhythmic gymnast with a focus on mental and physical health. This research was designed to explore this topic further by connecting solely with retired rhythmic gymnasts in order to maintain a better understanding of how these same topics of body image and nutritional behaviours affect them after they have left the world of competitive sport. Defining rhythmic gymnastics to the general public is difficult as it refers to several other activities such as dance, juggling, and technique that may all be combined at the same time (Loquet, 2016). For example, in France, Delatrré and Pechillon (1986), rhythmic gymnastics is characterized as a sport in search of an identity which "evolves in an either expressive or technical dimension, and hesitates between artistic and gymnastics" (p.6). The first literature to distinguish the differences between artistic and rhythmic gymnasts was conducted by Warriner and Lavallee (2008) which focused on the different influences that retirement had on self-identity as well as the physical self in the gymnasts. Based on the data collected, Warriner and Lavallee (2008) concluded that in comparison to artistic gymnasts, the rhythmic gymnast experiences greater levels of distress over weight gain and the physical changes that coincided with their retirement from the sport. The rhythmic participants in the

study commented extensively on the weight gain that was present in their retirement as well as the adjustment that had to be made in order to become comfortable in their new body type (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). It is important to note that the sample size of rhythmic gymnasts in this study was rather small, only three participants, therefore it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion based on their results alone. More recently Stirling et al. (2012) furthered research on this specific topic with the publication of their research study on eight retired elite rhythmic gymnasts and the role that retirement had on their body image satisfaction and weight control behaviours. The findings from this study were interpreted to suggest that retired rhythmic gymnasts do in fact experience levels of personal body dissatisfaction as well as guilt associated with weight gain, muscle loss, and eating habits (Stirling et al., 2012). Stirling et al. (2012) also discovered that some retired rhythmic gymnasts engage in extreme weight loss behaviours such as diets, food restrictions, and use of laxatives in order to maintain their slim gymnast physique after transitioning out of the sport and into the retired years. In addition, Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavallee (2004) suggested that many athletes are left vulnerable in their retirement due to various psychological and emotional adjustments which can lead to difficulties such as depression, identity crises, eating disorders, lower self-confidence, isolation, and substance abuse. There is a necessity for the above mentioned difficulties to be explored further as it is essential to understand the reasons for why a former elite athlete may undergo these physical and emotional traumas during retirement.

Utilising a phenomenological framework and incorporating this into the data analysis, provides the opportunity to further explore the lived experiences and the nuances within the retired rhythmic gymnasts experience. In this manner the research is able to provide further insight into this transition, and ultimately add to the literature, as well as providing knowledge to facilitate means to intervene and assist. Given the limited data reflecting solely on retired rhythmic gymnasts surrounding their body image satisfaction levels and nutritional behaviours, further research into the area is warranted, particularly in diverse contexts. Particular attention was afforded to the emotional and physical well-being of the retired athlete, coping strategies and techniques during the transition period, as well as the input of a fundamental support system. To further the research in this sport-specific field, the experiences of seven retired elite rhythmic gymnasts from Team Canada were explored throughout this study through the analysis of semi-structured interviews. The data collected aims to provide a better understanding of the former

athletes' experiences during their transition out of sport and into their retirement years. Thus, this research can not only supplement the limited existing literature, but also provides an opportunity to explore and understand the rhythmic gymnasts experience of the transition into retirement, and the impact on eating habits and body image, as a means to facilitate awareness, develop interventions and future recommendations.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

This section outlines the remainder of the dissertation and provides a brief overview regarding the structure and content of the research dissertation. Chapter one provided an introduction to the research dissertation, the specific research aims, as well as the aspects pertinent to the rationale of this research. In addition this chapter explored the structure of the dissertation.

Chapter two presents a summary of the literature that was reviewed. Within the literature review, the experiences of female athletes, more specifically rhythmic gymnasts, are introduced. The research areas of body image, eating habits, and influences on the athlete are explored in relation to the rhythmic gymnast. In addition, these concepts are then explored within the experiences of the retired athlete. Literature on the retired rhythmic gymnast in these particular concepts is sparse, which sheds some light on an area that needs to be explored more in order to understand these transitional experiences better.

Chapter three presents the methods section of this report. This chapter begins with the specific aims of the research including the research objective, the specific research aims, and the specific empirical research aims. Following this, the research questions that arose during the literature review are presented within the methods chapter. Following this, the research design is presented which leads to details regarding the participants involved in the study. The data collection process and methods of the research as well as the research study procedure and data analysis are then outlined. The chapter concludes with the general ethical guidelines and ethical procedures associated and adhered to during the research process. Finally, the chapter explores reflexivity, a vital aspect within a qualitative research study.

Chapter four explores the findings and data interpretation based on the research collected and analysed in the dissertation. The chapter begins with an introduction, thereafter the results are then presented in four main themes: athletic identification, personal body image comparison, current eating habits, and transitional support system and are located within the theoretical framework to provide a deeper understanding.

Chapter five provides the conclusion of this research. Within the conclusion, the original research questions are addressed based on the findings of the report. These findings are summarised and presented with the conclusions that were drawn from them. Furthermore, the strengths and limitations of the research are identified and explored in an attempt to improve on any weaknesses should any future research be conducted in this area. Finally, potential areas for future research that arose from the study are presented and discussed. The research dissertation concludes with final thoughts regarding the study.

Overall, this chapter provided an introduction to the research and key concepts within the research study. In addition, chapter one explored the research aims, as well as the research rationale. Finally, the chapter provided a brief overview of the structure of the remainder of the report. The next chapter provides an exploration of the relevant literature, exploring key concepts pertinent to the research, as well as exploring previous research relevant to this research.

CHAPTER 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two is the literature review, which broadly explores athleticism and body image related literature. Furthermore, this chapter explores literature relating to body image and eating, with specific reference to the rhythmic gymnast. In addition, exploring the influences on the athlete, such as their family and peer relationships, as well as those aspects specific to the elite gymnastic arena, such as coaches and competition judges.

Rhythmic gymnastics is a female dominant sport with an emphasis on aesthetics, flexibility, long lean lines, beauty, power, artistic expression, and grace. It is the lesser known version of gymnastics in comparison to artistic gymnastics; however rhythmic gymnastics is a highly recognized sport worldwide and is even an Olympic sport. The sport consists of both individual competition as well as group which involves 5 individuals carrying out a routine together. All routines are demonstrated on a carpet-like mat and involve one or two of the five main apparatus at one time: rope, hoop, ball, ribbon, and clubs. Competing at an elite level of rhythmic gymnastics involves many hours of training and dedication in many aspects of an individual's life both in and out of the training gymnasium. The routines are marked by a panel of judges and are scored based on the gymnast's execution of elements and artistic expression out of a possible 20.0 marks.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Society often places significant emphasis on individuals achieving an “ideal body through diet and exercise however athletes are further exposed to the internal pressures of their sport which often overemphasises the link between peak performance and the maintaining of a specific weight” (Francisco, Alarcao, & Narciso, 2012, p. 266). Peak performance is defined as “an episode of superior functioning where an individual performs up to and exceeds their full potential” (Privette, 1983, p. 1361). Peak performance describes a state that is also known as peak experience, which is the zone of optimal functioning and flow that an athlete is constantly striving to attain (Wells, 2010). It refers to the moment that an athlete is able to put everything together, at their highest potential, achieving a state of fluidity and exceptional individual

performance (Wells, 2010). Peak performance is important as this implies that an athlete strives to attain their peak performance through any means while in training. The athletes desire to obtain peak performance may at times be unrealistic, which may result in athletes pursuing means that may not be beneficial to them later on. According to Hausenblas and Carron (1999), and Toro, Galilea, Martinez-Mallen, Salamer, Capdevila, & Maria (2005), the internal pressures from the sport can be related to peak performance and a specific target weight (as cited in Franciso et al., 2012). The topic of body weight weighs heavily on many elite athletes, and for some sports losing weight is personally important for the athlete as they believe it is necessary to execute their peak performance (Dosil & Gonzalez-Oya, 2008). In addition, parents, coaches, and team mates place high expectations on the gymnast which contribute to the leading factors that may cause some form of disordered eating or un-healthy nutritional practices in athletes (Dosil & Gonzalez-Oya, 2008). According to Dosil (2008) “athletes experience pressure to participate in weight loss techniques from themselves, as well as coaches and parents through their comments regarding the necessity to lose weight for their training” (p. 44). Rhythmic gymnasts are among this group of elite athletes competing in an aesthetic sport that encourages a specific body type to achieve peak performance. On average, an elite rhythmic gymnast usually trains approximately 36 hours each week for six days a week. It is during this training time that the athlete is spending a large amount of time with their coaches and team mates, reiterating the potential effects on their expectations.

In addition the athlete may also put excessive pressure on themselves to live up to a specific standard of perfectionism. Perfectionism has been defined as “a network of cognitions, including expectations and interpretations of events and evaluations of oneself and others, characterized by the setting of unrealistic standards, rigid and indiscriminate adherence to these, and the equating of self-worth and performance” (Burns, 1983. p. 223). Perfectionism is a common characteristic found within athletes involved in aesthetic sports such as ballet and gymnastics (Krasnow, Mainwaring, & Kerr, 1999). According to Nordin, Harris, & Cumming (2003) the drive for perfectionism in sport is related to eating disturbances found among rhythmic gymnasts. Nordin et al. (2003) believed that the personality trait of perfectionism exists within the elite competitive realm in gymnastics because the trait would aid in benefiting all the hard work that the athlete has dedicated to their sport. It was believed that possessing the quality

of perfectionism would be correlated to eating disturbances found within elite rhythmic gymnasts due to the nature of it being an aesthetically focused sport (Nordin et al., 2003). With rhythmic gymnastics being an aesthetic sport that places a very high emphasis on possessing a specific thin body type to achieve specific elements, it can be expected that the athlete's would strive to be nothing short of this body ideal. According to a study conducted by Sundgot-Borgen (1996) none of the athletes involved demonstrated signs of disordered eating behaviours until they began sport-specific training. In addition, all twelve of the participants that were on the elite rhythmic gymnastics team were engaging in dieting behaviours in order to improve on their appearance as well as their performance (Sundgot-Borgen, 1996).

The theory of self-determination can also play a vital role during the intense training years of an elite athlete. The self-determination theory (STD) can be defined as a theory of human motivation and personality in social contexts that differentiate motivation in terms of being autonomous or controlled" (Deci & Ryan, 2012. p.416). In addition the self-determination theory assumes that human beings are evolved to be active, self-motivated, and oriented to natural development through the use of integrative processes (Deci & Ryan, 2012). These inherent qualities develop over time and are also affected by environmental factors (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Furthermore STD places emphasis on the different types of motivation, more specifically autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and amotivation as predicting factors in performance and well-being outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). STD also plays a vital role in examining an individual's life aspirations while demonstrating the relationship of both intrinsic and extrinsic life goals to both performance and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008), With regards to the rhythmic gymnast, this would be the motivating factors that arise from within the individual athlete inherently as well as those that are a result of their sport-influenced environment and the desire to maintain a high-level of competition with an elite status within the sport community.

Body image and eating behaviours are often incongruous within the rhythmic gymnastics community. As gymnasts are required to fuel their bodies to accommodate intense training regimes, however paradoxically; they are also expected to maintain a 'slim' figure that provides an aesthetically pleasing presentation when competing. As a result athletes often present with uncertainty towards the nutritional requirements for their bodies on a daily basis. Athletes, in

comparison to non-athletes, have a greater requirement for caloric intake with approximately an additional 500-1000 calories per hour of exercise (Dosil, 2008). Therefore, based on the intense weekly training schedule of the rhythmic gymnast, they cannot perform off of the same nutrition plan as the general population (Dosil, 2008). Athletes from various sports seek different ideals of nutrition (Dosil, 2008). According to Dosil (2008), “gymnasts would seek a minimum ideal weight to compete more effectively” (p. 4). In aesthetic sports such as rhythmic gymnastics, it has been found that the actual energy intake is below the requirement which results in nutritional deficits in many cases (Dosil, 2008). This is further complicated by both internal and external pressures. They may even limit intake before an important event or competition as they are focused on maintaining what is often deemed an ideal figure. Nutrient limitations can potentially have adverse effects on their performance because they are limiting the necessary caloric intake required for the athletic demands that come with competition. Such contradictions often places significant pressure on the athlete and can result in significant ambivalence regarding their own body image and thus may influence how they engage with food and eating behaviours on a daily basis and potentially into retirement. Like many women, female athletes may feel added pressure to be thin or maintain a certain type of body image within their sport (Salbach, Klinkowski, Pfeiffer, Lehmkuhl, & Korte, 2007). In fact, it has been demonstrated that there is a higher prevalence of disordered eating practices found in female athletes than within the general female population (Sungot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Furthermore, participation in aesthetic sports, especially at the elite level, are often associated with risk factors in the development of disordered eating habits and poor nutrition practices (Salbach et al., 2007). In addition, aesthetic sports that emphasize thinness to increase performance and levels of achievement have been found to put athletes at a greater risk of developing negative eating habits (Garner, Rosen, & Barry, 1998). Garner et al. (1998) concluded that sports such as rhythmic gymnastics that rely on thinness for performance enhancement, increases the potential development of poor nutritional habits within the athlete.

In addition aesthetic sports that emphasize thinness to increase performance and levels of achievement have been found to put athletes at a greater risk of developing negative eating habits (Garner et al., 1998). Garner et al. (1998) concluded that sports such as rhythmic gymnastics that

rely on thinness for performance enhancement, increases the potential development of poor nutritional habits within the athlete.

Given these previous studies, there is a great need to explore the athlete's experiences and to gain an understanding of these experiences to facilitate a body of knowledge that can contribute to interventions in this regard.

2.2 BODY IMAGE

Body image can be defined as “the mental picture a person forms of his or her physical self” (Breakey, 1997, p. 107). According to Breakey (1997) an individual's perception of their body image can initiate a combination of emotional, perceptual, and psychological reactions. In aesthetic sports athletes are constantly bombarded with pressures to be thin or to maintain a low body weight which can result in them to be more susceptible to negative body image (Bryne & McLean, 2002). According to Thompson and Sherman (1993), there are three components of body image: perceptual, subjective, and behavioural.

The perceptual component describes how an athlete describes their body or even specific body parts. This element basically described their personal perceived perspectives and does not necessarily reflect reality (Bryne & McLean, 2002). The subjective component thus represents the attitudes, emotions, thoughts, and values that the athlete has towards their body. In this component, both rational and irrational beliefs about the athlete's body are important (Bryne & McLean, 2002). The behavioural component thus relates to the athletes body perception and the feelings that they associate with this perception (Bryne & McLean, 2002). This component can highlight various behaviours that may be related to negative eating behaviours and poor body image.

Throughout the gymnast's career in the sport, they are pressured to look a certain way and in rhythmic gymnastics in particular, the athlete is often expected to maintain an appealing physique as their success at competitions is strongly influenced by their visual appearance and body physique, alongside their performance (Salbach et al., 2007). A rhythmic gymnast's body esteem plays a vital role in the development of poor nutritional habits (Ferrand, Champeley, & Filaire, 2009). As a result of this pressure, athletes often can engage in poor and unhealthy eating

behaviours, and weight loss techniques, which is often coupled with body dissatisfaction (Salbach et al., 2007). For example, this can be demonstrated through the method of extreme dieting and food restriction, use of laxatives and diet pills, as well as binge and purging techniques in order to maintain a specific body weight. The athletic community encompassed in the rhythmic gymnastics sport culture glorifies thinness for success (Sundgot-Borgen, 1996). Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) outlined that, “satisfaction with own appearance was determined not only by appraisal of own appearance but also by a decision about the importance of physical appearance” (as cited in Ferrand et al., 2009, p. 6). This indicates that it can be predicted that the athlete that places a high value on physical appearance as a component deemed necessary for athletic success, which will place them at a greater risk for practicing negative eating behaviours (Ferrand et al., 2009). The pressure to be thin within rhythmic gymnastics is often demonstrated in some form of weight control behaviour or food restriction (Francisco et al., 2012).

Current research on body dissatisfaction focuses on perceptual or attitudinal body-size distortion, which refers to an individual’s personal feelings of satisfaction with their own body image. Competing in aesthetic sports such as rhythmic gymnastics can result in greater pressures to lose weight despite them having a low Body Mass Index (BMI) (Bettle, Bettle, & Neumarker, 2001), which affects an athlete’s perception of their own body image. In fact, rhythmic gymnasts in general evaluate their own body image and weight to be larger than it actually is (Ferrand et al., 2009). Elite rhythmic gymnasts are encouraged to maintain a specific lean body type while in competition in order to be a success within the sport which may contribute to the distorted perception of their own body image and weight as described by Ferrand et al. (2009). Ferrand et al. (2009) concluded that the majority of rhythmic gymnasts have a significantly lower BMI score than elite female synchronized swimmers and non-athletes. BMI is a measure of body fat that can be calculated as a person’s weight in kilograms divided by their height which is represented in metres squared (D’Alessandro, et al., 2007). Again, this statistic demonstrated by Ferrand et al. (2009) uncovers the lean body type of a rhythmic gymnast, however the rhythmic gymnast may not even be aware of their thin stature as it is normal within the rhythmic community.

A study conducted by Bettle et al. (2001) further supports this notion and reveals that female athletes participating in aesthetic oriented sports are less satisfied with their body and aim

to lose weight despite their low BMI. This does not necessarily mean that these female athletes are dissatisfied with their actual body image. Instead, the athletes may see a distorted version of their actual body image at times resulting in their own perception to be different from the reality of which it really is. According to Salbach et al. (2007), “a mildly distorted body image of the abdomen was identified in elite rhythmic gymnasts” (p. 388), while in training compared to no body image distortion in the non-athletic students. In addition Kerr, Berman and De Souza (2006) also found that rhythmic gymnasts still in training reported to having only a moderate level of body dissatisfaction, whereas there have been reports of retired gymnasts describing a continuous battle with nutrition and weight. According to Kerr et al. (2006), “12% of current gymnasts had been told by a coach to lose weight whereas 40% of former gymnasts reported that they were told to lose weight by a coach while in competition” (p. 38). Many of the retired gymnasts that participated within the study attributed their continuous struggle with body-image and nutrition due to negative remarks made while they were in training (Kerr et al., 2006).

The results of the study conducted by Kerr et al. (2006) however did not provide any long term effects that participation in rhythmic gymnastics may have on one’s body image satisfaction levels. Kerr et al.’s (2006) research did not explore the rhythmic gymnasts’ personal experiences with their eating habits which provides for the unique nature in which this research will operate. For rhythmic gymnasts that are transitioning into retirement, “self-identity is particularly relevant because the impact of a transition is moderated by its effect on the individual’s assumptions about the self” (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008 p. 302). According to Stephan and Bilard (2003) retired athletes may experience identity issues due to the physical changes that their body undergoes when they are no longer engaged in elite level training. When the elite athlete transitions into retirement they will likely lose their athletic physique as well as develop a more mature body type. Following the cessation of intense training upon entering retirement, the athlete is involved in a more sedentary lifestyle which resulted in weight gain as well as feelings of dissatisfaction with their body (Stephan & Bilard, 2003). Furthermore, Stephan and Bilard (2003) discovered a decrease in social value present in the former elite athletes which was brought on by the weight gain and body transformation that occurred at the beginning of retirement from sport. Athletes involved in aesthetic sports such as rhythmic gymnastics may experience weight gain, loss of muscle, and reduced flexibility (Stephan, et al., 2007). These

changes in physique caused by retirement can result in an increased amount of stress on the athlete (Phoenix, Faulkner, & Sparks, 2005). The former gymnast is used to a lifestyle that revolves around her training schedule and diet, however without this intense regime her body is bound to undergo changes. Furthermore, rhythmic gymnasts usually retire from competition at a young age, which results in the onset of their delayed pubertal development which is represented by a weight gain of approximately 40 to 50 pounds (Russell-Mayhew, 2005). This rapid on-set of weight gain in retirement can be potentially stressful for the athlete as they are still in the elite training mind-set that revolves around a lean and thin body type.

According to Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), and Lavallee and Robinson (2007), these studies suggest that retired elite gymnasts are more susceptible to becoming sensitive regarding their physical changes and weight gain experienced in retirement. For example, the athletic identity, which describes how much the athlete identifies with the role of the athlete, is a specific characteristic that can either aid or hinder the athlete's transition into retirement (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Furthermore, the degree of athletic identity experienced by the former athlete plays an important role in determining the outcome of the transition from competitive sport (Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavallee, 2005). A study conducted by Werthner and Orlick (1986) suggested that "the loss of the 'living, loving relationship' experienced by active elite athletes with their sport would have a substantial impact on the individuals" (as cited in Stephan et al., 2007, p. 79-80). Numerous gymnasts have reported a discontentment with their body image as well as the physical shape of their bodies when in retirement as they believed they no longer displayed the body of an elite rhythmic gymnast (Stirling et al., 2012). This is a result of the former gymnast still identifying with their former elite athletic self. As an elite athlete, they saw themselves as having a career when involved in sport. Therefore a retired athlete can be expected to undergo a period of transition when they terminate their 'career' and develop new goals and ambitions post retirement (Cesic Erpic, Wylleman & Zupanci, 2002). Elite amateur athletes generally retire at a young age which involves them transitioning out of sport and into a new career or lifestyle (Fogarty & Albion, 2014), which can leave them with a sense of loss in areas such as social networks, personal identity, and public attention (Lally, 2007). In addition these changes can result in feelings of lowered self-esteem and self-confidence (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), as well as disordered eating habits (Blinde & Stratta, 1992), as a direct result of the identity crisis they may

face during the transition phase. The athlete never visualised their life without sport, training, and competition (Ungerleider, 1997). The athlete develops such a strong self-identity to their athletic self, due to the fact that the training involved becomes an important component in which their everyday lives revolve around (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002). Maintaining an athletic identity is also a major factor impacting on athletes' personal and psychological development, where possession of a strong level of athletic identity has been found to be associated with the delayed development of a multi-dimensional self, in creating adjustment difficulties following retirement from sport, emotional stress, social isolation, and delays in career maturity moving forward (Brewer, 1993; Kornspan & Etzel, 2001; Tasiemski, Kennedy, Gardner, & Blaikley, 2004). One way to aid in the athletes' transition is to begin career planning prior to retirement which helps allow the athlete to picture themselves in a different environment resulting in a greater level of efficacy in transitioning into a new lifestyle (Martin, Fogarty & Albion, 2014). According to Alfermann et al. (2004) athletes who have prepared for retirement are able to make a smoother adjustment out of the sport community.

According to a study by Stirling et al., (2012) retired gymnasts found that their change in body composition as well as the transition into a non-competitive body type to be extremely stressful on themselves. In addition former elite rhythmic gymnasts were bothered by their weight gain, loss of muscle mass, and the decrease in muscle tone and definition (Stirling et al., 2012). There are three main factors that contribute to the development of negative body image: "indulgence, cessation of restrained eating, and decreased physical activity" (Stirling et al, 2012, p. 6). Indulgence is experienced when the former athlete does not follow any of the nutritional restrictions that were previously placed on them while in training and in competition (Stirling et al., 2012). Instead, the retired gymnast feels that they can now eat whatever they want, whenever they want to without having to follow any food intake rules (Stirling et al., 2012). Cessation of restrained eating also resulted in weight gain for the retired gymnasts as they were no longer regulating their food intake, and instead were eating healthily (Stirling et al., 2012). Finally, a decreased level of physical activity results in weight gain in the retirees as they are no longer participating in an intense exercise regime which also leads to a noticeable loss in muscle mass for the individual (Stirling et al., 2012). The training schedule of a rhythmic gymnast is so intense that in retirement it is almost impossible for them to exercise at the same elite level for

the same amount of hours each week. The adjustment to a much lower level of physical fitness will result in a change in body type as well as fitness levels. The decrease in exercise alone will automatically result in weight gain and/or change in muscle mass which can be extremely frustrating for a retired athlete who is dealing with all of the challenges they face transitioning out of elite sport. Komanthi, Eftsathiou & Stergioulas (2012) demonstrated that retired rhythmic gymnasts felt pressured to manage their body weight later on after cessation of sport and that there was a pre-occupation with body weight resulting in feelings of stress, guilt, fear, and sadness.

2.3 EATING HABITS

Rhythmic gymnasts experience specific sports-related pressures to be thin which is a leading risk factor for developing poor nutritional practices (Nordin et al., 2003). "The prevalence of excessive training loads and the over emphasis on thinness is increasing in all aesthetically shaped sports" (Boros, 2009, p.1). Female athletes in particular may be at a great risk of developing negative dietary habits as well as poor nutrition (Boros, 2009). According to a study conducted by Boros (2009) on rhythmic gymnasts and their non-sports related counterparts, both groups reported eating breakfast, however the gymnasts ate lunch, dinner, and sweets less frequently as well as describing to have less enjoyment for food (Boros, 2009). Furthermore, many retired rhythmic gymnasts have reported practicing food restriction, skipping meals, and using sugar and caffeine as their energy suppliers to avoid indulging in extra calories while they were in training and retirement (Kerr et al., 2006). These results demonstrate that gymnasts practice poor nutrition and eating habits in order to maintain a desirable body type for the sport regardless of any possible health risks posed due to their nutritional intake and training regime.

According to a study conducted by Smolak, Murnen, and Ruble (2000) elite female athletes differ from individuals with eating disorders with regards to their eating behaviours. Individuals who demonstrate disordered eating behaviours attempt to control their weight through means of laxatives, diet pills, excessive exercise and self-induced vomiting (Smolak et al., 2000). An individual with disordered eating behaviours will also engage in numerous diets that are often extreme and restrict their caloric and nutritional intake (Smolak et al., 2000).

Athletes however, manage their nutrition levels following a goal-directed plan for their sport as their aim is to enhance their performance (Smolak et al., 2000). This often results in the athlete consuming what is needed instead of focusing on not consuming what is forbidden from their nutrition plan (Smolak et al., 2000). Furthermore, Smolak et al., (2000) also illustrated that elite athletes in aesthetic sports have a strong desire for thinness, which may put them at risk for developing poor eating habits and poor nutrition, even though they may be personally satisfied with their bodies. This is important as it seems to highlight the fragility towards outside pressures, where an athlete may be satisfied with their body image; however outside pressures involved in the sport could place substantial pressure which may aid in the development of a negative relationship towards food or a concern about body image. It has been found that some former gymnasts even resort to avoidance of exercise and develop an aversion to dieting in retirement (Komanthi et al., 2012). These negative feelings towards body image may carry-over into retirement because the former athlete has grown up in a community that is extremely body type conscious. The elite rhythmic gymnast has trained within a highly aesthetically focused environment, which may be a cause leading to body image distorted behaviour both during the competitive years as well as following training into their retirement (Viera et al., 2007). According to a study conducted by Sundgot-Borgen and Torstveit (2004), “female athletes competing in aesthetic sports showed higher rates of eating disorder symptoms (42%) than are observed in endurance sports (24%), technical sports (17%), or ball game sports (16%)” (as cited in Klinkowski et al., 2007, p. 108). These findings may be due to the fact that in aesthetic oriented sports or activities, the participants must wear tight fitting uniforms that accentuate their body type further, which may result in gymnasts adopting more negative perceptions in terms of their body image (Sundgot-Borgen, & Tostveit, 2004). Sundgot-Borgen (1996) also detected dieting behaviours in rhythmic gymnasts even though they already had a lean body shape. This demonstrates that the athlete will alter their eating behaviours in order to achieve a desired body type regardless of their current lean figure. This can result in a rhythmic gymnast limiting caloric intake or participating in excessive exercise in order to achieve that “ideal” body weight they desire to achieve greater success in competition. The research aims to examine the former athlete’s experiences of eating behaviours and nutrition, as well as body image, from their own perspective following their retirement from elite competition.

Warriner and Lavalée (2008) were among the few recent researchers to analyse the differences between rhythmic and artistic gymnasts in their study on the influence of retirement on body image identity in female gymnasts. From this study, the researchers concluded that weight issues and the physical changes that the athlete experiences in retirement were sources of significantly more stress for rhythmic gymnasts than artistic gymnasts (Warriner & Lavalée, 2008). According to Warriner and Lavalée (2008), the “rhythmic gymnasts commented extensively on the weight they gained in retirement and claimed that this change required a ‘considerable adjustment’ ” (p. 311). The gymnasts transitioning into retirement may experience food restricting behaviours in order to attempt to maintain their weight or lose weight. Coming out of intense long term training schedules, where they have been surrounded by a drive for thinness, may present body image and eating disturbances later on when they are no longer involved in the sport (Theodorakou & Donti, 2013). According to Stirling et al. (2012), the former gymnasts may engage in calorie counting, the use of diet pills, and excessive exercise. In addition, Stirling et al. (2012), concluded that there are four factors which retired gymnasts believe attributed to food restricting behaviours, namely: "previous pressure to lose weight, previous disordered eating behaviours, lack of support during retirement transition, and continued involvement in the sport through coaching" (p. 9). This reiterates the importance of this research exploring rhythmic gymnasts' experiences in terms of their nutrition and body satisfaction following retirement from elite competition. As such understanding such experiences, particularly experiences of such adjustments from a phenomenological perspective provides rich insight into rhythmic gymnasts' experiences.

2.4 INFLUENCES ON THE ATHLETE

Pressure can arise from various aspects within a young gymnast's career. Significant sources of pressure may be from peers, fellow team mates, family, coaches and even judges at the competitions. Coaches are often an integral component and as such have been identified as the greatest source of influence (Francisco et al., 2012). In fact, in aesthetic sports such as rhythmic gymnastics, “it is the coach who most chooses the weight-loss methods” (Dasil, 2008, p. 43) According to a study conducted by Francisco et al., (2012), coaches were seen as accountable for

making a significant number of negative comments about eating, were continuously monitoring their athlete's weight gain or weight loss, and advising on possible food restriction habits, and even unhealthy weight loss techniques, such as crash diets. In addition, several studies have shown a considerable link between the negative pressures put on an athlete by their coaches (Donohue, Miller, Crammer, Cross, & Covassin, 2007; Kerr, et al., 2006) and dieting behaviours (Toro et al., 2005). According to Dosil (2008), it has been demonstrated that there is insufficient training given to coaches on specific sports related nutritional information, which can result in "weight related problems in certain disciplines" (p. 24). As a result, often coaches can be a negative resource in terms of providing unhealthy, potentially disordered eating behaviours to their athletes, or creating expectations and thus excessive pressure on their weight loss, resulting in athletes adopting unhealthy eating behaviours. The athletes may develop potentially harmful and/or unhealthy eating behaviours and diets in order to appease their coaching staff (Dosil, 2008). Ultimately, this can have adverse implications for the athlete and as such these practices are often problematic, or unhealthy, and usually ingrained in the individuals eating practices. Thus, these eating behaviours have the potential to be sustained into retirement from elite gymnastics.

Furthermore, Warriner and Lavallee (2008) found that the athletes in their study reported negative relationships with their coaches with regards to weight and an increased pressure to be thin with the notion that "beauty is skeletal" (p. 308). According to Sundgot-Borgen (1996), an athlete may experience improved performance with weight loss as they feel lighter which results in a psychological boost as well as gaining that approval from their coach (Sundgot-Borgen et al., 2013). However, this notion that "beauty is skeletal" (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008, p. 308) can also result in a negative impact on the athlete during training, as well as in retirement, as extreme weight loss can cause nutrient deficiencies and psychological stressors such as anxiety, depression, and decreased concentration levels (Sundgot-Borgen et al., 2013). This seems to reiterate the significance of the coach and their authority in relation to weight loss and nutritional practices.

Parental influence also plays a substantial role and parents can add to the pressures experienced by the athlete by not becoming involved in any body image or weight issues (Francisco et al., 2012). Parents of elite athletes may choose to avoid getting involved in body

related issues, leaving this aspect of the training to be discussed and decided between the coach and athlete. Francisco et al., (2012) found that 47.8% of the parents who participated in their study on Spanish gymnasts and dancers demonstrated a “dismissive relations family pattern, showing poor involvement of parents in gymnastics issues” (p. 270). Dismissive relations in parenting can be defined as a parent that isn’t comfortable with emotions, often distancing themselves from emotions and/or shutting down emotionally (Firestone, 2015). Parents also appear to be unaware of the degree that the coaches are involved in influencing weight loss. According to Kerr et al., (2006), the majority of parents do not realise the degree to which coaches recommend weight loss techniques as well as the numerous times the athletes were suggested to lose weight through negative remarks about their bodies from the coaches. There have been many studies that describe the influence the family can have on the development of eating behaviours. According to Gomez (1996), there is in fact a correlation between various parent strategies and the development of psychopathologies such as negative eating behaviours. Family logistics that may affect an athlete’s nutrition include poor communication between parents, high expectations from the parents, overprotective parenting, and a lack of conflict resolution (Dosil, 2008). In addition to these characteristics, many families accept the various weight-loss techniques demonstrated by the athlete as they see them as being a normal part of the sport (Dosil, 2008). It is essential for the parents to provide the athlete with healthy eating habits and opportunities within the home to aid in the avoidance of potential negative eating behaviours (Dosil, 2008). According to Toro and Vilardel (1987), the family contingent is the main contributor to both the development and prevention of poor nutritional habits.

Peer pressure, on the contrary, did not appear to have a negative effect on the gymnasts body image satisfaction, instead was considered a protective factor felt by the athlete among their training partners found inside of their own club and from other competing clubs when attending competitions or development programs (Francisco et al., 2012). According to a study conducted by Carron and Hausenblas (2000) on group influences on eating behaviours, “the majority of athletes (60%) did not perceive any form of influence from their peers, while 30% reported team mates having a positive influence and 10% a negative influence” (p.53). These results may suggest that the athlete’s peers may have little influence on their own personal eating behaviours. This may be due to the fact that most rhythmic gymnasts compete individually,

therefore leaving the athlete to be solely responsible for their own performance and on-going training techniques. For those gymnasts that are influenced by their peers, a study conducted by Kipp and Weiss (2012) found that rhythmic gymnasts that described having strong and influential relationships with their teammates had a more positive self-description and engaged in less dieting behaviour than those that did not have a strong bond with their athletic peers.

In addition to the coaches' influence on gymnasts eating behaviours, judges in rhythmic gymnastics emphasize a specific criteria for body weight and shape that potentially aids the athlete in terms of success in competitions. This is highlighted in terms of scoring, as an athlete may execute a flawless performance however their appearance plays a significant role in their overall score, which then might not represent an accurate reflection of their talent or performance. This is due to the fact that a tall and thin physique is considered highly desirable in terms of elite gymnastics competitions. This desirability is reinforced in the processes of judging and is a leading factor in the aetiology of disordered eating behaviours (Thompson & Sherman, 1993) or low caloric consumption in many of the elite level rhythmic gymnasts. This illustrates the intensity of the athletes desire to achieve a higher score on their routines often irrespective of the potential personal cost. This short term thinking from the athlete demonstrates the dedication levels and high desires for achievement and perfection within the rhythmic community.

Adolescent elite rhythmic gymnasts may also experience an increase in the desire to be thin, coinciding with their bodies beginning to undergo puberty, while they are still involved in intense training schedules and competitions. It has been reported that with the onset of puberty and the small amount of uncontrollable weight gain, disordered eating patterns may be triggered (Sundgot-Borgen, 1994). Therefore, the beginning of puberty and the changes in body type that accompany the development of secondary sex characteristics can lead to a greater focus on weight concerns for the athlete (Soric, Misigoj-Durakovic & Pedisic, 2008). In addition, upon entering adolescence, a gymnast begins to realise that movements, once second nature, become more difficult to perform due to the weight gain and the changes of a somewhat newly developed body type (Hoffman, 2010). This may lead to body image becoming a focal point for the athlete, potentially resulting in a limited caloric intake for fear of further weight gain (Hoffman, 2010) or increased dissatisfaction with their body image. The adolescent gymnast experiences a decrease in their own control over their body development unrelated to the intensity of their diet or

training, as they begin to experience the on-set of puberty. This can potentially cause the athlete to create a link between their weight gain and their performance inadequacies, which may reinforce the notion that they will perform better when they are thinner. This may also cause increased levels of pressure to reduce weight and an increased desire to be thin both personally, as there is a reinforcement equating thinness with achieving good performance, often reinforced by outside sources such as peers, coaches, judges, and family (Francisco et al., 2012). Furthermore, rhythmic gymnasts do not have a lengthy career within the sport, as the sport is exceedingly strenuous on the body, this often adds further pressure to perform within their careers. The average age of the competing rhythmic gymnast at their peak within the sport is 18.59 (Avila-Carvalho, Klentrou, da Luz Palomero, & Lebre, 2012). If the adolescent athlete experiences an increased desire to be thin, this may also affect the individual as they retire from competition and undergo bodily changes that are brought on through those adolescent years with the onset of puberty. This retired gymnast will still expect to have their typical gymnastic body, regardless if they are no longer training as they were when in competition. Rhythmic gymnasts have focused on having a lean body type throughout their athletic career however, when an athlete retires from their career at an elite level, their training levels will decrease tremendously, and their eating patterns, or nutrition needed may be drastically altered as a result of decrease in pressures and change in training intensity. Following this their bodies may also undergo substantial changes as a reflection of their new lifestyle without strict nutritional and training regimes. According to Stirling, et al., (2012) “indulgence, cessation of restrained eating, as well as a decrease in physical activity, all attribute to the athletes body composition changes when in retirement” (p. 134). Stirling et al., (2012) reported that although athletes retiring from elite sport go through substantial changes, the changes in their body composition were considered the most distressing aspect of their retirement. For many athletes, the weight gain that occurs within retirement may also coincide with the onset of puberty and the maturation of their body (Stirling et al., 2012). It is important to understand that the risk factors for disordered eating behaviours and increased desires for thinness in retirement may be sports related, specifically with aesthetic sports.

According to a study conducted by Rust (2002) on the female athlete triad, these risk factors are more prevalent in sports where performance is judged and scored, sports that require

tightly fitted clothing for competition, and in sports that emphasize pre-pubertal body image for performance success. All three risk factors indicated by Rust (2002) are predominate aspects involved in rhythmic gymnastics especially at the elite level where competitions encompass the athlete's career. With adolescence and the on-set of puberty emerging in retirement, uncontrollable bodily changes may magnify weight gain for the former athlete (Stirling et al., 2012). Further findings from Stirling et al., (2012) support the previous research conducted by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), and Warriner and Lavallee (2008) reporting that retired gymnasts may experience body image dissatisfaction and weight control behaviours throughout their transition into retirement from elite competition.

When an elite athlete enters the world of retirement they are no longer training for excessive amounts, and thus go from training 36 hours a week to a much more limited engagement of physical activity. Given the intensity of their training regime, these athletes are often faced with a new sense of freedom following retirement, which may result in a desire to explore and experience different aspects of social life of which they were previously denied (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Essentially, the athlete can broaden their social life when they have entered into retirement and may not spend as much time training inside a gym or working on their fitness. In addition, an athlete may also experience feelings of despair or loss when entering retirement. According to a study conducted by Warriner and Lavalee (2008) retired rhythmic gymnasts described a feeling of emptiness and hopelessness. Many of the participants described that their retirement from the sport "signified the loss of goals, structure, and purpose in life" (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008, p. 307). Thus, it is imperative for the athlete to have access to different aspects of support that focuses on primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention and treatment throughout the athlete's competitive career. Also, this help should be provided during their transition into retirement from the sport as they settle into a new lifestyle.

In conclusion, there has been substantial research conducted on athletes involved in frequent exercise and negative eating behaviours; however there has also been research that has found participation in aesthetic sports results in equal or lower risk of developing these behaviours (Salbach et al., 2007). This seems to highlight the inconclusive nature of research on this subject, reiterating the importance of further research focusing on the relationship between the rhythmic gymnasts, an aesthetic based sport and eating behaviours, especially for the retired

athlete. Currently, there is limited research on how the issues or pressures involved in the training and competing can affect the athlete upon entering retirement from their sport as well as insufficient research that focuses on the elite rhythmic gymnast as they enter into their retirement and transition into the young adult lifestyle. Furthermore, further research is needed regarding their experiences and how these affect their attitudes they may have towards their own body image and thus the eating behaviours they may adopt.

2.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Phenomenology was first used by the Swedish researchers Ference Marton, Roger Saljo, Lennart Svenssen, and Lars-Owe Dahlgren in the 1970's in a study to examine the learning styles of university students (Mann, 2009). It was within the 1980's that phenomenology was recognised as a research approach on its own and was widely used to describe the experiences of the participants in a study in relation to a specific phenomenon (Mann, Dall'Alba, & Radcliffe, 2007). The theoretical framework of phenomenology can be defined as "the empirical study of the qualitatively different ways in which aspects of the world are experienced" (Mann et al. 2007, p. 6). For this study, the experiences of the retired elite rhythmic gymnasts will be explored in great detail through the utilisation of phenomenology. In essence, phenomenology involves investigating a phenomena in relation between the person being examined and their perspectives from their own world (Mann et al., 2007). According to Marton (1981) phenomenology can be described as "research that aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences" (p. 180). This research study will aim to take an in depth look at the different experiences that the participants describe regarding their transition into retirement. The analysis will focus on the nutritional habits and body image satisfaction levels experienced by each participant as they transition from elite athlete to retired elite athlete living a more typical everyday lifestyle. Phenomenology is therefore driven by the desire to understand a shared life experience by the participants making their experiences the focal point of the research as opposed to the actual event they are describing (Campbell, 2011). It is research that is experientially descriptive and is driven by the understanding of a person's experience in relation

to a specific phenomenon (Marton, 1981). In addition, the focus of the data collection and analysis in phenomenology is on the understanding of the phenomena from the participant's perspective (Campbell, 2011). Understanding the shared experiences of the participants that demonstrate specific life challenges in nutrition and body image satisfaction will aim to lead to further research on the experiences and challenges faced by former elite level rhythmic gymnasts. Furthermore, it is hoped that this research will begin the development of a protection plan or program to aid the retirees with the specific challenges they may face in their transition from elite athletic competitor into retired athlete with regards to the specific phenomena of nutritional habits and body image satisfaction levels. Through the semi-structured interviews, the researcher will be obtaining data that is solely based on the experiences of the participants. The research will focus on the experiences that the individuals have had with nutritional habits and personal body image satisfaction levels. All of the data collected and analysed will be a sole reflection of each individual's experiences with their retirement with the aim of understanding why these experiences occurred and how they have affected their experiences.

Following the phenomenological framework, the research study aims to "interpret an experience or fact, by listening to different stories of the participants" (Campbell, 2011, p. 1). According to Lester (1999) utilising phenomenological methods in qualitative research is effective at bringing forth data based solely on the perceptions of the participants from their own subjective perspective. Utilising both phenomenography and phenomenology allows the researcher to explore both the experiences of the rhythmic gymnasts as well as the consequences and outcomes of their experiences. According to Marton (1981) phenomenology is methodological as opposed to being substance-oriented like phenomenography. Phenomenography is different than phenomenology because it takes into account the conceptual thoughts of people (Webb, 1997). A phenomenographer "does not claim to study 'what is there' in the world (reality) but they do claim to study 'what is there' in people's conceptions of the world" (Webb, 1997, p. 200). Therefore, utilising the phenomenological approach for this study will be beneficial as it proposes to help understand the retired gymnasts' experiences with nutrition and body image, while at the same time allowing the researcher to explore the reasoning for their experiences. Utilising a phenomenological research method in conjunction with phenomenography will allow the study to explore the 'what', 'how', and 'why' of the

specific phenomena being studied. Based on the data collection and analysis of the participant's experiences as described in the semi-structured interviews, the researcher will attempt to pinpoint specific experiences that affect nutritional habits and body image satisfaction levels as well as how these experiences have affected their life. In addition, the data analysis will describe why the specific experiences have had such a profound, either a positive or negative, effect on the former athlete's lifestyle. Understanding the 'what', 'how', and 'why' will aid in the proposal and potential development of a prevention/protective retirement transition plan as well as open the door to more further research on the transition into retirement of elite athletes and the challenges they may face.

The theory of phenomenology in this study will focus on the areas concerning the experiences of the participants upon retirement from rhythmic gymnastics and in regards to their eating habits as well as body image satisfaction. The phenomenology of the study will refer to what can be said about the participants' experiences and expressions towards their nutritional habits and body image upon retirement from the sport. This study will follow a phenomenological framework, focusing on the individual experiences described by the participants in their retirement. In this manner this provides the opportunity to better understand the experiences of this phenomena. This will allow the research study to investigate how the participants perceive, experience, and conceptualise the phenomena being studied (Marton, 1981). The object of research in phenomenology is to explain the differences of experiences for various aspects of the world through the participant (Mann et al., 2007). Phenomenology can be explained by the following:

There is not a real world 'out there' and a subjective world 'in here'. The world [as experienced] is not constructed by the learner, nor is it imposed upon her; it is constituted as an internal relation between them. There is only one world, but it is a world that we experience. (Martin & Booth, 2007, p. 13)

As a researcher utilising a phenomenological framework, one would not only be interested in studying what the participants say in regards to their nutritional habits and body image satisfaction levels. Instead the researcher is interested in their experiences being described in relation to the phenomena (Mann et al., 2007). As Patton (1990) described in his study, this

phenomenological study will describe the descriptions of what the participants are experiencing and how it is that they experience it. Since phenomenology is considered to be empirical research, the researcher will use the interviews to discover the experiences and self-reflections of the participants (Orgill, 2002). The use of phenomenology for the purpose of this research study relates to the focus on body image, eating habits, and influences on the athlete, as it is the experiences involved in these areas for the participants that are the desired outcome of the research. Based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews the researcher will be exploring and recording the personal experiences of the participants in relation to the phenomena of their nutritional habits and levels of body image satisfaction. This demonstrates that as a researcher utilising the phenomenological approach, one must only analyse data from the perspective and experiences of the participants being interviewed while having an understanding of their own influences on the data and analysis. Utilising this approach, the researcher must remain aware of their own thoughts, feelings and experiences that relate to the topic and how they may relate to the analysis throughout the research process. The researcher must take into account any personal feelings or emotions that may develop over the course of the interviewing process and data analysis with regards to nutritional habits and body image satisfaction. The researcher must understand their personal reflections while undergoing the research study and how they will affect the outcome of the analysis of the personal experiences shared by the participants.

Exploring and understanding the experiences of body image satisfaction levels and nutritional habits as described by the participants using a phenomenological approach will allow for the researcher to focus on developing an understanding of the lived experiences as described by the retired gymnasts. Utilising phenomenology within the data analysis will allow the researcher to hone in on the unique experiences revolving around nutritional habits and body image satisfaction that coincide with retiring from an elite level aesthetic sport, such as rhythmic gymnastics.

This chapter explored the literature relating to the rhythmic gymnastics field, with particular focus on body image, eating habits and exploring influences on the rhythmic gymnast. In addition, the chapter highlighted theoretical framework of phenomenology and how this

operates in relation to the research. The next chapter provides the method utilised in this research.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The method chapter provides an overview of the research method employed in this study highlighting the research design, research questions, participants, data collection, and data analysis. This section details a thorough understanding of how this research study was compiled and the methods that were followed in order to carry out the research and complete the study. Being a qualitative study, the research study was designed to focus on the opinions, reasons, and motivations of the participants involved in respect to their body image satisfaction levels and nutritional habits in their retirement from rhythmic gymnastics.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research will employ a qualitative approach. A qualitative method was well suited for this research study because the aim of the research was to understand the experiences and attitudes of the subject, and it answered the questions regarding the ‘what’, ‘how’, or ‘why’ of the phenomena (Bricki, 2007). In this manner the research explored how participants described their experiences in an aesthetic oriented sport, specifically rhythmic gymnastics, and the relationship it had on their eating habits and body image. Each participant in the study was given a written explanation of the research and investigation prior to their consenting to participate (See Appendix A). All of the subjects submitted a signed consent form (See Appendix B) prior to beginning their participation which indicated their approval for participation and anonymity within the research data collected and analysed. The participants also signed a permission form for the semi-structured interview (See Appendix C) to be audio recorded (See Appendix D) for the transcription process of the data. This study involved the in-depth exploration of former elite athletes’ experiences within an aesthetic oriented sport, more specifically former rhythmic gymnastics experiences with regard to how they view their eating behaviours and body image.

The research was conducted as a qualitative study and followed the procedures involved in phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenological inquiry is appropriate for qualitative research as it addresses the meanings and essence of the experiences of the research participants as the focal point of the research (Creswell, 1998). In addition phenomenological inquiry at the same time incorporates the “what” they have experienced as well as the “how” they experienced it, with the goal of understanding how the everyday phenomena occurs from the perspective of the participant (Creswell, 1998). The main focus of phenomenological study is to focus on the descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience it (Patton, 1990). Therefore, the aim of this phenomenological inquiry was to identify the common essence or commonalities of the shared experiences of the participants. Utilising the semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to engage with the experiences of the participants to elicit those commonalities in terms of the participants shared experiences. This study relied on phenomenological inquiry to examine the lived experience from the participant’s point of view to uncover the commonalities of the lived experience in respect of rhythmic gymnasts entering retirement and their experiences of training, nutrition, and body image.

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions undertaken in this research are outlined below:

- i. What are the experiences of female retired elite rhythmic gymnasts?
- ii. How do female rhythmic gymnasts experience their involvement in elite sport in relation to their body image post retirement from the sport?
- iii. How do female rhythmic gymnasts experience the changes both physically and emotionally upon entering retirement?
- iv. How do retired rhythmic gymnasts experience their personal support systems when they are no longer involved in competition and training?

3.4. PARTICIPANTS

The target population for this study included retired elite athletes from various rhythmic gymnastics organisations. The study selected solely female participants, as rhythmic gymnastics is a sport in which only female athletes currently compete at the elite level. The age of the participants ranged from 28-38; with 8-17 years post retirement. To find appropriate participants for the study, purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the data collected was useful to the study. However, seeing as the research explores their subjective experiences, the participants were selected using the snowball or chain sample method.

The former elite female athletes were first contacted via email or telephonically to be provided with further information about the research and to indicate what participation would require and if they would be interested in participating in the study. Potential participants were then provided with a participant information form which highlighted the purpose of the study. All seven of the selected participants were assured of confidentiality and have given signed informed consent to participate and to the utilisation of the data in accordance with the ethical standards as outlined by the University of South Africa's ethics committee. For those participants who conducted their interviews via telephone or Skype, all consent forms were submitted and signed via email or fax and returned to the researcher prior to the interview being conducted.

3.5 RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The procedure began by locating a potential group of participants for the research study through a purposeful sampling process, by contacting rhythmic gymnastics organisations within Canada. Following this initial contact with the organisations through the Organisation Information Sheet (See Appendix A), the participants were selected following the snowball or chain sample method as the sample size for the study was predicted to be quite small. The initial contact with the female participants was done via messages where the researcher explained the purpose of the study and also sent out the Participant Information Sheet (See Appendix B) to each potential

participant, to explain the nature of the research, as well as the requirements of a participant, should they chose to participate in the research. The initial contact was then followed up by further emails or skype discussions upon the participants agreeing to take part in the study. During these conversations, all of the information and explanations regarding the research were discussed, participants had the opportunity to ask or clarify any concerns they may have held so that each participant was made aware of what was required of them upon their consenting to participate. It is at this time that the Permission to Interview sheet (See Appendix C) as well as the Permission to Audio Record the Interview sheet (See Appendix D) were provided to the participant. This allowed for each participant to become aware of the procedures and allowed for the researcher to address any personal questions that they may have had prior to beginning the interviews.

The data collection for this study involved utilising the semi-structured interview schedule (See Appendix E), which was carried out for each of the seven participants in a one on one interview. All of the interviews were conducted either telephonically or via Skype. Skype was the chosen method to interview for the participants as it was the most convenient for each of them in working with their schedules. Utilising skype adhered to safety and ethical guidelines as the program has encryption software which is used to establish and confirm both the identity of the person placing as well as receiving a Skype call.

Once the seven participants confirmed their decision to participate, interview times were agreed upon between the researcher and the participant and thereafter the interviews were scheduled. Prior to the beginning of each scheduled interview, the researcher collected the consent forms from each individual participant via mail, fax, or electronic mail. All of the interviews were conducted solely by the researcher. All of the interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent, to ensure that the researcher could remain fully engaged in the interview with the participants at all times, while at the same time allowing for the data to be re-visited and assessed following the interview with a high degree of accuracy. Throughout the interview, the researcher did engage in note-taking, to further explore individual aspects of their own experiences, which was supported by the utilisation of a semi-structured interview schedule.

Upon completion of each interview, the researcher began the process of transcription of the data verbatim using the software program ATLAS.ti. The researcher transcribed all seven of the interviews, which allowed for a sense of familiarity with the content to develop and to also look back at the notes that were taken during the interviews themselves creating a depth in the analysis process. By listening to the interviews numerous times, the researcher was able to develop an understanding of the dominant themes that arose during the transcription process, to further attend to in the analysis of the data. Following along with the process of thematic content analysis, the researcher was able to then use the discovered dominant themes to create a summary of the viewpoints expressed by each of the participants. By creating these themes, the researcher was then able to organise the data into sub-themes by making connections amongst the analysis of themes that were discovered across the research. These themes were then considered in relation to the theoretical framework of phenomenology.

3.6 DATA COLLECTION

The method of semi-structured interviews was chosen as the mode of data collection for the research. This method was a good fit for the study as the one on one interviews provided an opportunity for each participant to share their own personal experiences in relation to the phenomena and the semi-structured nature allowed for some deviation with the individual participant's experience. Semi-structures interviews are the most widely-used interview format for qualitative research (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These interviews are most commonly conducted with an individual or in a focus group and take approximately 30 minutes to several hours to complete (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). For the purpose of this research, the interviews were conducted individually and lasted approximately one hour. Conducting the interviews in an individual setting allowed for the researcher to engage in an in-depth manner into the individual personal experiences of each participant in order to gain a better understanding of the individual phenomena, in line with the phenomenological framework (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). All seven of the participants were former elite level rhythmic gymnasts that competed at an international level representing their country. The semi-structured interview schedule (See Appendix E) was compiled by the researcher and the researcher's

supervisor and included a set of open-ended questions to allow for each participant to explore their own personal experiences in regards to the questions with the potential for the researcher to probe the participant. There was a standard set of 15 questions to be asked in each semi-structured interview (See Appendix E). Throughout the skype and telephonically Face Time scheduled interviews, the researcher was able to interact with and observe the participants in their own environment and record any observations made throughout. All of the seven interviews were audio recorded, with consent, to ensure data collection accuracy for the transcription process to follow.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews was analysed using phenomenological inquiry. According to Creswell (1998), phenomenology can be defined as:

The act of the researchers search for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experiences and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning (p. 52).

The main focus of phenomenological study is to focus on the descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience it (Patton, 1990). Therefore, the aim of a phenomenological inquiry is to identify the common essence or commonalities of the shared experiences of the participants. Utilising phenomenological methods and data collection through semi-structured interviews aimed to engage with the participants' experiences to elicit those commonalities in terms of participants shared experiences. The study used phenomenological inquiry to examine the lived experience from the participant's point of view to discover the commonalities of the lived experience in respect of rhythmic gymnastics entering retirement and their experiences of training, nutrition, and body image.

To begin, data was sought out through semi-structured interviews of the seven participants that were conducted solely by the researcher. The initial interviews allowed for the researcher to begin the data processing through the use of the data collected from the open-ended

questions provided within the semi-structured interview. This format allowed for the researcher to jot down notes of the observations made as well as to probe the subject based on their original answers to a question. The second stage of the data analysis continued with the recorded interviews being transcribed using ATLAS.ti, a computer based data processing program which allowed for the data to be initially classified and then categorised. Coding allows for the researcher to tag segments of the text and then sort through each of the tagged segments with similar content, thus creating separate categories and uncovering the major themes of the data collected (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The initial categories represented similar characteristics that were then classified into more specific themes of data analysis. The four themes or similarities uncovered through this process were: athletic identification, personal body image comparison, participants' current eating habits, and the need for a transition program to aid the former athlete into their retirement.

All interviews conducted were audio recorded with the consent of the participants, as well as being transcribed verbatim by the researcher to ensure accuracy of the data being collected. Utilising individual interviews was of key importance to this study as this is where the researcher was able to explore the individual subjective experiences of each participant and their involvement in rhythmic gymnastics competition, as well as into their experience of retirement from the sport. The researcher created a semi-structured interview schedule that allowed for probing questions in order to gather in-depth information. In this manner the research explored the participants' experiences of eating behaviours, nutrition and body image, locating their experiences as an athlete involved in the elite level of rhythmic gymnastics and in particular their transition into retirement.

All of the data collected was analysed by means of thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is utilised in qualitative data analysis and explores the data to identify the common issues that recur while identifying the main themes that summarise the views that have been collected (Brikci, 2007). "Thematic networks are web-like illustrations that summarise the main themes constituting a piece of text" (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 385). According to Attride-Stirling, (2001) thematic content analysis is a way of organising qualitative data, discovering themes found within the research, and making connections and analysis based on the themes. The utilization of thematic content analysis to analyse the data collected complemented the

phenomenological inquiry of this study. Thematic content analysis is a beneficial tool for phenomenological research as it allows for the researcher to summarize the key features of the data as well as presenting emerging themes and sub themes during the analysis that presents psychological interpretations of the participant's lived experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Phenomenological inquiry partnered with thematic content analysis during the data collection process will result in an in-depth analysis on a small number of individuals who are able to describe the specific experience in great detail (Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007). In addition, thematic content analysis compliments the phenomenological inquiry in this study as it helps to offer an understanding of the lived experiences from the participants regarding the phenomena they experienced during their transition into retirement. To begin the thematic analysis of data, firstly, the transcripts were read and annotated, which provided an overview of data and the first initial observations that were made (Brikci, 2007). After the initial observations were completed, the researcher identified themes found in the data and created summaries of the data within the interviews (Brikci, 2007). This can also be referred to as the creation of theoretical notes in an attempt to derive meaning from the data collected (Hughes, 2002). Thirdly, the researcher utilised these themes to develop a coding scheme for the data (Brikci, 2007). A coding scheme is essentially a list of all the themes and codes that was applied to the data for further analysis (Brikci, 2007). Following the initiation of the coding scheme, the researcher began to code the data by applying the codes to the whole set of data collected (Brikci, 2007). Finally, the data was placed into different groups depending on the assigned code (Brikci, 2007). During this process, the researcher attempted to incorporate different aspects of the data analysis in order to develop analytical notes (Hughes, 2002), developing a richness and depth to the analysis. In this manner the researcher was able to provide for similarities and patterns across the data from all of the interviews conducted with the participants (Brikci, 2007).

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics can be defined as principles that represent the norms and prescribed guidelines for conduct that can be considered to distinguish between what is deemed acceptable and what is deemed unacceptable behaviour (Resnik, 2011). Ethics operates within a psychological perspective to provide a structure or procedure to manage how to act and analyse problems and issues (Resnik, 2011). It is important for the researcher to adhere to ethical guidelines as it promotes the goals of the research through knowledge, truth, and the avoidance of error (Resnik, 2011). This study focuses on qualitative methods and involves recorded data from semi-structured interviews. There are four key ethical considerations involved in this research study: informed consent, voluntary participation/autonomy, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm.

3.8.1 ETHICAL GUIDELINES

The researcher has the key responsibilities that must be adhered to ensure proper ethical research is adhered to throughout the study. For any research study it is important to follow the four major ethical principles outlined by Beauchamp and Childress (1983) of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (as cited in Brikci, 2007). Furthermore, there are two key ethical issues to be considered in any research, those being consent and confidentiality (Brikci, 2007). It is imperative that the psychological ethical principles as outlined in the necessary and applicable ethical codes are adhered to throughout this research dissertation. It is the researchers responsibility to first and foremost protect the welfare of those involved in the study both directly (research participants) and those indirectly involved (general public, any third-party involvement).

Former elite rhythmic gymnasts from Canada were approached as potential participants for this study through the gymnastics governing body in the province of Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. Initially the sport organisation was approached and provided with an organisational information sheet, which also provides consent to approach individuals within the

organisation (See Appendix A). Potential participants were contacted through clubs that are listed as provincial representatives for rhythmic gymnastics within the above provinces in Canada and invited to participate in the research. All potential participants were provided with a participant information sheet (See Appendix B). This provided potential participants with information about the research and their role as a research participant.

With regards to ethical considerations, the same ethical guidelines will be adhered to that are being followed as outlined by the University of South Africa's ethical committee. In addition the University of South Africa granted ethical clearance for this study prior to the beginning of research commencing (See Appendix F).

3.8.2 ETHICAL PROCEDURES

Before beginning the data collection for this research dissertation, general ethical clearance was obtained from UNISA through the ethics committee and is indicated by the Ethical Clearance Certificate (See Appendix F). Following this, informed consent is the first ethical principle that needs to be attained in this research study. Informed consent entails providing all potential participants with all of the relevant information that the researcher proposes will be involved in participation in the research study (Doyal, 1997). It is necessary for the researcher to provide all of the procedural information of the study, including any potential risks or benefits, if any, the overall goal of the study, the methods to be followed as well as the duration involved in the participation (Doyal, 1997). Thus, participants were provided with a participant information sheet (See Appendix B), outlining the nature of the research and what participation would entail. The researcher initially approached the sport organisation for consent to invite volunteers to participate in the study using the form addressed to the sport organisations (See Appendix A), the researcher then provided the potential participants with the Participant Information Sheet (See Appendix B). This provided all potential participants with information about the study, as well as contact details of the researcher and supervisor should they have any questions regarding the study. After individuals indicated that they were interested in participating, they were again informed about the voluntary nature and their rights as a participant, including their right to withdraw and their right to refuse to answer any questions that they do not feel comfortable

answering. This ensures that all participants are aware that their inclusion in the research study is done solely on their own voluntary basis and that there are no advantages or disadvantages to participating in the research. Voluntary participation is a vital ethical consideration for research, as it gives each participant the right to withdraw from the study, as well as the ability to decide how much information they feel comfortable to contribute throughout the interview depending on their personal levels of comfort in regards to the research matter. Voluntary participation was to be assured both verbally in the beginning of the interview with the participants as well as in writing on the Permission to Interview form (See Appendix C).

In addition, confidentiality was ensured to all the participants, as well as the sport clubs involved in the study. The researcher highlighted that the information obtained is confidential and that the data will be kept with password encryption with only the researcher and her supervisor having access to such. Furthermore, each participant was be provided with a consent form granting the researcher permission to conduct the interview (See Appendix C), as well as a consent form to audio record the interview (See Appendix D). It is important to note that for interviews conducted telephonically, with Face Time or via Skype, consent forms were submitted via fax or email, signed and sent back to the researcher prior to the commencement of the interview. On both of these documents the participants' rights and what participation entails is reiterated and the researcher confirmed this at the beginning of the interview. These consent forms outlined the confidentiality that will be adhered to during the collection of data, as well as within the data analysis and write up. This is carried out by ensuring that any identifying information gathered in the interviews was removed from the transcripts, wherever possible. In the instance of quotations being used, the participants were informed that their response will be utilised with the use of pseudonyms following the removal of any identifying information. In addition, all data obtained for the study including papers, recordings, and participant records will be kept for a period of two years after publications, with password encryption and then destroyed following publication.

The final ethical consideration that is imperative for this study is the avoidance of harm. This study explores body image and nutrition in relation to rhythmic gymnasts' experiences following retirement and could have the potential to raise unforeseen feelings or thoughts for some participant's. Participants were made aware of the nature of the research upfront and were

informed that they could withdraw from the research, and any questions that they did not feel comfortable in responding to. Should the unforeseen circumstance occur and distress or anxiety arises from any questions posed during the interview process, all participants are provided with contact details of organisations where they may receive free counselling services such as the Canadian Mental Health Association and Mental Health Helpline for the participants residing in Canada as a precautionary measure, to ensure that the principle of avoidance of harm is upheld.

3.9 REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity in research involves having an understanding of the researcher's role within the research process that helps to shape the findings of the study (Willig, 2001). According to Willig (2001) the notion of reflexivity can be described as:

Personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changes us, as people and as researchers. (Willig, 2001, p. 10)

Self-reflexivity in qualitative research can be defined as “when researchers engage in explicit self-aware meta-analysis” (Finlay, 2002, p. 209). It is essentially a process where the researcher is given the opportunity to explore their personal opinions, if any, as well as analysing their own experiences and how they may have influenced the data interpretation. Examining the researcher's opinions on the various elements of data collected is an important stage in the qualitative research design (Finlay, 2002). The findings are based on our own preconceptions and assumptions (Maunder, 2010). The job of the qualitative researcher is to therefore make sense of the subjects experiences in a meaningful way that will help to discover a greater understanding of the individual (Shaw, 2010). According to Shaw (2010) reflexivity is not just an awareness-raising activity that we engage in during the process of data collection and analysis. It is instead a process that is present within each stage of the research (Shaw, 2010). Reflexivity is therefore “the process of continually reflecting upon our interpretations of both our experience and the phenomenon being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of our

previous understandings and our investment in particular research outcomes” (Finlay, 2003, p. 108). Self-reflexivity is crucial to qualitative research as it sees the researcher constantly monitoring and analysing the data (Finlay, 2002).

Since interpretation of the results are also based on my prior experiences and assumptions of the data, the findings of this study need to be explained in context. My initial interest in studying retired rhythmic gymnasts came from my own personal experiences involved in the sport when I was younger. I represented Canada as a member of both the Junior and Senior National Team. My interest in the area of retired rhythmic gymnasts developed while I was still involved in an elite level of training. I was younger than most of my team mates so I became interested in the transition into retirement from watching many of my older team mates go through this process. While I was involved in the sport, I remained very close with my retired teammates as they were consistently at the gym visiting, coaching, volunteering, or judging at competitions. The origins of this study developed a few years ago when I reconnected with many old team mates through email and Facebook, as well as in person. The topic of nutrition and body image satisfaction became very relevant as I continued in conversations with the retired elite rhythmic gymnasts whom I had previously trained with. These conversations also brought up potential personal struggles that I had previously ignored within myself or perhaps not even noticed. I became aware of the need to delve further into this topic as I began studying my own personal experiences with the transition into retirement. I remained conscious of any of my own potential personal opinions due to my previous involvement within rhythmic gymnastics throughout this entire process. That being said, even though I had been involved within the sport, this research presented me with a whole new outlook on the training aspect as well as the retirement transition that I had not been previously aware of. My own personal experience transitioning out of the sport was not taken into account during this process, however I did remain aware of any potential bias's that could arise during the research collection, as well as data analysis because of my prior experience within the sport. I believe having prior experience within the sport was significant during the data collection process as it allowed for me to develop a stronger rapport with the participants. Having had shared experiences, this rapport may have influenced the honesty of the answers given by the participants during the semi-structured interviews. It is important to note that being an elite rhythmic gymnast myself I may have shared

similar experiences as the retired participants within the study which could potentially induce a bias. Compensation and control for the potential influence of bias was demonstrated through the content of the interview guide as well as practice training using the pilot interview supervised by the supervisor.

As the researcher, I examined the interviews constantly, searching for any commonalities, as well as unique traits found within the participants experiences. I also looked for any areas that may have potentially posed both risk and protective factors to the lifestyle of the retired rhythmic gymnast's as they transition into their new role in life. Utilising a phenomenological approach for this study enhanced the data collection throughout the interview process as the focus remained on the subjective meanings and experiences of the research participants. Utilisation of this specific research analysis allowed myself as the researcher to remain focused on the in depth personal experiences of each individual participant. Honing in on the subjective meaning of their experiences also allowed me to place more emphasis on the participants' emotions and experiences in regards to their nutritional habits and body image satisfaction levels. In addition, the research focused on each individual and their own personal experiences in their transition from elite athlete to retired elite athlete. As the researcher, I needed to first explore my own experiences in relation to rhythmic gymnastics and engage with any personal opinions or judgements related to the sport. This allowed me, as the researcher, to gain an in-depth look at as well as an understanding of the experiences that the former rhythmic gymnasts undertake while transitioning into retirement. While analysing the data, I needed to ensure that I was providing the reader with an accurate representation of the participants' experiences by being aware of any personal opinions that may have developed while engaged in the analysis. Through analysis of my own personal thoughts, opinions, and feelings regarding the research and the participants' nutritional experiences in retirement, I ensured that as the researcher I was providing an accurate account of the findings which had been discovered from the participant interviews and data collection. Utilising the notion of self-reflexivity was important following the phenomenological approach as it demonstrated that as the researcher, I influenced the data collection, selection, and even possibly interpretation as the research was to be a joint compilation of the researcher and participant relationship (Finlay, 2002). Self-reflexivity was an essential component of this phenomenological study as it aided in the understanding of how the data was collected and

analysed, based on the personal experiences of the participants. Essentially, it allowed myself as the researcher, to transition the personal experiences of the participants, as well as their relationship with the research, into areas of significance that will potentially provide a greater understanding of the specific issues experienced in the retirement from rhythmic gymnastics.

I was fortunate enough to have had a separate life outside of gymnastics through my soccer. I had a very understanding coach, and unlike the majority of my team mates, I was not only allowed to but in fact encouraged to pursue my passion for a career and scholarship in soccer. For many of my former team mates, they were not as fortunate as I to have had something to transition to, and instead remained an integral part of the rhythmic gymnastics community once retired.

It is through this research of the different experiences of transitioning out of the competitive lifestyle from the participants, I hope to highlight any areas of potential risk or areas of concern that may be detected before the retired rhythmic gymnast begins her new life as a former elite athlete. In addition, this research dissertation hopes to shed light on the experiences of body image and nutritional habits in the retired rhythmic gymnast in order to create a support system to cope with the challenges that are presented by the participants.

This chapter explored the research design relevant to this research, provided information regarding participants, and the research procedure adhered to in this study. Furthermore this chapter engaged with the data collection and data analysis methods. The chapter also provided an in-depth sense of ethical considerations, and their application in this research in particular. Finally, the chapter provided a reflexivity section, as an integral component of qualitative research. The next chapter provides the results and discussion based on the data collected, and then located within the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The research conducted in this study followed the guidelines of a qualitative study and the data was collected and analysed following the research approach of phenomenological inquiry. The emerging themes for discussion in the interviews included body image satisfaction levels, nutritional habits of the retired athlete, and influences on the participant while they were competing, as well as in their retirement. The analysis of the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews presented new emerging similarities among the experiences of the participants that included athletic identification, personal body image comparison, participant's current eating habits, and the desire for a transition or support program when retiring from rhythmic gymnastics. This chapter will explore the four main themes indicated above and each will be presented and discussed in greater detail, exploring the participant's experiences and making reference to literature supporting the findings for the retired female athletes in relation to the emerging categories. Below is a table that outlines the four main themes and subthemes that emerged during the thematic analysis of the data:

<u>THEMES</u>	<u>SUB-THEMES</u>
Athletic identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -transition process -maintaining unhealthy and restrictive diets -work ethic -quality of life -reason for retirement
Personal body image comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -obsessions -personal and peer pressure -different types of comparison (to others and to athletic self) -positive and negative emotions regarding body type and body image
Balance, eating habits, and lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -dieting -balanced nutrition - outside and personal pressures
Challenge of transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -disordered eating habits -aid of professional help -education -support system -feelings of abandonment

4.2 THEME ONE: ATHLETIC IDENTIFICATION

Athletic identity refers to the extent that an individual identifies themselves within the athletic role (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2009). A strong athletic identity is positively associated with athletic performance (Werthner & Orlick, 1986) and is therefore seen as a highly desirable quality among elite athletes. Research findings in this area indicate that athletes that embrace an elite level of athletic identity will take longer to transition into their post-athletic life, which results in them being at a greater risk for undergoing career identity and psychosocial distresses later on in life (Martin et al., 2009). The first theme explores the athletic identification that is strongly experienced even in retirement by the former elite rhythmic gymnasts. A phenomenological perspective is required to determine the overall effects and importance of the various variables involved for the former athlete as they transition out of sport and into retirement. Self-identity can be very important during the transition process because the impact, either positive or negative, is based on the effect the transition has on the individuals own personal assumptions about their self (Warriner & Lavalee, 2008). Following this model, Schlossberg's multidimensional approach has been related to the termination of athletic careers (Swain, 1991). Athletic identity has been previously recognized as an additional characteristic of each individual athlete that regulates the level adaptation to sport retirement (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). All of the participants in this study still referred to themselves as rhythmic gymnasts in various contexts. Regardless of the varied number of years that each has been retired from the sport, all seven participants still demonstrated a very strong personal connection and relation to their identity as an athlete in the present day, as illustrated by the exemplars below:

'I'm a former gymnast so part of me will always be a gymnast' 'it is a fibre of my being, so I don't know who I would have been without it'. – Participant 2

'I can't be 15 and a gymnast forever, although I would love to be!' ... 'It's my forever, it's my first love, it's my first passion and I carry it with me all the time' – Participant 1

'It was different than the average childhood or teenage after school experience, but I feel special we had that' ... 'we had this whole other life that was about reaching goals and working toward that was a wonderful life long experience' - Participant 3

'I did many things after that and I think they all happened because of gymnastics'... 'it was my one true love. I carried my love of the sport with me in general'... 'gymnastics was a sport of perfection and I never truly shed that' –Participant 6

'I still identify myself as a former gymnast. It has shaped my work ethic'... 'it shaped my upbringing and is still a part of my identity today'... 'you have done it for so long and so often it's just a part of you' – Participant 7

'It's a slippery slope where you keep sliding back to where you used to be or who you used to be' - Participant 2

Participant 2 describes the role that sport has played in her life and how it continues to play such an integral role in her life presently. Participant 2 highlights that *'part of me will always be a gymnast'*, that it is *'a fibre of my being'*, suggesting that she is unable to understand or make sense of her own identity without the component of a gymnast. In addition, participant 1 echoes that sentiment, highlighting the desire to be *'a gymnast forever'*. Both participants seem to construct the desire to be a gymnast is forever, as well as characterizing this as an aspect of themselves, as *'it's my forever'*. Reflecting that this is an aspect of their self that doesn't change, that it is *'with me all the time'*. This seems to demonstrate the consistency of their identity as an important aspect of who they are. These sentiments expressed by the participants within the study are examples of identity foreclosure, as they have remained committed to their identity within sport (Murphy, Pepitas, & Brewer, 1996). Development of this type of identity is particularly predominant in female sports such as women's gymnastics as the nature of the sport requires the young athlete to excel within their sport career preferably prior to their adolescent years of puberty (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Thus, one might consider the implications of this given the ingrained nature of participant 1's identity as a gymnast, that there may be an aspect that continues to hold herself as a gymnast, and thus potentially maintaining those ideals, and associated behaviours, such as unhealthy and potentially restrictive diets. According to Cestic Erpic et al. (2002) the degree of athletic identity and its prevalence over other social roles has a significant effect on the quality of the retirement process from sports, especially regarding the psychological difficulties experienced and the difficulties related to their post-sports career. In

addition it has further been demonstrated throughout numerous other studies that athlete's that possess a strong athletic identity post retirement will experience more difficulties in the overall transition from sport (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000; Cestic Erpic, 1998; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

This seems to exemplify the powerful connection that is felt between former elite rhythmic gymnast's athletic identity throughout their lives within their families, careers, and relationships, suggesting that ingrained nature of their identity. This strong connection with their former athletic self demonstrates that each of the participants, even though they have all removed themselves completely from the sport (training, coaching, judging) still revert back to identifying themselves as when they were in their intense training days in rhythmic gymnastics when describing their current lifestyle.

Furthermore, all seven of the participants referred to demonstrating a strong work ethic when describing their present state of affairs within their education and careers as well as lifetime achievement goals. Again, this strong work ethic was attributed to their athletic upbringing and identity as an elite athlete. As illustrated by the exemplars below:

'I wouldn't work as hard in the office today I don't think, if I didn't have that work ethic instilled in me.' – Participant 6

'I didn't know who I was for a very long period of time'... 'being a hard working athlete remained the same. I was identifying myself as that' – Participant 6

'I think outside of gymnastics it helped me develop perseverance'... 'when I am going through bumps and obstacles to just keep going, persevere to the end' - Participant 7

'For the people I love the most, failure to disappoint is something that is still part of my life and that I haven't shaken' - Participant 3

'Hard work, goal setting, being driven and showing passion. All of these things have transferred into my adult life and I am extremely thankful to gymnastics for that'... 'the organisational skills and time management, knowing those things definitely helped in my post-secondary education' - Participant 4

Participants highlighted aspects of their identity as a gymnast that have continued with them as an individual outside of gymnastics. Participant 6 highlights the *'work ethic instilled in me'*, however at the same time participant 6 demonstrates the aspects of gymnastics that have also continued in other spaces, such as, *'if I looked good to other people, as opposed to competing against the other person'*. As such, this starts to illustrate the focal role of aesthetic thoughts, as ever present in rhythmic gymnasts that the aesthetic aspects continue to be present. In this sense the participant struggles to distinguish herself as a central aspect within other sporting spaces, reiterating the continual sense of a judgemental gaze, originating in gymnastics from judging processes. According to Benson, Evans, Martin, Surya, and Eys (2015) developing an exclusive sense of athletic identity, for example in the scope of having a specific body image, can result in a lowered feeling of self-worth in retirement. This is linked with the strong sense of athletic identity, more specifically their identity as a rhythmic gymnast.

The quality of life by a former elite athlete is directly linked to their ability to decrease their specific athletic identity post-retirement from the sport (Cesic Erpic et al., 2004). Participants suggest the difficulty in disconnecting with their identity as a rhythmic gymnast, that this identity becomes part of them, which makes it particularly difficult to disconnect from. According to Martin et al. (2009) athletes entering into retirement with high levels of athletic identity experienced adjustment problems, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction. Past research has suggested that 'easier transitions' could be the result of the development of post-sports career planning (Gilmore, 2008). This is exemplified by Alfermann et al.'s (2004) research which distinguished that the quality of life in the transition from sport is fundamentally correlated to the absence or presence of a pre-retirement strategy for the athlete. All seven of the participants in the current study related to these previous findings as they all felt the transition into retirement to be overwhelming without having participating in any pre-retirement planning activities.

Although participant 6 was able to be successful to an extent within her transition into a new sport, she was never able to shake her identity as a rhythmic gymnast within her new competitive sports realm. Furthermore, for participant 6, her identity as a rhythmic gymnast

within her new sports role did not hinder her athletic abilities however an adjustment needed to be made eventually in order for her to recognise both of her athletic identities together as one. In addition, maintaining that athletic identity allows an individual to distinguish themselves from the rest of the community within the general population while at the same time have a sense of belonging to a sports specific group (Benson et al., 2015). It seems that the participants struggled to maintain this negotiation as illustrated by the exemplars below:

'Gymnastics and the experience I had was the best...I have something to show for it, I have something to tell my kids you know?'- Participant 1

'think it's almost the because you've done it for so long so often and for so long that it's it's part of you'- Participant 7

Participant 4 recalls how her work ethic helped her get through her post-secondary education years. For participant 4, identifying herself as an athlete still allows her to maintain a strong sense of focus and discipline on her specific tasks at hand while continuing to strive for higher achievement as she had done in gymnastics. It is this notion of goal setting and strong work ethic that eased participant 4 slowly out of her athletic identity and into her new role within her career and family life, while maintaining her high standards for achievement. Maintaining a connection to her former athletic self has allowed participant 4 to continue to work towards new goals in life and maintain a strong sense of work ethic responsibility in order to achieve her new goals. She recalls that a part of her would always remain a rhythmic gymnast even though she has moved on in her life, as those qualities are instilled in her and help her to achieve her life goals within her transition into her retired years. This is reiterated by previous research (Gilmore, 2008) where sport remained an integral part of many retired gymnast's lives for a period following retirement. In the situation of participant 4, sport remained a part of her life in retirement through the attitude and work ethic that remained instilled within her that was taught during her years of competition.

When an athlete makes the transition from being actively involved in sport and competition to retirement it can result in a sense of loss in various areas of their lifestyle including social networks, personal identity and public attention (Lally, 2007). Therefore, it would appear that the quality of an athlete's adjustment to post sport life is facilitated if athletic identity decreases over time leading up to their retirement (Cesic Erpic et al., 2004; Lavallee, Gordon, et al., 1997; Webb et al., 1998). This can be achieved if the athlete is able to experience other areas of social networks through academics, other sports, clubs, or organisations based on their alternate interests and hobbies (Lally, 2007).

Many of the participants in this study retired from the elite level of rhythmic gymnastics in order to further their education and focus on other hobbies and interests, as a means to develop and create social networks outside of the elite rhythmic gymnastics community, as illustrated by the exemplars below:

'I really sought out other things because I really you know wanted to find a balance-
Participant 2

'Mostly I threw myself into the social side of being a teenager'- Participant 3

'Utilising dance...it was very similar so it was like baby steps'- Participant 7

'I went from training full time to not doing the sport at all and I went to University'-
Participant 2

'I was you know transitioning into from elementary school into high school...you're entering high school you kind of want to venture out to do other things'- Participant 5

Participant 2 describes how she went from training full-time throughout high school to retiring and not doing the sport at all and then attending university full time and focusing on her academics. In addition, the participants joined other sporting communities and became more social to cope with their new free time. For example, participant 3 speaks of throwing herself into the social aspect of adolescence and her experiences of being able to go out with friends on a

regular basis. Participant 7 on the other hand utilized dance class as way of identifying herself post retirement from gymnastics when she describes joining a dance group because ‘it was very similar so it was like baby steps’. Participation in physically active activities can help transition the former athlete out of their ‘athletic-self’ daily habits and into a new less physically demanding routine (Richardson, 2009). Having this outlet allowed for the retired athletes to focus on goal-oriented achievements within their education and new hobbies, utilising their strong work ethic instilled in them through rhythmic gymnastics to obtain their goals. However, even though the participants had these various outlets to ease them into their retirement from rhythmic gymnastics competition, all seven of the participants still regarded being a gymnast as a major focal point in their lifestyle and themselves as an individual.

These results demonstrate the difficulty of the nature of the athletic identity that remains within a retired rhythmic gymnast and how it transitions into other aspects of their life, be it within education, the workforce, family, and social circles in their retirement and needs substantial navigation. In addition, all seven of the participants suggested that their athletic identity is a positive quality to maintain, regardless of their retirement circumstances. This is contradictory to a previous study which demonstrates that the circumstances, in which the elite athletes retire, voluntary or un-voluntary, affect their levels of athletic identity (Martin et al. 2009). However, as previously demonstrated through the participant’s quotes above, none of the participants in the current study reported any negative emotions or situations that arose due to their continued athletic identity. In fact, all participants attributed their current successes in their new lifestyles to their strong work ethics, passion, and high-achieving attitudes that come with being a former elite rhythmic gymnast. This demonstrates that although the former rhythmic gymnasts continue to identify themselves as athletes, they have been able to utilise this characteristic in order to maintain high standards of achievement and a strong work ethic to achieve their goals in their current lifestyles.

4.3 PERSONAL BODY IMAGE COMPARISON

The second theme explores the participant's experiences of their own personal body image and the comparison of the former rhythmic gymnast to that of themselves during their intense training years. All seven of the participants made reference to a form of comparison to themselves and their body when they were gymnasts and to themselves now. Three of the participants described and placed emphasis on their weight gain that occurred in their retirement, and their experiences with their new bodies, and the remaining four participants described their process of remaining thin even after their training ended. The emphasis placed on this personal body image comparison is illustrated by the participants in the exemplars below:

'I gained a lot of weight and that's just not me right! I shouldn't have been that heavy, mind you I wasn't, I'm not very heavy but what I'm used to [as a gymnast] is not what my body was...I gained a lot of weight and just felt like that wasn't me. I felt like it wasn't me. I shouldn't be this heavy. I wasn't used to what my body was'.-Participant 1

'I think it's a really hard concept to shed. That feeling of needing to look a certain way...Of course there is an unwritten thing like body image. Do you look like a gymnast should? Are you slim? It really is like the line'. - Participant 2

'At school I had a lot of feedback that I looked like an athlete in a positive way. Then I would get to the gym and I would get feedback from my coaches or others that would make me feel like I was not thin enough'- Participant 3.

Participant 1 described how her weight gain is something distinct from who she is. She describes feeling as though the weight gain and new body type '*wasn't me*' as she only saw her real self when picturing herself, as a gymnast, thus having the petite rhythmic gymnastics body she previously had, and thus these changes were experienced as '*it wasn't me*'. Participant 3 reiterates these same difficulties, as participant 3 highlights constantly feeling pressure to looking a certain way and that she '*didn't have the shape she wanted*'. Both responses suggest

their difficulties during their rhythmic gymnast years, but also suggest how these processes of comparison were initiated in the sport. Participant 2 indicates the pervasive nature of such, that *'it's a really hard concept to shed'*. Physical changes such as weight gain and reduced strength are inevitable in athletic retirement, and the topic has recently gained attention within empirical researchers (Phoenix, Faulkner, & Sparks, 2005). Suggesting that this concept of body image is something that endures and is something that continues after retirement, which then gives rise to this process of consistently engaging in comparison, and the pressure to *'look a certain way'*. This demonstrates not only the pressure but also the rigidity associated with their thinking taken on from their role as a rhythmic gymnast. This is then reiterated and echoed by participant 1 indicating that *'it's driven into your head to look a certain way'*. Past research has concluded that elite rhythmic gymnasts maintain a below average physical profile in terms of weight (O'Connor, Lewis, & Boyd, 1996) however this body type should not be maintained into retirement. Rhythmic gymnasts begin competing at an elite level at a very young age which results in them developing an early on-set interest in their body type given the aesthetic component of the sport (Kolmanthi, Theodosios, & Apostolos, 2012). According to developmental theorists, the years of adolescence play a critical role in identity formation (Erikson, 1968) where identity revolves around personal goals, interests, values that are formed through experimentation as well as achievements within developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1972). For young females in particular, the developmental tasks can include independence, formation of mature relationships with peers, as well as the acceptance of one's body type including maintaining a positive body image (Gilligan, 1993; Josselson, 1987; Rice, 2001). For young female rhythmic gymnasts competing at their highest level of the sport there is an especially strong influence on the maintenance of a specific weight and body type in order to reach their optimal performance (Tan, Bloodworth, McNamee, & Hewitt, 2014). The gymnast is trained to believe that their appearance should be skeletal in order to be beautiful which as demonstrated in the study can pose difficulties during the retirement period when weight gain and change in body composition is inevitable. This is only exasperated by the fact that the majority of elite gymnasts retire during their adolescent years which are a crucial developmental period for their bodies.

Participants then spoke about the continued nature of these concerns, and comparisons, as if they would not cease, almost suggesting an enduring process, which is demonstrated by the exemplars below:

'I still have issues. I will look at former gymnasts on Facebook or when I used to go back to the gym, you know I remember when I happened to do a performance you know again you worry because once you are in that environment it feels like people are always judging you against other people and against what you used to be' - Participant 2

'I got kind of jiggly, and my tummy is not where I want it to be. I couldn't fit in to my clothes and I felt pressured a bit...I wasn't overweight but for me I wasn't happy either' - Participant 1

'I went from finishing gymnastics into University right away and so it took a few years for my body to reconcile and for my metabolism to even out. And then I got into dance and I've always had stronger legs and a leaner upper body but then more recently I got into Cross fit and I started doing more weight training and so I was again the leaner muscular build. And then I had a baby and now I'm just a little softer.' -Participant 2

Participant 2 indicates the consistent comparison to peers from the rhythmic gymnastics field, *'I will look at former gymnasts on Facebook'*. Furthermore, participant 2 highlights the consistent sense of comparison *'against other people, and against what you used to be'*. This suggests that the comparison is not only of the individual against others, but against their elite athlete self, again reverting back to their athletic identity in regards to body image and body type. Furthermore, as participants 1 and 3 describe experiencing a lot of pressure from different sources, participant 3 indicates that she would *'get feedback from my coaches or others that would make me feel like I was not thin enough'*, whereas participant 1 highlights feeling *'a bit pressured'*. This pressure seems to originate from themselves, coaches and peers, often resurfacing how judges scored them on such aesthetic factors, and to display behaviours and a body type consistent with a gymnast. However, this body type and associated behaviour could to

an outsider resemble the concerns around potential disordered eating, as their aesthetics are attributed and linked to success when competing in the sport and this thinking seems to endure (Kolmanthi et al., 2012). This is further demonstrated by a study conducted by Stirling et al. (2012) that demonstrates that the former athletes have been trained to believe that thinness equals success in sport, which can then be transferred into other areas in their life causing them to develop feelings of body dissatisfaction. Participant 2 even speaks about it when saying, *'it took a few years for my body to reconcile'*, suggesting that following their retirement from the sport, that there needed to be a process of her body getting back to her body as an athlete. Thus, this can contribute to the need and desire of the participants to compare to their former thin gymnast body type in retirement as 'normal', resulting in the feelings of sadness and uncertainty when describing their current body in retirement. These sentiments are expressed by the participants in the following exemplars:

'I always felt that I was thin, just not in the way I wanted to be. In training I just didn't have the shape I wanted...we had many verbal cues that pressured us into having an extremely skinny body type and I wanted to look that way too. And I could visually see other gymnasts who were skinnier and who had certain body types looked better on the carpet'-Participant 3

'You're driven, it's driven into your head to look a certain way. You have to be this weight or that weight'- Participant 1

On the other hand, Participant 2 describes a change in her body type but with an emphasis on the reasons why the changes occurred. Participant 2's experiences demonstrate her personal understanding of why her body was changing. She may not have been enthusiastic about the changes but she did embrace and accept the changes as they came throughout her retirement and thought of the entire process logically. As participant 2 says *'she is now a little bit softer'*, she compares her current body type to that of her previous gymnast body. She still feels *'muscular'*, as she describes herself today, however she also understands that she doesn't have her gymnast

body anymore due to a change in lifestyle when she recalls her new body type with the addition of Crossfit to her hobbies resulting in *'the leaner, muscular build'*.

Previous studies demonstrate similar sentiments to that of Participant 2, as she describes herself as *'softer'* in her retirement, as well as the negative effects that may incur due to changes in body upon retiring. Retirement for most athletes is associated with a reduction in training and a change in eating patterns that will often cause weight gain and loss of muscle mass (Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorts, Theeboom, & Annerel, 1993). It has also been shown that these changes in body type may affect the retired athlete negatively (Stephan, et al., 2007). Below is an exemplar from the data to illustrate these sentiments:

'I'm not very heavy, but uh, what I'm used to is not what my body was...I wasn't overweight ummm but for me ummm I wasn't happy with my weight either.' - Participant 1

Participant 1 in particular struggled with the weight gain that occurred upon retirement from the sport. She experienced feelings of distress and low self-confidence, that she *'wasn't overweight ummm, but for me ummm I wasn't happy'*. A previous study on retired rhythmic gymnasts conducted by Stirling et al. (2012) demonstrates this sentiment exactly describing that the retired athletes found their changing body type and loss of their *'competition body'* to be distressing. Participant 2 on the other hand, exemplifies a positive attitude towards the weight gain and various changes in her body type from training to post-baby, however she also still compares herself to her *'gymnastics figure'* when she discusses feelings of always needing to look a specific way. This comparison is common among retired athletes as due to the aesthetic nature of rhythmic gymnastics; former athletes are susceptible to being influenced by their excessive pre-occupation with their body image, body type, and weight later on in life (Komanthi et al., 2012). It has also been found that retired athletes can also experience feelings of guilt, anger, and stress in respect to their body image after they have transitioned out of sport as they are still in constant comparison to their athletic body (Komanthi et al., 2012).

Interestingly, all four of the participants that described remaining thin into their retirement from the sport, still described a change in their bodies that made them compare themselves to their former rhythmic gymnastics size. This seemed to suggest that there was still a sense of disparity between their athletic body and their current body, and emphasis on those changes. As indicated in the extracts below:

'I think if I were to put on weight I think I'd have a problem with it' - Participant 6.

'I'm still very skinny and very thin. But now I probably lack muscle mass. I definitely don't find myself fit anymore' - Participant 5

'maybe just in the sense where I was too skinny. That still that kind of still transcends into today you know. I don't really like wearing a lot of things that expose I guess my body. And that might be partly due to the fact that I don't really like the way that, I don't like the fact that I'm so thin so for me even with clothes that I wear I tend to, they're usually long sleeves or they're very covering I guess you could say' - Participant 5

'I literally wore men's clothing for the first, like up until I was about 19' - Participant 6

'I've gone back to being really skinny, I still have the definition in my arms and stomach, but I've lost all the muscles in my quads and my legs...And so everything just went away. All the muscles gone, like you know most of the muscles gone fat. It's just really kind of gross!' - Participant 6

Participant 6, even though she remained thin into adulthood, mentioned that if she were to gain weight now she would *'have a problem with it'*. This demonstrates that even though she has personally not struggled with weight gain upon retirement from rhythmic gymnastics, there is still that fear of potential weight gain or a change in her body type. This seems to suggest an engrained concern of what weight gain might mean for participant 6. In addition, 2 of the participants that remained thin also became very self-conscious of their body type upon retirement. Both of these participants note a loss in their muscle mass and resort to covering up their bodies in bulky clothing so as not to show their thin physique that they are currently self-conscious about. Participant 5 describes her loss of fitness when she stated and described herself

as *'very thin, but lacking muscle mass'*. Past findings from interviews on retired female gymnasts conducted by Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) and Lavallee and Robinson (2007) also demonstrated this sentiment of an enduring preoccupation with body type, body image, and weight gain into retirement. The same sentiments were also reiterated by Stirling et al. (2012) as the study describes retired gymnasts feeling as though their lack of being physically fit due to a decrease in physical activity had resulted in an un fit body and loss of muscle mass. It has also been found that retired rhythmic gymnasts describe it to be quite difficult to adapt to the lack of muscle mass and physical strength that they were accustomed to (Stirling et al., 2012). Participant 5 continued on to describe her feelings towards her extremely thin physique from training days to today and the uncomfortableness she felt within her current body type when describing her wardrobe choices, *'I usually wear long sleeves, they're very covering'*. These sentiments expressed by Participant 5 seem to suggest she did not gain weight following retirement from the sport, however she still described feelings of low self-confidence and self-esteem with regards to her body image. This demonstrates that the former rhythmic gymnast experience of herself is now more conscious of not only body weight but body image. The absence of the gymnastics environment creates this challenge to maintain this body, and the associated body image, which can result in more stress and unhappiness about their body, and ultimately themselves. Stirling et al. (2012) also identifies that former rhythmic gymnasts express feelings of stress associated with their new body type and shape into their retired years. This might suggest that the comparison comes into existence through the transition from the gymnastics environment, which has caused them to personally become even more aware of their body, resulting in negative feelings towards the way they currently look in comparison to when they were competing or also to the social circle they are now currently involved in.

Whereas participant 3 presents an alternative experience, as illustrated by the following extract:

'I had a lot of muscles in my legs which made me very insecure. In training I was thin I just didn't have the shape that I wanted... I wasn't actively trying to lose weight it just

happened that my body shed some muscle from not training and I felt far more comfortable than I did when I was in gymnastics’- Participant 3

Participant 3 describes being more self-confident with their body now than when they were in gymnastics, however they still made comparisons between their current body image and how they felt about their body while in training. After retirement Participant 3 recalls the confidence and positive self-esteem that she experienced with her new body type when she discusses her loss of muscle mass in her legs that lead to her feeling ‘*far more comfortable than I did when I was in gymnastics*’. Participant 3 expresses how she became more comfortable in her body after weight loss due to the loss of muscle mass that occurred early in retirement. Maintaining a lean and thin body type is associated with being successful in an aesthetic sport like rhythmic gymnastics (Klinkowski et al., 2008) and now that Participant 3 had achieved her desired thin physique that she had previously longed for in training, she also achieved a greater sense of body satisfaction. For participant 3, her change in body composition that occurred into her retirement actually resulted in a greater feeling of body image satisfaction as opposed to distress (Stirling et al, 2012) as she felt she became leaner. This again depicts the sense of ‘obsession’ and pre-occupation that a rhythmic gymnast carries with them into their transition out of sport with having a ‘thin’ body type and specific body weight (Komanthi et al., 2012). Although her retired body image may have improved, Participant 3’s positive relationship with her body image was credited to her new leaner physique that she achieved in retirement, yet one that she desired to achieve while she was still in competition. Therefore, even though the participants underwent different experiences in their retired years with their relationship with their body image, they all shared the commonality of comparing their current bodies with that of their former gymnast selves. In addition, the comparison was represented in comparing to their former elite athlete self, to other former gymnasts, and to current rhythmic gymnasts demonstrating the desire for each individual to possess that long and lean figure in their current lifestyle post gymnastics.

The theme of personal body image comparison has demonstrated the evolution of the comparison, that in the majority of the participants this comparison existed during their

competition years and continues to endure in their retirement. Participants demonstrated having difficulties with their post-retirement body image, as well as the continued sense of a gaze that is integral in the sport of rhythmic gymnastics. In this manner the process of comparison becomes integral to their body image and creates an ever-present gaze that seems to be difficult to remove themselves from, which could in-turn have substantial impacts on them and their lives following retirement.

4.4 BALANCE, EATING HABITS, AND LIFESTYLE

The third theme explores the participants' current eating habits in their lives today. The majority of the participants engaged with dieting and weight management as an aspect of a more balanced diet and lifestyle, as opposed to the fad diets or food restricting/limiting that they described had taken place during their athletic years. As illustrated by the exemplars below:

'I know especially in the dance, yoga, and cross fit communities people again have very restrictive diets and I wonder if again my experience in sport makes me try to keep away from that'- Participant 2

'I feel really lucky that I can eat whatever I want and still remain thin'- Participant 6

'I have to consciously portion control, which I am not very good at. We are really conscious right now about trying to eat more vegetables...I really like bread and I just don't want to stop eating it'- Participant 2

'I know that it's better for you to have some fat in your diet and that starving yourself actually has backfires. If you want to have a healthy metabolism than you shouldn't starve yourself because your body holds on to its energy so that you can survive. I am a very health conscious person but now it feels like I am healthy in a positive way where I will frequently eat dessert and very much have a normal nutritional pattern where I eat every meal'- Participant 3

'If you tell a child they can't play with a toy, all they want to do is play with that toy. It's the same thing with food. Like saying you're not allowed to eat this or that you have to watch what you eat and be aware of your weight...well gosh all I'm going to want to eat is junk food if you're making such a big deal about not eating junk food' - Participant 2

Both participant 2 and participant 3 demonstrate the importance of maintaining what they described as a balanced lifestyle within their retired years, in order to remain healthy as opposed to following restrictive or fad diets to lose weight. Participant 2 describes how she just needs to *'consciously portion control'* and try to include as many vegetables as possible into the meals she prepares for her family, as opposed to making dietary restrictions. Thus, it can be suggested that dietary restrictions were often reliant on during their training as a rhythmic gymnast and to move to a healthy management of eating habits took conscious work. While involved in competition training, gymnasts experience extreme pressures to be thin which results in disordered eating patterns (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Furthermore, as participant 2 states that *'I am not very good at it'*. Participant 2 and 3 are able to engage with the health benefits involved with maintaining a balanced diet, as opposed to restricting food intake for themselves and their family in order to achieve specific body goals, but that this is something that is perceived as difficult.

Whereas participant 3 speaks of her current balanced nutritional habits and the knowledge that she has gained regarding nutrition since her retirement from the sport. Participant 3 discusses how her mind-set towards food evolved following retirement. Participant 3 suggests that she educated herself on the importance of having *'some fat in your diet and that starving yourself actually backfires'*. In addition participant 3 does not restrict herself to specific foods as she had done previously in gymnastics. Instead, she describes her nutritional habits as reflecting *'a positive way where I frequently eat dessert'*. This seems to suggest and speak to the rigidity of diet within in training and thus the implications of the loss of that sense of rigidity in retirement. Elite athletes, especially rhythmic gymnasts, experience a very a rigid nutritional environment during training which involves the restriction of food and the development of a controlled relationship with food (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Participant 2 even describes her experiences

of being told not to have something during her training years has led to wanting it more, in her case 'junk food'. This seems to illustrate the implications of dieting during training, and the rigid processes, as having repercussions on their own eating habits post-retirement.

As indicated above, these repercussions have both positive and negative impacts on their current eating behaviours, as well as ultimately their lifestyle and body image. According to Komanthi et al. (2012) most elite rhythmic gymnasts deprived themselves of specific foods such as sweets to maintain a low body weight. Being a part of other fitness communities while in her retirement, participant 2 did not allow herself to engage in the nutritional restrictions present in these new social fitness settings. Participant 2 seems to suggest that the exposure to numerous diet restricting plans while involved in rhythmic gymnastics, that thereafter she wanted to distance herself from that stringent control over her eating behaviours; particularly given that she engaged in such restrictions as a result of pressures during her sport career, from coaches, peers and the aesthetic focus, which many other retired gymnasts struggle with (Stirling et al., 2012). It can take time for a former gymnast to lose their previous notions about nutritional intake and to free themselves of their controlled eating behaviours, posing a major challenge during their transition into retirement (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). This suggests the enmeshed nature of eating habits, body image and the lifestyle of an elite gymnast. Even if a retired gymnast appears satisfied with their current body to a certain extent, their past dietary restrictions that were present during the training years can lead to an aversion to the notion of a 'diet' (Komanthi et al., 2012). Participants highlighted their engagement with eating habits, post-retirement below:

'I am an emotional eater so I eat when I am upset. I eat when I am bored. So I have tried to sort of work on those things. I definitely have a focus on a lot of vegetables and some fruit and try to limit my dairy and starches. I try to eat as much lean protein as I can which is difficult with a toddler at home' - Participant 4.

'I didn't really have a strict diet. I just ate normal...I love fruit and vegetables...I started eating right again after having my baby' - Participant 1

'Um I saw a nutritionist at my coaches uh urging and she put me on you know a calorie reduced um high protein, lots of veggies ah sort of meal plan' - Participant 4

'A lot of my diet has been up and down, not knowing how to eat. For the most part I have maintained pretty much the same diet but smaller quantities' - Participant 7.

Participant 4 describes the struggle she has faced with her nutritional habits after transitioning into retirement when she describes herself as *'an emotional eater'*. Without the stringent requirements and boundaries from the support there is a need to *'sort of work on those things'*. This seems to suggest that the balanced eating habits are not easily acquired, and that there is a component of having to find that balance, not as a competing gymnast, but as an individual. Participant 4 expressed that while in gymnastics she was *'put on a high protein low calorie meal plan...and that it is amazing what I did or didn't eat back then'*. Participant 4 constantly felt pressured into achieving a certain body type while in training, which carried over into her life outside of the gymnastics community. According to De Bruin et al. (2007), the female gymnast diet is specific to the related sport demands on weight, as well as coach pressures to achieve a specific body type for optimal sport achievement. In addition, the physical challenges experienced in training can affect the former athlete in retirement resulting in negative body image and negative self-esteem (Stephan et al. 2007). As suggested by participant 4, these aspects of body image pressures are carried into her retirement years which resulted in using nutrition and food intake to deal with her emotions, as well as a coping mechanism for stressors. As proposed by Stirling et al. (2012), food intake becomes a means to control specific areas of life, and this is particularly significant following such stringent sporting careers where there is a lot of control established for the individual. However, following retirement this control, from the coaches, peers, and aesthetics of the sport fall away, often leaving the individual to put such control back into their lives to assist them in managing this transition. The retired rhythmic gymnast is challenged with overcoming their previous excessive controls that were exerted on their nutritional habits and to now develop a balanced nutritional lifestyle in their retirement (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). The below exemplars illustrate current eating habits of the participants:

'I skip meals. Not intentionally. I try to eat healthy but because I skip meals my body just wants really filling foods' - Participant 6

'A lot of my diet has been kind of up and down, not knowing how to eat' - Participant 7

Whereas, participants 6 and 7 both describe their current nutritional habits as being fairly 'normal' and 'maintaining their former eating habits' while at the same time describing a lack of education on how and what to eat post gymnastics. Participant 7 describes that her lack of education on how to eat right caused her diet to go 'up and down', combined with a sense of 'not knowing how to eat' when initially transitioning into her retirement. This sentiment is also expressed by participant 6 as she 'tries to eat healthy', but includes that she 'skips meals, not intentionally' and thus she feels that eating healthy negates the implications of skipping meals, that she 'just wants really filling foods'. It is evident that some of the participants are unsure how to maintain a healthy nutritional lifestyle, regardless of their body image or weight changes post competition. This suggests the absence of education regarding eating habits, but also illustrates the struggles within the transition.

Furthermore, it seems that the structure and control imposed on them while an elite athlete can lead to them rebelling from such control, or implementing means for control into their own lifestyles. Former rhythmic gymnasts may find it difficult to manage eating patterns in retirement due to the stringent control over their eating behaviours and weight that were present during their competitive years (Stirling et al., 2012). This seems to suggest that it is particularly difficult to maintain a balance due to the environmental changes in terms of structure and control, while trying to make sense of the transition and changes as well. It would be beneficial for the former athletes to be educated on proper diet regimes, body weight maintenance, as well as coping strategies (Komanthi, 2012). Komanthi (2012) suggests that it would be beneficial to create a model of healthy eating habits for a quality life for the athletes entering retirement that depicts long term strategies to cope with the changes that their bodies and minds will undergo. This is something that seems to be echoed by the participant's challenges in finding and navigating that balance within their own lifestyle.

Participants regardless of if they have gained weight or not in their retirement, speak of eating what they want and the importance of moderation. It appears that all of the fad diets and meal restricting that encompassed their surroundings throughout their childhood and adolescence has resulted in them all focusing more on adopting a healthier overall lifestyle when it comes to nutritional habits and nutrient education. This theme seems to demonstrate the challenges of the transition and initiating balance in their lives following their retirement, which reiterates the sense of change and transition as a process fraught with challenges to overcome, which is demonstrated further in the next theme.

4.5 THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSITION

The fourth and final theme explores the challenge of this transition into retirement and demonstrates the need for a transition programme, to further assist the athlete upon their transition out of the sport and into retirement. The research demonstrated in this study supports prior research on the retirement in elite athletes. An athlete must adapt to their new lifestyle as they transition out of competitive sport taking into account their own personal characteristics, perceptions of the transition, and specific characteristics in both the pre and post transition environment (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Below are exemplars to illustrate the struggles that the participants faced during their transition out of elite competition and into retirement:

'If there was one thing that after retiring that I found out was difficult to hear was having a friend that you didn't realise were struggling with eating disorder. The one you thought was the perfect body and yet they were the ones that had eating disorders and ended up in hospital'- Participant 3

'I loved it. When I quit I tried to pretend as if it never existed'- Participant 6

'I think if I had just quit the sport and moved on I probably would have been a bit better'- Participant 4

'There was a period of a few years where I was bulimic and so when I told umm he wasn't actually even a psychologist but when I told I called him my mental trainer so when I told him then I started seeing a psychologist'- Participant 2

Participant 2 reflects on her own personal challenges that she faced in retirement when discussing that, *'there was a period of a few years where I was bulimic'*. Participant 2 describes a period in her life at the termination of her career as an elite rhythmic gymnast where she struggled with maintaining proper nutrition, as well as a balance in her new lifestyle that required her to seek help from *'my mental trainer'* which eventually lead to obtaining assistance from a psychologist. This supports previous research suggesting that there is an increase in the number of athlete's that are seeking out or requiring professional assistance from a sport psychologist to manage their transition out of sport (Murphy, 1995). Participant 3 illustrates the extent of this nutritional struggle faced by retired rhythmic gymnasts when she states that *'one thing that after retiring that I found out was difficult to hear was having a friend that you didn't realise were struggling with eating disorder'*. This again demonstrates the challenges that the transition out of an aesthetically focused sport like rhythmic gymnastics can pose on a former athlete both physically and mentally in regards to their body image and nutritional habits. Indeed, it has been found that for some athletes the experience of retirement can provoke high levels of stress, personal distress, and can require extensive adaptation to their new lifestyle (Blinde & Stratta, 1992). Participant 4 indicates that if she *'had just quite the sport and moved on'* that it would have been *'a bit better'*. Suggesting that the process of moving on is integral to the management of this transition. Participants 2, 3 and 4 suggest a sense of isolation, as well as the unknown, either about peers or about the process of transition, and the struggle inherent in this.

In addition to describing specific struggles and challenges faced in their retirement, all seven of the participants attested to the necessity and importance for the introduction of additional education of the process of retirement as well as coping strategies for a retiring elite amateur athlete. This supports previous documentation from Warriner & Lavalley (2008) that demonstrated that many of their former gymnast participants struggled with the lack of access to counsellors or advisors to aid them in the structuring of a future plan involving new careers as

well as dealing with the emotional ramifications experienced in retirement. Below are exemplars highlighting the need for such transition and educational assistance:

'I don't I honestly don't remember if I saw a nutritionist then. Umm but I mean even when I was at university it wasn't necessarily to do with body image but I actually sought out a counsellor at school to to talk about you know some others issues that I that I was having'- Participant 2

'It would have been good to have some sort of plan as to you know this is what you can do, and this is how you can eat to help maintain or so that you're not going to gain a bunch of weight...Maybe all three of us could have worked together. My parents, my coach and myself to get a plan together'- Participant 4

'I found the whole work-life thing balance really difficult, which I don't think I have mastered yet'- Participant 2

Participant 2 sought out professional help to assist with her transition from elite athlete to university student. Participant 2 explained that she knew that she would be going from one extreme to the other in her life, so she understood that she would need some assistance in providing her with some stability along the way when she states *'that she sought out a counsellor at school to talk about you know some issues'*. Whereas, participant 4 highlighted having no access to any professional help or support when she made the transition from athlete to several different roles within the sport. The disparity between these two experiences reiterates the personalised difficulties inherent in the transition process. Athletic retirement is a very complex subject as every athlete is different and undergoes an individualised experience during their transition out of sport. For example, one athlete may describe their retirement as a positive process (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) whereas another individual may develop numerous stressors that require specialized assistance (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). This also highlights the importance of a personalised transition programme. Such programmes could operate as a means to provide relevant support and coping with the inevitable changes that will occur in their lives

physically, mentally, and socially. Sungdot-Borgen et al. (2013) suggest that a specific nutrition plan be created for the former athlete that details an adjustment of nutritional intake in accordance with their new fitness regimes with the help of a sports nutritionist or dietician.

Furthermore, theme three has also highlighted that the importance of educating the athlete prior to leaving the sport can be beneficial in their transition period. The participants highlighted the sense of preparation, being able to anticipate or make sense of the approaching challenges before facing them alone. Educating the athlete on body-image concerns, self-acceptance, healthy eating behaviours, and a reasonable level of fitness/training can be an effective form of prevention of future problems when the athlete retires (Sungdot-Borgen et al., 2013). Many retired gymnasts express these same sentiments as they find the transition out of sport and into retirement to be a difficult one that involves many changes to not only their bodies, but to their entire lifestyle as they are now exposed to new social settings as well as social groups. The newly retired gymnasts are trying to find themselves outside of the gymnasium by joining new teams, discovering new interests, forming new social circles, and pursuing their education as demonstrated by this study. Coakley (1983) encourages retiring gymnasts to seek out social networks outside of the gymnastics community, within different social environments. Developing these relationships prior to retirement can be beneficial for the individual as they will have meaningful relationships already established outside of the sport realm which will aid in their transition into retirement and coping with the loss of previous athletic social networks (Clowes, Lindsay, Fawcett, & Knowles, 2015). Leaving behind the rhythmic gymnastics community can be a difficult task for the former gymnast, presenting all sorts of challenges both physically and mentally that can only be heightened with a feeling of a lack of support. Participant 4 highlights the desire for support that *'all three of us could have worked together'* suggesting the reliance on their support system while an elite athlete and then an abrupt change thereafter.

Furthermore, the lack of support from team mates still involved in the sport, coaches, and even the gymnastics federation can contribute to these difficulties experienced during the initial transition into retirement, resulting in potential weight-control behaviours and other practices in their new lifestyle (Stirling et al., 2012). Sundgot-Borgen et al. (2013) recommend that national and international federations of sport should put policies into place to prevent athletes involved

in aesthetic sports to participate in potentially harmful weight loss practices both during training as well as into their retirement. Suggestions such as creating educational modules with the help of the coaches, athlete, and medical professionals to aid in the transition out of body-image sensitive sports like rhythmic gymnastics (Sundgot-Borgen et al., 2013). This seems to be a need reiterated by the participants.

Some participants were able to make sense of these challenges through the process of witnessing their peers within gymnastics, or the sport as a whole, struggle, this is illustrated below:

'I could totally see people having an issue completely...I had heard that a former team mate had gone through some body health struggle after gym and that's when I realised that this could be some sort of problem'- Participant 6

'People knew that things were going on but nobody stepped in to change it because it was part of that community...it's almost scary how out in the open it was that we were all trying to lose weight from such a young age'- Participant 3

Participant 6 was exposed to the challenges of the transition, through colleagues having '*gone through some body health struggle*' and that this alerted her understanding '*that this could be some sort of problem*'. Furthermore, participant 6 acknowledges that she '*could totally see people having an issue*'. Participant 3 adds to this by suggesting that '*people knew that things were going on*'; yet illustrates a poignant understanding that was held, that it was deemed '*part of that community*'. In this sense there is almost a silent acceptance of difficulties that these experiences are anticipated, or even expected, yet contradictorily there is an absence of engagement. Furthermore, participant 3 demonstrates concerns, that '*it's almost scary how out in the open it was*' and reiterates this absence of engagement or support that '*nobody stepped in to change it*'. Both participant 3 and participant 6 demonstrate an aspect of the rhythmic gymnastics community as silent on issues, that there is little conversation, although there is a shared awareness, through peers and their own experiences. This suggests that often dynamics specific

to rhythmic gymnasts are then perpetuated and this can often result in behaviours being reinforced, such as the reinforcement of poor eating habits, or particular body type. This notion is exemplified in other research studies as it has been demonstrated that participation in a sports climate that emphasizes a thin body type can result in body image difficulties after retirement from the sport (Stirling et al., 2012). In addition, a former athlete can remain susceptible to sport-related pressures to lose weight or maintain a specific body type following sport involvement (Stirling et al., 2012). The participants seem to elude to the importance of creating a sport/athlete specific program to be put into place to assist in the transition process out of elite athlete, as they suggest the absence of such, and that the athlete has to seek such help out and may not have the resources for this. Previous research on retired artistic female gymnasts demonstrated that retired gymnast's would benefit from the provision of support strategies created to improve their transition into retirement (Clowes et al., 2015). For example, Clowes et al. 2015) distinguished that their participants desired for their sport institutions to provide continuing education, general guidance to discover the next steps, as well as guidance and assistance to transition into a new role within the sport. Furthermore, participants' experiences highlighted the silent collusion within the sport, yet simultaneously mindful of the potential ramifications of such.

All the participants highlight rhythmic gymnastics as being all-consuming, in the sense that it was all they knew for many years. It was their after school program, their career, their social group, and their family. Thus, the sudden halt of all their social support, all at once, which can leave the retired athlete without support while managing a new transition, as suggested by the exemplars below:

'Even 15 years later, weight and body image are constantly on my mind...it is like what do I do with myself now?' - Participant 1

'And also difficult for my body because I was used to doing exercise and anaerobic exercise and all of a sudden I was doing nothing... and especially with the eating too. – Participant 4

Athletes can be left feeling abandoned by the entire gymnastics community when they enter retirement, which is essentially their life, which leads them to believe that the federation and

their coaches should take a more active role in assisting with the retirement process (Stirling et al., 2012). However, many coaches feel that engaging their athletes in pre-retirement planning is distracting and detrimental to their training (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Participant 1 demonstrates this sense of abandonment and unknown, she highlights going from constantly thinking of *'weight and body image'* and then going to a space of isolation, as suggested by *'it is like what do I do with myself now?'* Previous research has demonstrated that retired athletes express a lack of support from the sport organizations following their disengagement from competitive sport, leaving them to feel abandoned, isolated, and forgotten (Brown & Pottrac, 2009). Participant 1 suggests that sense of isolation, as well as the abrupt nature of the change. Athletes can be left feeling isolated or with a lack of support in their retirement resulting in feelings of uncertainty, and this uncertainty extends with regards to their body and eating habits (Stirling et al., 2012). There is a perceived lack of support felt by the athlete during their retirement transition (Stirling et al., 2012). Warriner and Lavalley (2008) demonstrated that athletes felt they received complete support during their competitive years in comparison to the lack of support and direction given to them by their sport governing bodies upon their retirement. Participant 4 indicates that sudden nature of the change, that *'all of a sudden I was doing nothing'*, often leaving the athlete caught off guard and without means to manage or appropriately cope with this sudden change. According to Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon (1997) and Grove, Lavalley, Gordon & Harvey (1998) and Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) preparation for retirement, as well as the provision of support, for the retiring athlete is extremely important to aid in the athlete's final transition out of the competitive sports world, which is echoed by the participants. Furthermore Stirling et al. (2012) demonstrated that coping with the on-going pressures to remain thin paired with poor eating habits learned while in training are contributing factors to the body image and weight challenges experienced by the rhythmic gymnasts later on in their life.

There is an immediate need for more research to be conducted regarding the environment in which the at risk athlete is a part of, to develop a better understanding of how this can impact their self-esteem, autonomy, relationships, identity, and body image which are all contributing factors of disordered eating behaviours (Komanthi et al., 2012). Participants were able to illustrate the magnitude of the potential impacts. Creating a support system to carry them through certain stages in their retirement can potentially lead to a happier, healthier, and more positive

body image, as well as nutritional habits over time as demonstrated by the results from this study. The development of educational programs and personalised transition programs for the athlete through the collaboration of parents, coaches, the athlete, and medical professionals can lead to an easier transition out of sport. Implementing such support systems and programs can prepare the athlete with the necessary tools to manage the potential struggles that may occur during the retirement transition process.

Overall, the themes highlighted the difficulties inherent in the transition process, as well as the potential impacts thereafter, particularly considering those linked with eating habits and body image. The results also seemed to illustrate the psychological impact of such a process, and seem to advocate for increased involvement and consideration of this transition period, particularly given the nature of aesthetic-based sports. The following chapter explores the strengths, limitations, and the future recommendations from this research.

CHAPTER 5: STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The research explored the participants' experiences and attitudes towards body image satisfaction levels as well as eating habits, following retirement from rhythmic gymnastics. The research also explored the participants' experiences in regards to their transition out of elite levels of competition from the sport. This chapter presents a summary of findings from the data analysis previously presented. In addition, the chapter provides an evaluation of the study in regards to strengths, weaknesses, and future areas of recommendations. Lastly, this chapter provides an overall conclusion to the research.

5.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Aesthetic oriented sports produce athletes that are pre-occupied with nutritional consumption, maintaining a strict diet regime, and having an overall preoccupation on body image. This is undoubtedly evident among elite rhythmic gymnasts as an increase in body weight can have a negative impact on their competitive performance (Salbach, Klinkowski, Pfeiffer, Lehmkuhl & Korte, 2007). In addition, many rhythmic gymnasts have been trained to believe that "thin is going to win" (de Bruin et al., 2007, p. 507). This is reiterated by participant's discussions of their desire to maintain their gymnastics figure, constantly comparing their current body to that of their former gymnast body, demonstrating that weight is a constant issue that requires further engagement. This pre-occupation with weight maintenance may have a negative and/or positive impact on the individual's self-image, could affect their eating patterns and nutritional behaviours, as well as lead to the development of specific behavioural patterns. For example, as described by participant's some experienced negative health issues due to poor nutritional habits in their retirement whereas other participants used their athletic knowledge and former negative experiences to create a healthier self-image and balanced nutritional and fitness lifestyle. It has also been found that:

a rhythmic gymnasts intense physical training schedule, in combination with a high desire for achievement in the sport, and the stress associated with remaining a specific weight and body type may be a risk factor in not only the drive for thinness but also the development of psychological distress. (Salbach et al., 2007, p. 6)

Some of these psychological distresses that participant's seemed to highlight include excessive exercise, food restriction habits, performance anxiety, a preoccupation with body type and body image, competitiveness between peers, and the desire for perfection. The result speaks to the engrained nature of the behaviours and practices within elite rhythmic gymnastics. Rhythmic gymnasts are at a greater risk for development of these behaviours because involvement with the sport is associated with competitiveness, high achievement, and a focus on a lean body shape in order to meet the sports aesthetic demands (Salbach et al., 2007).

The research study has presented four dominant themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis which can now be related to the initial areas of interest posed at the beginning of this study regarding the retired rhythmic gymnast. The data collected and analysed uncovered areas of interest in relation to body image, nutritional habits, and self-identity that were experienced in their retirement transition out of rhythmic gymnastics. Initially, this study intended to shed some light on the experiences of the retired rhythmic gymnasts in relation to the transition in retirement involving body image, physical and emotional changes, personal support systems, and the overall experiences after transitioning out of the elite level of sport. Through the analysis of the discussions from the semi-structured interviews with the participants, it was discovered that there was in fact similar experiences shared amongst the participants in regards to their individual experiences of retirement. The analysed data uncovered specific themes based on each of the seven participants experiences that were classified into four main categories or themes of the results: each participant still relates to themselves as a former gymnast, each participant compares their body image now with what it was in training, they focus now on eating a more balanced diet as opposed to a fad weight loss diet, there is a need for, as it would be beneficial, a transition program to aid the former athlete's out of training and into retirement from the sport. Educating the gymnast as they enter into their retirement from elite sport will aid the former athlete on the changes that can potentially occur as well as providing them with coping strategies to manage the changes (Martin et al., 2009).

The most dominant theme uncovered from the experiences of the seven participants was in relation to how the former gymnasts all related to their athletic identities in some form even though they had been retired from the sport for a range of seven to eighteen years. It did not matter how long the participant had no longer been involved in rhythmic gymnastics competitively, as they all still felt a very strong connection to that athletic identity as an elite gymnast. The participants attributed their strong work ethic as well as their desire to achieve excellence within their careers, education and family life to their current connection to their athletic identities. According to Martin et al, (2009) the presence of an athletic identity refers to the extent that an athlete or former athlete identifies themselves within the athletic role. In addition as previously stated, maintaining a strong athletic identity is positively associated with athletic performance (Werthner & Orlick, 1986) which in turn will also result in a positive association in high achievement when incorporated into other areas of the former athletes life. It was also demonstrated that there is a life long connection with the former rhythmic gymnastics self, as many of the participants still currently describe themselves as a gymnast or the presence of gymnastics being a part of them forever, ingrained within them. The remaining athletic connection at such a strong level can potentially cause harm to the former rhythmic gymnast however as it makes transitioning out of elite sport more difficult for the individual (Cesic Erpic et al., 2002). In addition, numerous other studies (Brewer et al., 2000; Cesic Erpic, 1998; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) have demonstrated that a continued possession of a strong athletic identity can result in the experience of greater difficulty in the transition process from the sport. Participants suggested a difficulty in disconnecting with their athletic identity, as being a rhythmic gymnast has become a part of them. Therefore, one may deduct from that given the nature of the difficulties experienced by a rhythmic gymnast regarding body image and dietary restrictions while in competition, that these issues may potentially become more troublesome during their transition process into retirement.

In addition, this present link to their athletic identity also impacted their view of their own body image in their retired years. Even though each of the participants had different experiences regarding their own personal body image, each one of them demonstrated a sense of comparison, both positive and negative, between their current body image and body type to that of their former competitive body. All seven of the participants made reference to a form of

comparison to themselves and their body when they were gymnasts and to themselves now. As previously demonstrated, when rhythmic gymnasts are competing at their highest level of the sport there is a strong influence on maintaining a specific low body weight as well as a long and lean body type in order to reach their optimal level of performance (Tan et al., 2014). The most common attribute regarding their body image was that they all currently realised that they were very fit back in their training days, as well as being 'thin' or even appearing underweight outside of the gymnastics community even if at the time they did not express those sentiments due to weight management pressures from coaches and judges. It was evident that while in training, the gymnasts did not have a realistic sense of themselves or may have even been made to feel as though they were inadequate in regards to their body type due to all of the diet restrictions and weight demands put on them from the pressures from coaches and general sports expectations involved in elite rhythmic gymnastics. These experiences followed them into their retired years as all of the participants referred to their former 'competitive bodies' throughout the data analysis when describing their current body image and body satisfaction levels which in turn was taken into their retirement as well. The participant's consistently reverted back to their rhythmic body type and slim figure when describing their current body. In addition, many participants felt like their true self was reflected in that competition body as they did not feel like themselves at first in their bodies post retirement.

The final theme uncovered relating to the development of a support system for the transition into retirement appeared to be on the minds of all of the participants. For those who remained a part of the athletic community be it through coaching or judging, they felt that a support system in place would have helped them to ease into their new roles within the rhythmic community with great confidence. Being armed with the tools to cope with their own personal struggles would have allowed the individuals to develop a better understanding of the retirement process and also aid in preparing their students for the future. For the participants who left the sport completely to pursue other goals educationally, socially and/or career based, they expressed the need for support in what to expect in their new areas of life experiences. Each participant within this study still had their own personal support system through family and friends as they transitioned from competitive gymnastics and into retirement, however each of them expressed a desire for some extra help, even professional aid into the transition. Some of the difficulties

described by the participants included trouble coping with the decrease of fitness, maintaining their body weight, acceptance of their retired body type, developing balanced nutritional habits, as well as maintaining work-life balances. Having extra support from a structured plan would aid the former athletes in coping with these challenges during the retirement process, thus making sense of the process itself to themselves. This seems to suggest the importance of support, both professionally and personally to navigate the challenges of the transition from elite rhythmic gymnastics into retirement. Participants spoke to physical, psychological, social and emotional changes as well as challenges and those participants who transitioned into retirement with guidance or preparation reported more enjoyable and positive experiences. The creation of a support system to aid the athletes would allow for them to have an understanding of possible outcomes to expect in their new lifestyle, can suggest coping mechanisms, as well as provide outlets and support systems for more specific areas for the former athletes to reach out to should they need the extra support. Instead, many of the participants were often left feeling isolated, with only their friends and family to support them in the transition, abandoned by gymnastics federations, and had negative feelings for the gymnastics community as they were no longer of use to their coaches or the athletic community, even though they still identified so strongly with their athletic self.

As previously demonstrated, maintaining the strong athletic identity with their former athletic self may have resulted in a difficult transition experience for the former athlete, especially given the lack of professional support. Lally (2007) suggests that when an athlete transitions from being actively involved in elite sport into their retirement it can result in a sense of loss as well as feelings of uncertainty in various areas of their lifestyle including social networks, and personal identity. In addition, according to Martin et al. (2009) athletes entering into retirement with high levels of athletic identity experienced adjustment problems during their transition into a new lifestyle. These difficulties are expected during a transition from elite athlete into retirement, however with the aid of proper support systems and strategies set in place for the former athlete, they may be able to prepare proper coping mechanisms to help with the challenges they are likely to endure both mentally and physically.

The seven former participants in this study all shared their personal experiences involving eating habits, body image, relationships, and support systems both during their athletic career, as

well as in retirement. The results seemed to illustrate that during training the gymnasts were all self-conscious of their body image and body type. Furthermore, that this ‘ideal’ shape desired in rhythmic gymnastics will develop a heightened awareness of their body image among the gymnasts that potentially continues into their retirement from the sport. This awareness evidently resulted in negative emotions towards the participants bodies later on in their lives. As previous research studies have discussed, (Sundgot-Borgen, 1994; Stirling et al., 2012; Kolmanthi et al., 2012; De Bruin et al., 2009; Kerr et al., 2006) involvement in aesthetic sports by female athletes can result in a detrimental impact on an individual’s self-perception of their body image while in training as well as feelings of perfectionism in achievement motivation involved in athletics. The results from this study has demonstrated similar findings to what has already been discovered amongst rhythmic gymnasts still involved in elite levels of training. In addition, this study also identified insight into how these factors may have affected the lives of the gymnasts upon retirement from the sport as they transitioned out of their athletic careers. The results seemed to suggest that most of the participants still experienced residual body image concerns, as well as feelings of low self-confidence surrounding their body type and a lower level of self-esteem in some situations as a result. According to Stirling et al. (2012) retired gymnasts will undergo challenges due to the aesthetic nature involved in participation within a sport that emphasises thinness. It was difficult for the former athletes to shake the notion that “thin is beautiful” (De Bruin et al., 2007) as they transitioned into their retirement years and experienced the physical changes that result from a much lower level of physical activity. In addition, many of the participants also retired during their adolescent years, which only exacerbated the physical changes that their bodies were undergoing, such as weight gain and body maturation, leading to negative feelings of body image satisfaction levels (Koukouris, 1991).

Participants seemed to maintain a strong connection to their athletic identity, regardless of their new careers, family life, and social circles. This is concurrent with results from a previous study that discovered that when former athletes looked back at their athletic careers, they realised they possessed an exclusive athletic identity which was linked to poor nutritional habits (De Bruin et al., 2009). Thus, this research seems to suggest that regardless of the retired athletes’ new lifestyle and the number of years they had been retired from the sport, they still reverted back to their days as competitive gymnasts in their daily lives. This was demonstrated in

the participants desire to set and attain goals within their personal lives, the described strong work ethic that was still instilled within them, as well as having the discipline from the sport that carried over into their current lifestyle. The participants still had a strong attachment to their former athletic self that they believed to be a positive within their current lives. The participants described their connection to their athletic identity as being a characteristic in them that provided motivation in other areas of life and helped them to set new goals of achievement in other aspects of their lives. The participants also believed that they demonstrated discipline and dedication which was a direct result of their athletic identities and desire to be the best. As described by De Bruin et al. (2009) the participants reverted back to former characteristics of perfectionism experienced during their elite athlete days and utilised this as a motivator, form of discipline, and positive attribute within their goal setting and career choices they now experience. Finally, the desire for a support system to be put in place to aid with the retirement transition for the former rhythmic gymnasts was a particularly strong theme for all the participants. Although all the participants recognised that they had support from their friends and family, as well as coaches, they also recognised that having a plan of action or an understanding of the process of retirement would have been beneficial when they had first left competitive rhythmic gymnastics. The participants had different transition experiences, but most of the participants spoke to their struggles in some form or other with the transition out of elite rhythmic gymnastics and into their new non-athletic life style. This is concurrent with past research that concluded that athletes with strong athletic identities may experience more difficulties during the retirement process from sport (Cesic Erpic et al., 2002). Some of the participants described emotional and or physical difficulties experienced, while others described positive outcomes from cutting all ties with the sport, which at the time was extremely difficult for them. Past studies have suggested that planning ahead for retirement from elite sport is one of the most crucial factors in ensuring an easier process of transition (Cesic Erpic et al., 2002). Interestingly, none of the participants involved in this study, described planning ahead for their retirement from rhythmic gymnastics, rather the participants were forced into retirement due to injuries, age, other hobbies, or due to feelings of lack of achievement within the sport. Martin et al. (2009) found that athletes that are forced into retirement are at a greater risk of developing issues related to poor adjustment, which reinforces the importance of preparation for retirement. The importance of teaching coping strategies and techniques to educate the retired athlete

through the development of athlete support programs is integral to the continued management of the athletes that leave the sport (Martin et al., 2009). Furthermore, strategies should include career planning, goal-setting techniques, and the development of social relationships outside of the sport (Martin et al., 2009). The participants spoke to the need and desire for a support system tailored for their own individual needs, indicating that this would have been substantially beneficial to their transition and development of their athletic identity outside of the sport. Irrespective of the reason surrounding their retirement from the sport, it would have been beneficial to have a plan set in place, created by the athlete, coaches, parents, and medical professionals to aid with this transition and the retirement process. Moreover, Cestic Erpic et al. (2002) suggests that it is necessary for a sports psychologist to study both athletic and non-athletic aspects of the retired athlete's life in order to better understand the retirement transition process to tailor an individualised plan, which seems to be reiterated by the findings of this study.

5.2 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study presents with areas of strength, as well as potential limitations to the study, and exploring such provides an opportunity for future research to develop studies within the rhythmic gymnastics field, taking the following into account. An important strength in this research was the use of phenomenological inquiry, as the data collected and analysed was a direct reflection of what the retired elite rhythmic gymnasts personally experienced themselves during their transition out of sport. Phenomena can be events, situations, experiences, or concepts that we are surrounded by every day (Hancock, 1998). The phenomenological method of study allows one to explore the impacts of a specific phenomenon that we may be unclear of or do not fully understand due to the lack of exploration (Hancock, 1998). In this manner the research was able to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences, providing detail that created great insight into the rhythmic gymnast's transition into retirement. The use of semi-structured interviews that were conducted in a one on one environment allowed for each participant to feel comfortable expressing and describing their personal experiences allowing for the development of a richness of data. Furthermore, this allowed the participants to present unique aspects of their

own experiences, through the semi-structured nature of the interview. The semi-structured interviews utilised within the phenomenological method raises awareness and increases insight into the topic of retired rhythmic gymnasts, providing areas of further exploration and study to obtain more knowledge in regards to this group of former elite athletes (Hancock, 1998). This research provides an additional understanding as to the importance of further research to be conducted in this very specific area of retired rhythmic gymnasts, particularly as there is not much previous research dedicated solely to this particular community. The findings from this study suggest a need for more research to be conducted in order to gain a greater understanding of the retired rhythmic gymnasts experiences and areas that they need aid and support in during their transition phase out of elite sport competition. In particular, exploring other countries and contexts to ultimately contribute to potential programmes that could assist in such transition processes.

Although the methodology utilised is the strength of the study, the subjective nature of the research also needs to be taken into consideration. Due to the nature of the semi-structured interviews, participants may have not felt comfortable answering specific questions and may also not have been completely honest in their answers to any of the questions. Unfortunately, this would be common nature for any qualitative study using phenomenology as all the data is solely based on a participant's experiences, leaving the researcher to trust that all the data collected from the participants is a truthful reflection of the participant's lived experiences in relation to the phenomena being studied. To provide a further sense of data analysis this study addressed areas of reflexivity when analysing the data collected throughout the process.

A potential limitation of the data can be related to the limitation of contextual understanding, with the focus primarily being on Canadian rhythmic gymnasts. Although all seven of the participants described similar experiences within the semi-structured interviews, it may have been beneficial to explore a myriad of lived experiences from vast contexts. In addition, all of the participants involved in the study had been retired from rhythmic gymnastics for quite some time. The study may have benefited to have had a few participants who had more recently retired from rhythmic gymnastics or who were currently undergoing the transition to understand how their experiences' would have compared to that of the other participants. This would have been beneficial to explain various attachments to athletic identity during the different

stages of retirement (Martin et al., 2009). This is something that could be explored in future research within this field. In addition, it may have been beneficial to look at separating participants into groups reflecting reasons for retirement (voluntary/involuntary) as done by Martin et al. (2009) to see how this may affect the retirement transition as well as how the support systems as well as coping strategies may differ.

5.3 FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This research served to add to the limited scholarly articles found on rhythmic gymnasts and their transition into retirement. This area of study is extremely important in aiding these former elite athletes in areas of distress that may arise from all of the changes that they may undergo. More specifically, the changes in relation to body image, body type, nutritional habits, social circles and even the need for the immersion of a support system for each athlete during the transition. The findings presented in this study provide an outline and understanding into aspects of retiring from elite sports in general that could be further investigated. In addition, it provides insight into this specific community as there is a definite need for more exploration of the retired athletes personal experiences to better understand ways to help them transition into their new lifestyle in the most positive and successful ways possible. It would also be beneficial to explore the attributes of strong work ethic and perfectionism which has been presented within this study, as well as in Stirling et al.'s (2012) study on rhythmic gymnasts. The common characteristics that have been demonstrated by these two studies and the rhythmic gymnasts strong work ethic and desire for perfection in all aspects of life following gymnastics poses an interesting topic to be further discussed in relation to body image satisfaction. It would be beneficial to explore the correlation between work ethic and perfectionism on the rhythmic gymnasts body image satisfaction levels to explore if there is a connection in their ability to accept their own body image regardless of their body type or weight based on this deep rooted desire for perfectionism, which seems to be instilled in them during their elite competitive years.

Furthermore, it has also been recommended that the governing sport body put prevention strategies into place to provide guidelines/resources and outreach programs for the retired

athletes in regards to providing sound nutrition, dispelling body image myths, as well as addressing ways to cope with stress in their transition out of competitive sport (Rust, 2002). This research, in conjunction with future research aims to add to and help establish and create feasible means to assist such athletes into retirement, through programmes and potentially creating support networks, and further research could provide more in this regard.

5.4 CONCLUSION

The research provided an opportunity to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences of the transition from elite rhythmic gymnastics into retirement through the use of the phenomenological method. Utilising this method of data collection and analysis allowed for the research to explore the topic of retired rhythmic gymnasts and their body image satisfaction levels as well as nutrition habits by exploring the participant's personal experiences. Data collected from the seven participants was obtained through semi-structured interviews that were conducted in a one-on-one format via telephone, Face Time and Skype. Following the collection of data via the semi-structured interviews, all data was transcribed and input into ATLAS.ti to begin the analysis process. Throughout the data analysis, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded to explore potential themes across the participant's experiences. After completion of the coding process, the data was again analysed with further exploration within the categories of athletic identity, body image, nutritional habits, and transitional support systems.

Overall, the research findings seemed to suggest that female retired rhythmic gymnasts undergo numerous challenges, some in regards to their body image satisfaction levels, as well as in forming healthy nutritional habits during their transitioning years out of elite sport competition. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that the majority of rhythmic gymnasts retire during their adolescent years and are undergoing stress associated with body maturation on top of the stress experienced from their retirement. The findings suggest a need for both further research and for the development of means to assist elite rhythmic gymnastics athletes into retirement. The participants in this study, as well as the outcomes from the data analysis, provide an understanding of the various areas that need to be addressed in order to help ease a former

athlete out of their competitive lifestyle and into a new life outside of elite sports. The research conducted in this study also shed light on to an area of importance with regards to the effect of the levels of athletic identity experienced post-retirement, as well as characteristics of perfectionism present within the former elite athlete's current lifestyle. Further research into the rhythmic gymnastics field, as well as other elite sports fields should be explored to provide a greater understanding of intervention and means by which to intervene.

The semi-structured interviews provided great insight into the lived experiences of the seven former elite rhythmic gymnasts. The experiences of these participants have provided insight into both positive and negative experiences that the retired rhythmic gymnast undergoes as they make the transition out of sport and into their new lifestyles. It is from these shared experiences that the field of rhythmic gymnastics, and potentially other elite sporting fields, can gain a better understanding of body image satisfaction levels, nutritional habits, and even potential support aids to help ease future former rhythmic gymnasts into this transition as it is a huge endeavour to leave the rhythmic gymnastics community during their adolescent years.

It can be further concluded that it is essential for the rhythmic governing bodies to become more involved in the transition process for the retiring athletes. The results suggest the importance of each individual athlete be provided with a support community tailored to their needs, such as, counselling, fitness, nutrition, goal setting, and socialisation outside of sport, particularly given the nature of retirement usually during adolescence. This research demonstrates the importance for a retiring elite athlete to feel continued support during their transition out of sport to aid them with coping strategies in preparation for potential changes both mentally in physically. Providing a support system created by the athlete, coach, family, and medical practitioners will only benefit retiring athletes as they prepare to exit the world of competitive sport and transition into a new career, higher education, and social groups outside of the rhythmic gymnastics community.

Through the analysis of the data, four main themes emerged. Firstly, participants indicated that the enduring nature of their identity as a gymnast, and thus their process of continuing to relate to themselves as a former gymnast. As such participants felt the continued process of focusing on their own body image often this process creates a comparison of their

body while they were training. This may place participants in a position with a negative or unfavourable comparison, and the emphasis needs to be on having a more balanced diet as opposed to a fad weight loss diet. These reiterate the need for a transition programme to aid the former athlete's out of training and into a retirement from the sport.

This chapter provided a summary of the findings of this research, as well as highlighting the strengths and limitations of the research. Furthermore, future recommendations were explored to provide insight into future research and interventions that can assist with the transition into retirement from elite sports.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ORGANISATION INFORMATION SHEET

College of Human Sciences
Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
PO Box 392
UNISA
0003
South Africa
Telephone: (012) 441 5761



Dear [insert organisation name],

My name is Amy Di Palma and I am a student attending the University of South Africa completing my Masters in Psychology. I am conducting a research study on the experiences of elite rhythmic gymnasts upon entering retirement from the sport. I am contacting you to enquire if I can please approach retired rhythmic gymnasts from your organisation to invite them to participate in the research. The research aims to take an in-depth look at the rhythmic gymnast and their own personal experiences with nutrition as well as body image after they are no longer training and competing at the elite level and have transitioned into retirement from the sport.

I would like to invite retired rhythmic gymnasts that were previously based at your organisation to participate in this research. Participation would involve granting permission to me, Amy Di Palma, to approach retired rhythmic gymnasts within your organisation via email and to invite them to participate in this research. The participation of individuals is completely voluntary and confidential. Participation carries no financial incentives or any organisational incentives, therefore the organisation will not be provided with feedback regarding any individual participants. Individuals are free to not participate without any repercussions.

Participation would mean that individuals interested in participating will undergo an individual interview that will be audio recorded, with their consent, at a location most convenient for the participant. All information that is collected from these interviews will remain confidential, with only the researcher and, her supervisor having access to the transcriptions and

all responses used in the research, will have a generic alias and will be kept as anonymous as possible.

On completion of project a summary of the general end results will be made accessible to the organisation as well as the participants upon request.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Should you have any further questions or concerns please feel free to contact us.

Kind regards,

Amy Di Palma (researcher)

Telephone: +27799630389

Email: 50888242@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Sarah Uren (supervisor)

Telephone: (012) 429 2118

Email: urensa@unisa.ac.za or sarahuren@gmail.com

University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, Pretoria
PO Box 392, UNISA, 0003, South Africa
www.unisa.ac.za

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APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Amy Di Palma and I am a Masters of Psychology student attending the University of South Africa. I am conducting a research study on the body image influences in elite rhythmic gymnasts upon entering retirement from the sport. You are invited to take part in a research study on the eating habits and body image satisfaction in rhythmic gymnasts. The general research aim of this study is to take an in depth look at the retired gymnast.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that should last approximately one hour. The interview will be conducted at an agreed upon time by yourself and the researcher and will be done via phone call, Skype, or in person. The interview will be audio recorded from start to finish ensuring greater accuracy from the data collected. The interviews will then be transcribed verbatim for data analysis. All of the data obtained for this study will only be seen by the researcher and the research supervisor and will be destroyed two years following any publication. Confidentiality will be ensured throughout the study. If direct quotes are used, a generic alias will be used to ensure your confidentiality as the participant.

As the participant, you will be asked to commit to a one hour interview session where the data will be collected. There are no direct benefits to this study, therefore choosing to participate will not have any consequences. The participant will be given the researchers contact information should they have any questions or concerns during the study. As a participant, you may decide to withdraw at any time throughout the study with no explanation necessary. As a participant you also have the right to omit or refuse to answer any questions during the interview process.

For any further information, I will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact me via email at 50888242@mylife.unisa.ac.za or telephone at +27799630389.

Should you have any further questions or concerns please feel free to contact us.

Kind regards,

Amy Di Palma (researcher)

Telephone: +27799630389

Email: 50888242@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Sarah Uren (supervisor)

Telephone: (012) 429 2118

Email: urensa@unisa.ac.za or sarahuren@gmail.com

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APPENDIX C: PERMISSION FOR INTERVIEW

I _____ hereby give my consent to being a participant in an interview conducted by Amy Di Palma for her study on eating habits and body image satisfaction.

I, the participant understand that:

- My participation is voluntary.
- I can refuse to answer any questions that I choose not to discuss with the interviewer.
- I have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point should I choose not to proceed with any further questions.
- I do not have to elaborate on any questions if I only choose to provide a yes/no answer.
- No information that will identify me will be included in the research or publication.
- This study has no foreseeable benefits or negative consequences in participation.
- If for some reason a negative consequence arises due to participation in the interview, the researchers contact information will be made available for any questions or concerns. If necessary, the counselling services details will be provided via the participation information sheet should the participant wish to receive assistance through free counselling services provided by the South African Depression Group (SADAG) and the Personal Crisis Help Services of South Africa. For participants in Canada, they will be provided with contact details of the Canadian Personal Crisis Helpline.
- I give consent for the researcher to use direct quotes within their research, with the understanding that a generic alias will be used so that my identity is not compromised and I remain as anonymous as possible.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D: PERMISSION TO RECORD INTERVIEW



I _____ give my consent to the recording of the interview.

I understand that:

- The audio files and transcripts will only be seen and heard by the researcher and her supervisor.
- I understand that the information recorded will only be analysed and processed by the researcher and her supervisor.
- All audio files and transcripts of the interviews will be kept in a safe and secure location where only the researcher will have access to the material.
- All audio file and transcripts for the study will be destroyed two years after publication of the research.
- There will be no identifying information used from the transcripts and audio files. Where direct quotes are used, anonymity will be provided to ensure confidentiality of the participant.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Semi-structured interview schedule:

1. How did you first get involved with rhythmic gymnastics?
 - a. Probe: did you know much about rhythmic gymnastics before you started?
2. Tell me about your involvement in rhythmic gymnastics?
 - a. Probe: level of competition; length of involvement?
 - b. Probe: best thing and worst thing about rhythmic gymnastics?
3. If you could describe one aspect when you competed that you feel defined you as a gymnast, what would that be?
 - a. Probe: and now that you are retired, what one aspect would you feel defines you as a retired rhythmic gymnast?
4. How would you describe yourself, a retired rhythmic gymnast?
 - a. Probe: do you think your perception of yourself has changed in any way since your retirement?
 - b. Probe: as a gymnast how important was it to meet the standards?
5. Could you provide a metaphor for the transformation that you physically went through as a rhythmic gymnast?
 - a. How would you describe your body when you were training?
 - b. How would you describe your body now following retirement for gymnastics?
6. How would you describe your relationship with your body?
 - a. Probe: and before retirement? And after retirement?
 - b. Probe: what would you describe as significant influences on your relationship with your body as a gymnast?
 - c. Probe: what would you describe as significant influences on your relationship with your body as a *retired* gymnast?
7. How do you think rhythmic gymnasts view their bodies?

- a. Probe: when you were training how did you feel about your own body?
 - b. Probe: and now, how do you feel about your body? (can probe reason for change in perception, should they indicate a change)
8. Could you tell me about your training regime when you were a rhythmic gymnast?
- a. Probe: hours of training?
 - b. Probe: fitness – how often and what kind of fitness?
 - c. Probe: your routines – intensity, breaks etc.?
 - d. Probe: any other forms of training, besides your routines?
9. Thinking back, on your training, how would you describe your training outfits?
- a. Probe: how did you feel in these training outfits?
 - b. Probe: how would you feel now being in those training outfits?
10. Could you describe your nutritional lifestyle as a rhythmic gymnast?
- a. Probe: what's your eating schedule like?
 - b. Probe: diets? Any restrictions etc.?
 - c. Probe: and your nutritional lifestyle now you are retired?
11. Could you describe the relationship you had with your coach?
- a. Probe: how did you experience your coach's influence on your perception of yourself?
 - b. Probe: how did your coach manage dieting and training regimes?
 - c. Probe: how did you experience your team mate's influence on your perception of yourself at that stage?
 - d. How do you experience your coach following your retirement?
12. Could you describe what going into retirement, from rhythmic gymnastics, was like for you in the very beginning?
- a. Probe: after the initial transition, did you go back to visit the club or your coach, and if so what was your experience of that?
 - b. Probe: looking back now, how has the experience of retiring from the sport been like for you?
 - c. Probe: could you describe
13. Could you tell me a little bit about your personal support system?
- a. Probe: and when you were competing?

- b. Probe: and that you have retired?
14. What were the most significant aspects of your training?
- a. Probe: looking back following retirement, how do you see the influences on you throughout your career?



APPENDIX F: ETHICAL CLEARANCE FOR M/D STUDENTS: RESEARCH ON HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

The Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at Unisa have evaluated this research proposal for a Higher Degree in Psychology in light of appropriate ethical requirements, with special reference to the requirements of the Code of Conduct for Psychologists of the HPCSA.

Student Name: Amy Christine Di Palma

Student no. 50888242

Supervisor/promoter: Sarah Uren

Affiliation: Department of Psychology, Unisa

Title of project:

Examining the phenomena of eating habits and body image satisfaction: An in depth study on the elite rhythmic gymnast as they transition into retirement from the sport.

The application was approved by the departmental Ethics Committee The proposal was evaluated for adherence to appropriate standards in respect of ethics as required by the Psychology Department of Unisa. The application was approved by the departmental Ethics Committee without any further conditions.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in brown ink, appearing to read "P Kruger".

Prof P Kruger

[For the Ethics Committee]

[Department of Psychology, Unisa]

Date: 29 January 2014