SPECIAL ARTICLE

Understanding body image: A phenomenological study among former female collegiate athletes in Metro Manila

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ABSTRACT

Generally, this study explores the transformation of body image among former collegiate athletes in Metro Manila. Through qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology, the study found out diverse experiences of former female athletes with their body image. A salient theme that was elicited from the study was how changes in daily routines significantly impacted their perceptions. External factors like comments from family, peers, and society also played a major role. The cultural norms of both athletics and Philippine society influenced how these women internalized their body image. Many still associate ideal bodies with athletic terms like "muscular" or "visible abs." Coping mechanisms varied, but most leaned towards positive strategies like seeking support to counter the negative influences.

Introduction

It is undeniable that sports are highly relevant to Filipino culture. It is considered as a social event where different individuals from various backgrounds get together either as players, athletes, coaches, or as watchers [1]. The country is relevantly known for its intense enthusiasm for sports due to its dynamic and diverse sports culture that pervaded every element of the Filipinos' life from small courts in the barangays to big national arenas. Within this rich sports culture, Filipino female athletes have played a paramount involvement in representing the country through displaying their talents in sports—whether it may be locally or internationally. Some of the notable female athletes who brought immense recognition for the Philippines are Lydia de Vega-Mercado, Bong Coo, Elma Muros-Posadas, Haydee Coloso-Espino, Mona Solaiman, Lita de la Rosa, Josephine de la Vina, Thelma Barina-Rojas, etc. [2]. These athletes did not only excel in their respective sports, but also embarked a journey as they transitioned from their active athletic careers to a post-athletic life.

Leaving a respective collegiate athletic career is a significant transition that poses a myriad of challenges, both in the physical and psychological aspect. Athletic Transition pertains to the phase of moving from an athletic career to a subsequent non-athletic life [3]; a process of transitioning out to experience the real world outside sports. It marks the end of a period defined by discipline, competition, and the cultivation of a finely-tuned athletic physique. Experiences of athletes who undergo this phase of their life may differ significantly. While others may thrive in the process [4], some athletes may find it challenging, encountering considerable stress and difficulties as they navigate their career transition [5]. For many female athletes, it can have a notable impact, resulting in a substantial disruption to their career trajectory and imposing a distinctive set of demands [6]. The transition from the peak of their physical fitness to a lifestyle after quitting can be accompanied by shifts in body composition and activity levels. These changes can lead to a complex interplay of emotions, affecting not only their self-esteem and body image but also their overall adjustment to a non-athletic existence.

In the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, a historical moment for Philippine sports was achieved by a woman, Hidilyn Diaz, a professional weightlifter from Mampang, a small village near Zamboanga. She won the gold medal in the women's 55 kilograms weightlifting division, overtaking Liao Qiuyun from the People's Republic of China [7]. Prior to this, Diaz won a silver medal at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janiero, Brazil [8]. Her journey as an athlete highlights not only the exceptional dedication and talent of Filipino athletes with the sport, but also their unique relationships with their bodies. Diaz claimed in a 2020 Olympic interview that she suffered from an injury that finally led to her breakthrough as she began to reduce her intake of harmful foods and increase her consumption of healthy alternatives, which resulted to improvements in her performance. This is an example that exhibits how athletes develop a profound connection with their physical bodies over years of unwavering dedication directed at enhancing, strengthening, and prioritizing their bodily attributes to optimize athletic performance [9]. Moreover, it is notable to state that athletes are a group with unique experiences and stressors, particularly in the areas of physical appearance and body image that are often overlooked.

Definitions of body image are complex and multifaceted in nature. It is a vast, dynamic, and diverse notion with numerous distinct structures that contribute to our understanding of the research field [10]. The best way to understand body image according to Slade (1994), is to explain it as a generalized mental representation of the shape, form, and size of the body that is influenced by a variety of historical, cultural, social, personal, and biological elements that operate over a range of timescales. In addition, it is also described as a significant role in various aspects of human experience that encompasses the communication of one's identity, the experience of pleasure and emotions, and the means through which individuals express themselves [11]. In simple terms, it boils down to how an individual views their physical appearance.

The topic of body image throughout a person's life is of relevance in the larger field of psychology [12,13]. However, in the discipline of sport psychology, the emphasis has mostly been on young athletes competing. Other studies have looked at how life events such as pregnancy [12,14], and college attendance [12,15] affect body image. Surprisingly, the move out of athletics has been generally ignored in this aspect [15]. In the realm of sports, the shift from active athletic involvement to leaving out exerts an influence on the body image of former female athletes [9,12,16-19]. This impact is rooted in the expectation that athletes must meticulously maintain their bodies, ensuring they are in optimal physical condition for peak performance, especially during competitive seasons. Expectations can subject athletes to external pressures, compelling them to adhere to specific appearance standards [19]. These pressures may persist even after their athletic careers have concluded. These expectations are an example of the varying factors such as personal, social, and cultural that influence an athlete's individual meanings of their bodies.

Body composition changes, such as weight increase or reduction, muscle loss, or adjustments to physical fitness, can affect how a person feels about

their body. When an athlete ends their active career, certain changes frequently take place. Fuller (2014) stated that athletes took pleasure in the confidence that physical fitness gave them as well as the way their bodies reflected their roles as athletes. Hence, following the end of their athletic endeavor, it is evident that they notice alterations in their bodies such as increase in body weight or loss of muscle mass. The confidence that they once felt in their physical bodies has eventually become a source of concern [21], and the experience of departing from sports has now become more challenging due to this absence. Furthermore, the exposure of former female athletes to different social networks may also have implications on their body image. In a study by Kerr *et al.* (2007), it was stated that concerns of the body and maladaptive behaviors are closely tied to the social groups that support thin body ideals as the cultural norm. For adults, studies also showed that the sorts of people and networks in physical activity spaces have an impact on women's body image in the adult phase along with the hypercritical attitude that women have toward how their bodies seem, move, and feel when exercising [22].

Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) defined coping as the ideas and actions that are used to deal with both internal and external stressful situations. It is a word that refers to the conscious and intentional mobilization of activities, as opposed to 'defense mechanisms,' which are subconscious or unconscious adaptive responses that try to decrease or accept stress [23]. As the factors are discussed, it is important to tackle how former female athletes are coping with the negative effects brought by the various factors that are affecting their current body image. This will involve the mechanisms that they are practicing to manage the changes brought about by leaving sports. Moreover, it is notable that the strategies they practice may encompass the variation of activities that they do or their own different ways of seeking support to address the negative experiences they go through.

Understanding how former female athletes cope with their encounters will be an important part of the study in consideration that there is a dearth of local literatures on the body image after leaving sports. While extensive literature exists on the subject of body image globally, the experiences of former female collegiate athletes in Metro Manila, Philippines, remain largely unexplored. Their transition from active sports careers to post-athletic life represents a unique and underrepresented aspect of body image research within the local context. This gap in local literature underscores the need for research focusing specifically on this population, as their subjective encounters leaving their respective sports careers reveal the complexities of body image in the context of moving to a new phase in life. Generally, the study purported to describe body image among former female collegiate athletes in Metro Manila, Philippines. This specifically aimed to 1) know the meanings former female collegiate athletes attach to body image; 2) know the changes of body image among former female collegiate athletes; 3) identify the personal, social, and cultural factors affecting body image of former female collegiate athletes; and 4) know the coping strategies employed by former female collegiate athletes to address the negative effects of personal, social, and cultural factors on body image.

The scope of the study specifically focused only on a specific population of former female collegiate athletes who have actively participated in organized sports or athletic activities at a collegiate level. The population was the study's focus as this certain groups have a limited number of years to compete, in comparison to professional athletes who have the opportunity to end their careers at their own discretion or unforeseen circumstances such as career-ending injuries and failure to make a team (Fuller, 2014). According to Fuller (2014) once the eligibility concludes, the vast majority of these athletes are faced with the complexity of life beyond. Hence, departing for this population are deemed to be distinct when compared to athletes in different levels or sport. Additionally, the research focused particularly on former female collegiate athletes who are residing in Metro Manila which means that the findings do not fully represent the diverse experiences of individuals living in different parts of the country, particularly those in rural areas. Due to the location and environment in which these individuals currently reside, differences in experiences may occur. Furthermore, only the different experiences on the changes of body image were studied. Other experiences such as changes in identity, will not be explored. It also delved with the personal, social, and cultural factors that influenced the body image of former female collegiate athletes, but did not cover the influence of other features such as historical factors (body modification practices), biomedical factors (medical conditions), and psychological factors (abuse and trauma, eating disorders etcetera).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design to fully describe the experiences of female collegiate athletes on the transformation of their body image after they left the world of sports. Hermeneutic phenomenological approach enables researchers to investigate how life's everyday behaviors are shaped by encounters, customs, and culture [24]. Apart from this, the aforementioned approach also seeks to delve deeper into the subjective and personal meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, rather than attempting to quantify or measure them [25]. Although, phenomenological research has also been criticized for being methodologically underdeveloped and for relying on obscure notions of "meaning attribution" or "deeper meaning" [26,27]; it is still particularly well-suited for investigating complex, nuanced, and often less tangible aspects of human life.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Metro Manila, Philippines. A total of ten (10) key-informants who are former female athletes from different schools and universities in Metro Manila were selected through purposive sampling. The qualified participants for this study include those who are 1) female who actively participated in organized sports or athletic activities at a collegiate level, 2) Filipino citizen, 3) 21 to 25 years old, 4) resident of Metro Manila, 5) willing to openly discuss and describe their body image, 5) able to communicate effectively in English language in which the study is conducted, and 6) have agreed to participate by signing the disseminated informed consent.

Among the ten (10) former female collegiate athletes, six (6) or most of them are 23 years old, while three (3) are 22 years old, and one (1) is 25 years old. In terms of sports event, three (3) were into cheerleading, and two (2) each for basketball, volleyball and futsal; and one (1) for swimming.

Data Collection Procedure

The recruitment of the key informants was conducted through an online social media campaign on different sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly known as Twitter). On Facebook, a publication material was posted, accompanied by a caption to provide an overview of the relevant information in the study such as (1) study title, (2) inclusion and exclusion criteria, (3) and monetary compensation. Key informants who were able to successfully fulfill the inclusion criteria for the study were reached out by the researcher via Facebook Messenger, e-mail, and text messages. For Instagram, the researcher made use of the "add to story" feature for the poster containing a hyperlink that directs the interested individuals to the demographic questionnaire. Additionally, users who follow the researcher were encouraged to repost the story to their accounts as well. Once a reply from the key informants were obtained, they were asked to set a schedule for the interview.

The overall rigor of this study was ensured by taking into consideration the components of trustworthiness specified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. First, the issue of credibility that questions "how congruent are the findings with reality?" (Stahl and King, 2020) was addressed by employing observation, which is another method used in data gathering. Aside from in-depth interview, series of observations on the behavior, and use archival pictures were used to triangulate the data and establish identifiable patterns on transformation of body image among former female collegiate athletes. Also, the codes developed from the interview transcriptions were presented to selected research participants for cross validation. The primary questions in the validation process include whether codes elicited from the interviews were consistent with the words used by the participants and if these were reflective of their experiences associated to body transformation after they left sports.

Second, although the study employed reflexive analysis, the factor of transferability was undertaken by maintaining the applicability of patterns and descriptions from one context to another. In order to ensure this, various methods in data gathering were used such as in-depth interview, observation, and archival pictures that usually lasts for 30 to 45 minutes for every participant. The whole duration of data gathering for this study lasted for (1) month. Although the study was specific to the experiences of former female athletes, insights distilled from this maybe significant to the circumstances of other women and other athletes regardless of gender.

Third, dependability as perspective of trustworthiness was considered in working constantly with another author. The collaborative manner of analyzing and making sense of the qualitative accounts resulted to a higher sense of credibility. The interpretation of the data from interviews that were validated by a co-researcher provided feedback and enhanced the nuances attached to the experience of the transformation of body image among former female athletes.

Fourth, confirmability or getting as close to objective reality was taken into consideration by analyzing the data objectively. The recurring themes from the qualitative data have been elicited by following conscientiously the process of interpretative phenomenological analysis. The discussion of the themes was done objectively by employing multidisciplinary approach informed by psychological, sociological, and anthropological theories. The use of theories in the analysis of data elevated the perspective from a more specific context of the experiences of former female athlete to a more universal insights that can be applicable to other contexts. Moreover, researches of other authors were used to explain the situation of the transformation of the body image among former athletes that expanded their experiences from a unique context to broader social settings.

Data Collection Tool

The data on the profile of the research participants were gathered through Google Forms link. This contained questions on the demographic profiles such as age, sex, school, sports event, etcetera of former female athletes utilized for the purpose of screening those who are qualified to participate in the study.

The main data were gathered through an in-depth interview using a set of guide questions formulated in a semi-structured and open-ended manner. Additionally, an interview protocol was made to create a more organized discussion between the researcher and the participants. The questions in protocol revolved around the topic of body image that include 1) meanings that they attach to their body image; 2) changes that occurred in their body image after they left sports; 3) personal, social, and cultural factors that affect their body image; and 4) coping strategies they employ to mitigate the negative effects of the aforementioned factors.

The tool has been subjected to expert validation by an expert in qualitative research. Questions were examined whether these are aligned and have logical sequence relative to the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was pilot tested among two (2) athletes to identify and resolve issues, ensure the quality of data, and optimize research process before the implementation of the study. Basically, pilot testing was useful in revising the terminologies used in the questionnaire that were not understood by those who participated in the pilot test. During the pilot testing, careful notes were taken on the problems encountered and appropriated revisions of the questionnaire have been adopted.

Data Analysis

The study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This analytic approach is defined as having a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology that is compatible with postmodern philosophy [28]. Smith and Osborne (2003, p. 53) discussed that the purpose of IPA is to investigate and describe how key informants are interpreting their social and personal environments, and the meanings of specific experiences, events, or states. Moreover, the authors stated that it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal meanings or accounts of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself. This type of analysis is beneficial because it offers a detailed and nuanced understanding of research key informants' experiences [29] and focuses on investigating how people interpret and get value from these encounters. Given the fact that the subject covered was body image, IPA was considered to be the most advantageous in extracting most of the data, as was provided by the informants.

The IPA has theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology that was introduced by Husserl (1931) as means to understand the context of the 'lived experiences' of people who are research participants and the meaning of their experiences. Following the methodology developed by Husserl, van Manen (1990) expanded phenomenology and wrote extensively on hermeneutical phenomenology that he described to as 'lived experiences' of research participants (phenomenology) and the interpretation (text) of the life they have lived and experienced (hermeneutics). According to him, the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (a "grasp of the very nature of the thing"); that means, qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon (an "object" of human experience). The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it [30]. Succinctly, Creswell (2007) explains that phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) wrote about transcendental phenomenology emphasizing less concern about the interpretation of the researcher's personal experience and more focused on describing the 'live experiences' of the research participants. He proposed for "bracketing" of researcher's personal experience from that of the research participants' 'lived experiences.' Recently, the theory of phenomenology was revolutionized by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) by conceptualizing the phenomenological research tradition which was eventually called the IPA.

The philosophical assumptions of phenomenology rest on common grounds. Firstly, it is the study of the lived experiences of persons, the view that these experiences are conscious ones [31]; and secondly, the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences, not explanations or analyses [30]. According to Stewart and Mickunas (1990) the philosophical perspectives of phenomenology argues for a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy that is limited to scientism but as a search for wisdom, a philosophy without presupposition that calls for suspension of judgement about what is real ("natural theoretical attitude" or "epoche"), intentionality of consciousness that means reality of an object is inextricably related to one's consciousness, and refusal of the subject-object dichotomy that highlights what Husserl has described as dual Cartesian nature of both subjects and objects wherein reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual.

Phenomenology was useful in understanding how former female collegiate athletes make sense of their experiences on body image. As research participants undergo significant changes after they left sports career, phenomenology was utilized to explore their experiences as they transition, redefine themselves, and how their athletic identity influences the post-athletic meanings of their body image. Through phenomenology, we are able to gain deep and nuanced understanding of the personal, social, and cultural factors that impinge on the experiences of our participants related to their body image. Moreover, challenges and struggles of former female collegiate athletes and personal insights on their coping strategies were uncovered by using phenomenology.

Moreover, IPA has theoretical foundations on hermeneutics that was derived from such philosophers as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricouer. Hermeneutics is a method of taking into account the phenomenon of meaning-making and its resultant impact on individual and group identity formation [32]. He added that a theory of hermeneutics addresses how individuals and collectives understand texts and communicative actions via their interpretive practices. Baran and Davis (2015) explain that hermeneutic theory suggests that reality is social, unpredictable, and not capable of being predictably measured and described, especially on the behalf of a community forged by common understanding of social texts. They highlighted the basic assumptions of hermeneutics that include 1) understanding is historically and culturally situated, 2) social and cultural understanding is maintained and challenged through acts of communication, and 3) researchers must attempt to understand an interpretive community on its own terms and should limit imposing normative and ideological assumptions on their own understanding of the group in question.

Hermeneutics in the context of this study was instrumental in understanding how former collegiate athletes reinterpret their past and present body image. This is a valuable approach in making sense of the body image of former collegiate athletes as it emphasizes how they make meaning of their experiences. Hermeneutics was significant in the analysis of how the experiences of former collegiate athletes are interpreted within personal, social, and cultural milieus. Specifically, hermeneutics was useful in the analysis of how former athletes describe changes in their body image and how they interpret these changes over time. Hermeneutics explored the shifts in self-perception, self-confidence, personal identity through interview and reflective accounts. Also, hermeneutics was useful in uncovering how former

collegiate athlete internalized or resisted the norms and standards in both the athletic industry and Philippine society in general. Moreover, by understanding how former collegiate athletes attach meaning to their body image, hermeneutics can help them cope with negative effects of different factors. This means that hermeneutics can contribute to redefining athletic identity in a way that will foster long-term well-being beyond competitive sports. Succinctly, hermeneutics was valuable in understanding how and why former collegiate athletes interpret their experiences relative to body image within personal, social, and cultural contexts.

Lastly, IPA has theoretical basis of idiography that was used in the late nineteenth century by German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (2001). Idiographic science is founded upon the premise that each individual is unique in all respects—genetically, physiologically and psychologically—and ultimately, experiences life in idiosyncratic ways [33]. Idiographic knowledge aims at describing and explaining particular phenomena [34]. As an approach, idiographic aims to seek understanding of the specific context rather than eliciting general conclusions. The idiographic approach is focused on the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each case or phenomenon studied [35,36]. According to Maykut & Morehouse (1994), the connotation for idiography can perhaps be more accurately characterized as the richly detailed and uniquely holistic representation of words and actions that attempt to describe a situation as experienced by its participants. This implies that idiography is specifically concerned on the dimension of the idiographic position captured in the concept of "inward outlook" utilized by Kelly (1955) to describe the focus of the approach.

The focus of idiography as an approach on in-depth, individualized analysis rather than generalization across populations was useful in the study of body image among former collegiate athletes in Metro Manila. Particularly, idiography focuses on the unique personal experiences of each former collegiate athlete, rather than applying broad theories or patterns. This emphasizes personal narratives that are instrumental in eliciting rich understanding of how former athletes experience and interpret transformation of their body image. Idiography is instrumental in understanding how unique meanings of the experiences of each former collegiate athletes were constructed rather than applying universal models of body image. Also, it highlighted the personal successes and struggles of each athlete as unique experience rather than categorizing them as homogenous group. This approach is crucial in designing personalized strategies, rather than one-size-fits-all model for coping and interventions among former collegiate athletes as they navigate effectively their struggles on body image within a transitional context. Summarily, idiography in this study stresses the subjective experiences by exploring the depth, complexity, and uniqueness of how body image is personally experienced by former collegiate athletes and argues that this is not a universal experience but a personal and constantly changing process.

The analysis of the interview accounts was done following the guidelines formulated by Smith *et al.* (2009). Firstly, transcriptions were immediately excerpted after the end of the interview of each informant. There were ten (10) interviews transcribed using the recordings in the zoom. The process of transcription was done through a site called Otranscribe for a more detailed and accurate result. The complete transcriptions were read and re-read alongside other data available and were checked for accuracy against audio tape recording. These steps are significant to ensure that the experiences of body image transformation among former female athletes remain central to the analytical process.

Secondly, the interview transcriptions were examined to elicit initial notes that explores semantic content and language associated to the transformation of body image among former female collegiate athletes. The notes that were produced in this step were used as basis for the emergent themes in the succeeding step.

Thirdly, identification of the initial codes and formulation of the subordinate and superordinate themes on body image transformation of former female athletes were all done manually through tables in Google Documents. The transcripts were coded line-by-line by means of In Vivo Coding, a form of qualitative data analysis that places emphasis on the actual spoken words of the participants [37]. Eleven groups of codes were produced from the transcriptions. One of these groups of codes includes "directly addressing the problem at hand," "support seeking," "positive reframing," and "acceptance."

Fourthly, the initial codes on the transformation of body image among former female athletes were grouped to formulate subordinate themes. Out of the codes cited as example in the previous step, a subordinate code,

"positive coping" was formulated. This subordinate code together with "negative coping" that includes codes of "unhealthy habits," "avoidance," and "self-critical" were clustered under one of the superordinate theme of "experiences of coping with the negative effects brough by personal, social, and cultural factors." Conceptualization of these superordinate themes came from the method of comparing and contrasting each case from one another, which means that doing the previous steps of reading through the collected data was repeated numerous times. The superordinate themes that were elicited from the transcripts include "meanings attached to the body;" "experiences of changes in body image upon leaving sports;" "experiences of changes in physique and self-confidence;" "experiences of body commentary received from family, peers,, and authorities;" "experiences of internalization of norms and standards in both the athletic industry and Philippine society;" and "experiences of coping with the negative effects brought by personal, social, and cultural factors."

Fifthly, the preceding processes were repeated in the analysis of the transcriptions of another research participant. The interview transcriptions of all ten (10) former female collegiate athletes were analyzed following step 1 to 4 as suggested by Smith (2009).

Lastly, the emergent themes across ten (10) participants were examined to look for patterns, whilst considering convergence and divergence alongside other themes. Fleshing out and emphasizing the unique characteristics of each individual informant was done through the process of interpretation. The researcher aimed to present them objectively while acknowledging the fact that self-reflection and awareness of preconception was brought into consideration due to IPA's hermeneutic underpinnings [38].

The initial results were cross-checked through the use of Intercoder Reliability (ICR) as a way to gauge how consistent researchers are when analyzing the same data [39]. It is especially important in content analysis to ensure the code, which defines how data is categorized, is applied accurately by everyone involved. Following this, formulated general patterns and codes were then compared through a face-to-face meeting. Once finalized, the findings were written and presented through the use of verbatim quotes from the informants to give a clear illustration of the key themes and results.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the participation in the study, an informed consent form was distributed to all key informants in which a clear explanation of the purpose of the study, various data collection procedures, potential risks, potential benefits, and other relevant information on the safety was indicated. Emphasis was placed on their unaffected right to refuse or leave the study at any time they wish to do so. Moreover, the key informants were given the opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns during their participation in the data collection. Whenever they are in need of extra support (e.g. psychological) that was caused directly or indirectly during their involvement, it was made clear that they will be referred to a Psychologist that the researcher had previously made contact with.

Confidentiality and anonymity of the key informants were rigorously maintained during the study. Instead of using their real names, they were asked to provide a pseudonym of their choice. Personal data and information of the participants were all protected through assignment of unique identification codes; a practice adhered to all throughout data collection and presentation of the results. The entirety of the data is secured in a Google Drive protected by a two-authenticator system, accessible only to the researcher and her adviser, to thwart unauthorized access attempts. Notably, external data handlers were required to sign a Nondisclosure Agreement (see Figure X) to reinforce prevention measures against theft or unauthorized sharing of information with third parties. They were also given a separate Google Drive containing anonymized data, identified only by the chosen pseudonym of the informants. The chosen platform stored the data for one year upon the completion of the study, after which it will be deleted. However, extra data handlers were instructed to delete the data they received after six (6) months with a follow-up from the researcher to request proof through the form of screen recording or screenshots, demonstrating the deletion.

Lastly, a permission, along with an ethical evaluation was requested from the University of the Philippines Manila Research Ethics Board (UPMREB) to ensure that the study complies with ethical standards, their rules and recommendations. Any issues or changes suggested by the ethics committee

to improve protection of the key informants were successfully addressed by the researcher. A certificate of approval was issued for this study by the UPMREB with code number of 2023-0837-UND.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of the Participants

The total number of key informants was 14, with all of them passing the inclusion criteria of the study. However, four (4) did not follow through the interview due to conflict with their schedule. The demographic profile of the key informants (see Table 1) includes the summary of their basic information such as chosen pseudonyms, sports played in college, sex, and age. Among the ten (10) participants, three (3) have been active in cheerleading, two (2) each for basketball, volleyball, and futsal; while one (1) in swimming. Majority, totaling to six (6) of them were 23 years old, while three (3) were 22 years old, and one (1) was 25 years old.

Themes Elicited from the In-depth Interview Accounts

The in-depth interview accounts that were subjected to IPA resulted to seven (7) superordinate themes. These themes include "meanings attached to the body;" "experiences of changes in body image upon leaving sports;" "experiences of changes in physique and self-confidence;" "experiences of body commentary received from family, peers, and authorities;" "Philippine society;" and "experiences of coping with the negative effects brought by personal, "experiences of internalization of norms and standards in both the athletic industry and social, and cultural factors."

Meanings former female collegiate athletes attach to body image

Based on the analysis of the in-depth interview accounts, the most common meaning attached to body image is to interpret it as self-perception. According to Han,

"I was just thinking about the mirror, actually. A mirror is something we use to see a reflection of ourselves. It is a metric used as a standard of my strength and my abilities."

Table 1. Demographic Data

Key Informant	Sports	Sex	Age
Nat	Basketball	Female	22
Lin	Cheerleading	Female	22
Pen	Cheerleading	Female	22
Eve	Volleyball	Female	23
Bam	Volleyball	Female	23
Sam	Cheerleading	Female	23
Jen	Basketball	Female	23
Deb	Swimming	Female	23
Han	Futsal	Female	23
Fae	Futsal	Female	25

Table 2. Themes from In-Depth Interview Accounts

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Codes
Meanings Attached to Body Image	Concepts created when the word "body image" is heard	Self-perception and perceived external validation
Experiences of Changes in Body Image upon Leaving Sports	Detachment to physical activities	Transitioning to a Sedentary Lifestyle
	Increased self-awareness	Previously unconcerned with body image, but now more mindful
Experiences of Changes in Physique and Self-Confidence	Public self-consciousness	Appearance changing, Personality change
	Weight and confidence	Increased self-confidence and self-esteem, Diminished self-confidence
	Difference on prioritization on the dimensions of body	Physical Appearance, Self-care, overall health and well-being
Experiences of Body Commentary Received from Family, Peers, and Authorities	Repercussions of unsolicited comments	Feeling belittled, Forced attention to physique, Seeking external validation
Experiences of Internalization of Norms and Standards in both Athletic Industry and Philippine Society	Ideal body image	Physically fit, Internal feelings
	Manners of internalization	Desire to conform to norms and standards, Comparison with other individuals
Experiences of Coping with the Negative Effects brought by Personal, Social, and Cultural Factors	Positive Coping	Directly addressing the problems at hand, Seeking support, Positive reframing, Acceptance
	Negative Coping	Unhealthy Habits, Avoidance, Self-Critical

It was salient in the interview accounts that body image is associated to a mirror, something used to see a reflection of oneself. As a mirror it is used as a calibration of one's strengths and abilities. Others would consider body image as a personal perception or preference, that is something unique.

Another key meaning attached to body image the concept of perceived external evaluation. Fae, Bam, and Deb shared,

"… the first idea that comes when the word body image is said is like–your picture in the eyes of others and yourself. The whole idea, that's how I think of it."

This meaning of body image is external in the sense that this is how others see a body, an image towards other people. Theoretically, this was explained by Cooley (1902) through his concept of "The Looking Glass Self" arguing that ideas and feelings that people have about themselves with others - their self-concept or self-image – are developed in response to their perception and internalization of how others perceive and evaluate them. According to Cooley (1902), the formation of self-identity happens when 1) people imagine how they appear to other people; 2) people imagine how others are, thus judging them based on appearance and how they present themselves; and 3) people imagine how others feel about them on the judgments they make.

Changes of body image among former female collegiate athletes

The changes in body image of former female athletes were primarily caused by their detachment from physical activities, changes in their physique and self-confidence, difference in prioritization on the dimensions of body image, their increase of self-awareness, and public self-consciousness. Fae narrated,

"I'm not active anymore. I don't think I have an active lifestyle, more on talking but I'm still very lazy, I'm headed toward unhealthy living. If before I'm healthy while I was in sports, now I'm unhealthy. I ran out of breath fast, just a brisk walk and I had to catch my breath. It's like you have more muscle pain, that's what I also think about. Before I was playing even though I'm running, there's no pain at all but now you can actually feel the body pain that makes it even harder to get up. After I'm done being an athlete, nothing."

The concept of retirement form sports is one of the role transitions whereas athletes shed certain activities that they are used to doing almost every day [40]. The informants reported a significant shift from their active athletic lifestyles to a more sedentary one. These were attributed to several factors. First, they mentioned feeling less in tune with physical activities in general, possibly due to the absence of a structured training routine. For athletes, the regimented routines and years of dedicated physical activity become ingrained in their self-identity [41]. Consequently, a significant shift in their ability to maintain that level of activity can negatively impact their motivation to exercise altogether. Further exploration of this phenomenon revealed a lack of motivation as a primary driver of the detachment. This aligns with Barker *et al.*, (2014) findings that the absence of teammates or a social circle for training and routines affects how athletes engage in physical activities alone. Moreover, another factor influencing the former female collegiate athletes' activity levels is the competing academic demands. Several informants, particularly those nearing graduation, cited the need to prioritize their studies as a reason for leaving competitive athletics. However, their desire to remain active is further challenged by the exhaustion associated with on-the-job training. This dual pressure – academic workload and on the job training – leaves them with limited time and energy for additional physical activity.

The informants' transition away from competitive sports inevitably led to changes in their routines and lifestyles. This, unsurprisingly, manifested in a transformation of their outward appearance. Notably, the interviews revealed a complex interplay between physique changes, self-confidence, and self-esteem. The experiences of the informants varied depending on their athletic physiques. Those accustomed to maintaining a lean build reported weight gain after leaving sports. However, this unexpected shift in body composition was accompanied by a surprising positive outcome: increased happiness and body satisfaction. In contrast, for some informants, weight gain after leaving athletics did negatively impact their body image. Those accustomed to a high level of physical fitness expressed a decrease in self-confidence and esteem. They attributed this shift to the visible changes in their physique, particularly an increase in waistline, and a decline in their physical capabilities. This finding contrasts with the findings of a previous study by Hardie *et al.* (2022) which suggested that former female athletes felt more happier with

themselves after their careers because "they no longer have the all-consuming responsibility to maintain the competitive shape/look."

While some gained weight and reported increased body satisfaction, others who lost weight expressed a decrease in self-confidence. This decrease stemmed from a sense of lost strength compared to when they were heavier. One informant, Deb, exemplified this paradox. She achieved a body type considered conventionally attractive by societal standards, yet this came at a cost. As she stated,

"I'm skinny again but at what cost? I'm not strong anymore. I don't feel the same."

Deb lamented the loss of strength and vitality she associated with her previous, more muscular physique.

The interviews also revealed a spectrum of priorities among the informants regarding body image. Some participants prioritized physical appearance, focusing on aspects like overall physique, arms, body shape, and build. This focus might be linked to their lingering image from their athletic careers. As one informant mentioned, these aspects were paramount during their competitive years. In contrast, other participants emphasized self-care, overall health, and well-being. Bam, for example, stated that metrics like BMI or body shape weren't their primary concern, especially considering the shift in priorities as one ages. This highlights a more holistic approach to body image, where physical health and well-being take center.

Furthermore, there was also a notable implication of public self-consciousness during the interview with the informants. For context, public self-consciousness refers to an individual's awareness and concern about how they are perceived by others in social situations [42]. The different manners that former female athletes practice this is through appearance and personality changing. Appearance changes highlighted the modifications that they do, specifically in presenting themselves to other people through the choice of clothing and even wearing make-up. According to Jen,

"I present myself in a more formal and presentable way unlike before, when I was still an athlete, I go to school wearing crocs, slippers, shorts, or any other training attire but now I make sure I look presentable whenever I go to school like I wear trousers, polo, like that."

Research consistently demonstrates a powerful link between body image and clothing choices [43]. In essence, how we feel about and perceive our bodies significantly influences how we manage our appearance through clothing selection [44]. Few of the participants shared the importance of looking neat and presentable while comparing it to their past self that did not really care much how the public sees them. They explained that leaving sports and being in a different social environment made them change their choices of clothing. Building on the idea of clothing as a reflection of the self, Kwon and Parham (2019) argue that our clothing choices go beyond simply influencing how others perceive us. They can also be a powerful tool for self-expression, reflecting our internal state and how we feel about ourselves. This evidence from the literature was also observed within the data provided by the informants. One of them stated that gaining weight made her wear cover-ups more often. The confidence that she once felt during her athletic career where she was free to wear the clothes she deemed 'sexy,' is nearly impossible for her current physique. Apart from this, another informant also shared that they became picky/choosy with the garments she would wear due to taking into consideration if she looks 'too fat' or 'too big' in certain clothes. This phenomenon is also in line with the results of Kwon and Parham's (2019) study whereas their study found that women who felt larger in size tended to prioritize clothing that camouflaged their bodies. The link between body image and self-presentation extends beyond clothing choices. Study by Robertson *et al.* (2018) suggests a positive relationship between cosmetic use and self-presentation, implying that women use makeup to enhance their appearance and boost their confidence. This resonates with the experience of Fae, one of the informants in this study. Fae explained that she uses cosmetic products to compensate for the loss of her athletic physique. However, her narrative also highlights a crucial aspect – her current exploration of alternative ways to project confidence that go beyond relying solely on physical appearance.

The transition out of competitive sports extended beyond physical changes for the informants. Several participants reported a shift in their personalities, becoming more reserved and shy. This impacted their relationships and

interactions with others. This finding aligns with research by Wendling & Sagas (2021) which suggests that life transitions can involve feelings of confusion and ambiguity, potentially leading to decreased confidence and hindering social interactions. The informants also described a stark contrast between their current experiences and their past as athletes. They recalled being more outgoing and joyful during their athletic careers, likely due to the confidence instilled by their achievements and the strong social bonds formed within their teams.

There were also shifts on the manner of how the informants gave attention to their body image in the past versus the present also emerged from the statements that they have given. Some of them reported a previous lack of concern about body image, with their primary focus being on performance and the functional capabilities of their bodies. Training for competitions dominated their thoughts and actions, leaving little room for awareness about body image. Papathomas *et al.* (2018) suggest that upon leaving their sport and experiencing significant lifestyle changes, athletes become more aware of aspects they previously overlooked. Hence, leaving competitive sports triggered a newfound attention to body image. Another informant shared a powerful sentiment stating that she began idealizing a certain body image that led to an internalization of what she sees. According to Han,

"…So, I never felt like I paid attention to my weight or if I had this or that. I was not really focused on what my body looked like before, when I was in sports…But then, after parting with sports, I began idealizing certain body looks and hoping that I would look this way which was not really how I thought of myself before."

This statement highlights the potential influence of societal norms and the media on body image after athletes' transition away from a highly structured, performance-focused environment.

Personal, social, and cultural factors affecting body image of former female collegiate athletes

The personal, social, and cultural factors that affected body image among former female collegiate athletes were salient themes on the 1) experiences of body commentary received from peers, family, and authorities, and (2) experiences of internalization of norms and standards in both the athletic industry and the Philippine society in general. The first recurring theme pertains to the repercussions of the unsolicited comments that are received from different groups of people that the key informants encounter and interact with (i.e., peers, family, and authorities). Also, this theme contains various challenges experienced by the research participants such as feeling belittled and insecure, feeling forced to put attention on their physique, and reminiscing about their old athletic self. Furthermore, the second salient theme has two sub categories namely the 1) ideal body image, and 2) manners of internalization that coincided with the study of Hardin *et al.* (2022).

All informants stated that they experienced hearing body commentary from different individuals that they interact with every day. Fae stated,

"…when I gained weight, my father said "slow down, you're getting too heavy," they started noticing more about my body, they compared a lot. When your family says something about how heavy you've become, it is something of value to me because it came from my family. Like "Oh no, have I turned ugly?" I think about how my body might be unattractive, how ugly I am, before I didn't even have stretch marks but now, I have lots of them which makes me tear up."

This indicates that making unsolicited comments of the body may lead to severe emotional trauma, affecting both physical and mental health, causing distress, feelings of being treated differently, and discomfort in public situations [45]. Majority of the results show that peers and family members are the prominent groups who affect the body image of former female athletes. Some have reported to be feeling belittled/insecure every time they hear commentary on their physical appearance or worse, pointing out the changes that occurred in their bodies when they stopped their career. Deb narrated,

"You know my dad, he would definitely want me to lose weight because I am bigger than usual or my family definitely comment on my "eating a lot" like a lot. I know that they were coming from a good place somehow and it was not to belittle me. But that's how I felt, I felt belittle and it's like I didn't feel good enough, like I felt ugly."

One informant even stated that the comments she receives from her family contains deep value, contributing to the feelings of ugliness and heightened awareness of her perceived physical imperfections. Additionally, another informant also discussed how her family would make comments on her eating habits, constantly reminding her that she will gain weight if she eats a lot. This contributed to her feeling belittled despite knowing that the intentions are good and not to make her feel bad about herself. With this, it is clear that family dynamics are a cornerstone in shaping body image that continues to influence how individuals perceive and interact with their bodies [46]. These influences are multifaceted, varying based on gender and cultural norms. For instance, some cultures emphasize thinness for women, while others value muscularity in men. However, in relation to what the informant had shared, it is evident that family experiences themselves can be reflected in body image.

Beyond family, peers also significantly influence the body image of former female athletes. Kenny *et al.* (2016) emphasizes this claim, stating that the negative correlation between peer influence and body dissatisfaction, highlighting how conversations about appearance among peers can lead to decreased body satisfaction. One informant also described a powerful experience–witnessing friends' body-shame others for aspects she herself felt insecure about. According to Deb,

"So my friend would like say oh my gosh you have man arms…oh my gosh you're so bulky like I think you're more built than this guy… that made me insecure, like really insecure."

These unsolicited comments are also bringing forced attention to the physique of former female athletes. From their words itself, it is magnifying the changes that they are not even aware of in the first place. However, due to the unnecessary attention that they are receiving from people, they start to think about it more until it develops to a negative feeling about themselves.

The constant barrage of comments can lead the informants to internalize societal norms and beauty standards, ultimately shaping their body image ideals. Having such ideals can be detrimental for one's body image and may lead to dissatisfaction or a result of a mismatch between one's perception of their own body in comparison to a perceived ideal [16,47,48]. Several participants expressed a desire for physical fitness, particularly a slim waist, associating it with happiness. Furthermore, the data reveals a strong emphasis on athletic physiques and toned muscles. This focus on athletic ideals may be a reflection of longing for their previous appearance as athletes. Sam said,

"The flyers (cheerleading position) which is there is slight shape on the muscle, slight abs, I mean you will really see them as physically fit."

This statement directly highlights the association with low weight and strict dietary control [49]. Greenleaf (2002) supports this notion, suggesting that leaving athletics doesn't guarantee an easy adjustment to body image changes.

The internalized image cultivated during their athletic careers might persist, leading them to chase an ideal that may no longer be realistic or healthy for their current lifestyle. Buckley *et al.* (2019, as cited in Hardin, 2022) also stated that "body image may emerge as an entirely new struggle for women as they for most of their life possessed and maintained the 'ideal' body." The informants' perceptions of a realistic and idealized body often mirrored the physiques they maintained during their active athletic careers. In simpler terms, the bodies they envisioned as achievable and desirable were remarkably similar to the ones they had sculpted through rigorous training [50]. Interestingly, the results also showed two informants that stated to focus more on their internal feelings. Han stated that whenever she feels the changes in her physical capabilities such as changes in stamina and endurance, she ends up feeling worse about herself. Hardin *et al.* (2022) highlight a crucial factor shaping the body image of former athletes – the enduring significance they attach to their peak physical performance. This focus on past athletic prowess can lead to negative body image when they perceive themselves as less fit, toned, or physically capable than they were during their competitive years.

Beyond the idealization of body image, one of the most prominent ways of internalization is comparing themselves to others. Considering the results of this objective, it can be seen that there is a clear indication of the Social Comparison Theory. This particular theory, as described by APA Dictionary of Psychology (n.d.), is "the proposition that people evaluate their abilities and attitudes in relation to those of others in a process that plays a significant role in self-image and subjective well-being." Humans constantly make social comparisons, may it be consciously or unconsciously, to other people or ideals (Festinger, 1954). Majority have stated that they engage in social comparisons,

referencing friends, fellow athletes, and media portrayals as their standard for their own bodies. Aforementioned point of comparisons coincides with the results in the study finding of Hardie et al. (2022), whereas it was stated that the concept of body image and the factors that influence it can be influenced by social comparisons (Tomsen et al., 2004). Researches by Kerr *et al.* (2010) and Seal *et al.* (2021) also highlight the significant influence of social networks and close relationships on body image, particularly for women. These studies suggest that exposure to peers and social groups who emphasize thin body ideals can contribute to body dissatisfaction and even eating disorders in young women. Similarly, Seal *et al.* (2021) found that the social environment in adult exercise spaces can also impact women's body image. The constant judgment they perceive regarding their bodies during exercise can further contribute to negative feelings. In addition, media portrayals also affect the way they see themselves whenever they do comparisons. The most stated type of media in the interviews was social media, specifically TikTok wherein you will see a numerous number of influencers and celebrities. The aforementioned platform has been criticized for promoting body stereotypes, leading to negative impacts on body concepts and mental health, especially through challenges that idealize thinness [51,52]. In addition, Thomas and Kotian (2023) also expressed that celebrities often portray unrealistic body standards, leading to body image disruption and negative psychological effects among the general population.

Coping strategies employed by former female collegiate athletes to address the negative effects of personal social, and cultural factors on body image

The coping strategies employed by former female collegiate athletes to mitigate the negative effects that are brought by the personal, social, and cultural factors of body image are divided into positive and negative coping. These coping strategies shed light on the ways these former female collegiate athletes deal with their personal experiences that heavily affected them after they left sports. Most of the participants cited social support networks as a crucial buffer against the negative influences on body image. Patterson *et al.* (2022) and Glenney *et al.* (2023) support this notion, demonstrating that social support from family, friends, and instructors can significantly improve body image perceptions, quality of life, and self-image ratings. One informant highlighted the importance of validation. Bam shared,

"in terms of support, of course since I've been an athlete before so the image of yourself as an athlete it never really goes away. There are still people who might think "she might be an athlete." So, there's still a lot of people who think your body is okay even if you're not confident with how it looks, there's still someone who appreciates and tells how nice and fit I am even though I stopped training or going to the gym every day."

The positive affirmations from their social circle regarding their body image made them feel valued and even glad that others still saw the "athlete" in them. This sense of validation serves as a powerful counterpoint to the often-critical messages they might encounter elsewhere. However, according to Greenleaf (2002) social support extends beyond validation. This is affirmed by the study as informants also emphasized the value of shared experiences and mutual encouragement. According to Fae,

"I also feel support from my friends, my previous co-athletes, they say it's okay Fae, all of us have gained weight too. That's what they all say to each other so I will not feel like I'm the only one who gained weight. It's also less painful for me when I hear my classmates or co-athletes say that's okay we all are getting a little fat and we can't do anything about it because we're all the same age and we don't have any physical activity."

Sharing their struggles with fellow athletes and friends who understood their experiences helped them feel less alone. The presence of this supportive network also served as a reminder of their inherent self-worth, independent of their physical appearance. Social support networks offer more than just emotional comfort. The informants also highlighted the value of engaging in physical activities together. Participating in shared workouts or activities does not only boost mood and self-esteem, but also contribute to a healthier lifestyle that supports positive body image.

Another key coping strategy involves reframing criticism into motivation and learning opportunities. Informants described focusing on the positive aspects of feedback, using it to identify areas for improvement and personal growth. Bam narrated,

"positive effect is when you're motivated because you get compared to other people. You get motivated as you set a goal you can strive for self-

improvement. Of course, your perspective helps to recognize your own strengths and accomplishments."

This approach helps them shield themselves from the negativity that can accompany criticism and judgments, allowing them to use the experience for positive change [12]. To materialize these motivations, they address it directly by getting gym memberships, trying to engage in physical activities or working out to manage their body image. Interestingly, one informant stated that she also uses humor to mitigate the negative effects that they encounter. The same point was highlighted in the study of Fasoli *et al.* (2022) that there is a positive impact of self-enhancing humor on body image among British women. The research suggests that women who use humor to uplift themselves experience greater body appreciation and kindness towards their bodies. Furthermore, they demonstrate a stronger motivation to actively celebrate their physical attributes. To lessen the internalization that occurs through the norms and standards that they encounter via social media, other informants stated that they curate their social media feeds by unfollowing accounts that make them dissatisfied with their bodies. Lastly, the informants also asserted that acceptance of the changes has also helped them cope with the negative effects that they encounter. Sam stated,

"one word, acceptance. I just accept it, life is life. Okay, thank you next...Just ignore it. I feel like the body, they are just pages. I have an era where I was fat. I know to myself that these things do not last a lifetime. I got that thinking now that I'm in my 20's."

Studies from Cash *et al.* (2004) also used positive rational acceptance as one of the coping strategies in mitigating the effects of negative body image. Positive Rational Acceptance is known as a strategy that emphasizes the acceptance of the challenging event and positive self-care or rational self-talk about one's appearance.

Despite coping positively, some informants still practice negative coping strategies such as unhealthy habits, avoidance, and being self-critical. A respondent stated that the negative comments she receives triggers unhealthy responses such as resorting to either intensifying her workout routines or through engaging in restrictive eating behaviors such as skipping meals. According to Pen,

"I'm not sure if it's healthy because when I get told that I'm gaining weight, I add more extremities to my work out or lessen my food intake, sometimes I don't eat at all."

Additionally, another respondent echoed this experience, asserting that her negative body image led her to practice extreme restriction in an attempt to lose weight. This result is also shown in the results of the study conducted by Buckley et al. (2019) which stated that decrease in body acceptance after retiring from athletics can lead to negative emotions and unhealthy behaviors like restrictive eating or excessive exercise focused solely on appearance [9].

On the other hand, other informants shared that whenever they experience receiving criticism through comments, they do not address it directly. Instead, they settle in shrugging it off and avoid processing the situation. Nat stated that they also practice selective inattention by choosing to ignore the comments and diverting her attention, locking her doors while she uses her phone to watch videos. Among other things, some participants also stated that they engage in negative self-talk. Fae narrated,

"one of the things I think about when I see old pictures of myself is what now, won't you stand up? I make myself realize that, what, will I just remain fat for the rest of my life? That is what I think when I look at my old pictures."

As they receive comments from external authorities (coaches, family, relatives, friends) and get exposed with standards imposed by social media and society, negative-self talk and internalization of a defeatist attitude toward themselves are done when expectations by oneself and others are not attained by the former collegiate athletes.

Within the context of this study, it is clear in the results that former female athletes are currently experiencing an internal conflict between their deeply ingrained habitus and the demands of new fields that they are currently into. This includes the manner of adjusting to the new daily routines, coping with the body image changes, and even adopting or learning new coping strategies to mitigate the difficulties that they face when they leave sports. It is notable to mention that according to the results, their habitus includes their self-perception as being strong

and fit. This was shaped by their rigorous training, experience in competition, and the values that are upheld on athletic performance. Upon leaving sports, their habitus are encountering new social contexts and expectations or field. Thus, their embodied sense of self (i.e. strength and fitness) are conflicting with the physical changes and new lifestyles that they are currently employing (e.g. sedentary lifestyle). In addition, the phenomenon of ending their sporting careers also brought heightened self-awareness and public self-consciousness, in which it can be understood as the result of their adjustment to their former athletic habitus and the expectations of their new environment, the field.

During their athletic careers, the field of sports is rewarding these athletes' physical fitness, strength, and competitive success. The rules in this field were clear, and the former female athletes knew how to navigate this space effectively. Entering a new field - may it be academically, professionally, or socially — means that they are obliged to adapt to different rules and forms of capital. Nam *et al.* (2022) made the same conclusion in his study stating that despite successfully transitioning out of sports, the experience of Korean college students during the process of it also included the lifestyle adjustments and internalization of the norms, standards, and expectations that the social environment has brought upon them.

Delving further, the interplay of the two concepts (i.e., habitus and field) shows that the habitus of being an athlete continues to influence how former female athletes perceive their bodies. This can be found on the statements wherein they shared that gaining weight and losing their toned physique clashes with their ingrained athletic image, leading to a potentially lower self-confidence and self-esteem. With regards to coping strategies they employ, it can be interpreted that this is an attempt for them to reconcile their athletic habitus with the demands and expectations of their new fields. Mechanisms such as social support, for instance, allows them to keep that sense of validation that was previously derived from their athletic self. Thus, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field sheds light on the complex challenges faced by former female collegiate athletes as they shift to post-sports life. Their ingrained habits, skills, and perceptions – their habitus – clash with the new social arenas (fields) they enter, such as the workplace or social circles with different rules and values. This conflict can lead to body image struggles. However, by understanding the interplay between habitus and field, we can also identify the coping strategies these athletes use to navigate these changes.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings of the study revealed that former female collegiate athletes have diverse experiences on body image upon leaving sports. One of the most consistent findings that emerged within the whole data is that drastic changes in their daily habits and lifestyles contributed greatly to their body image. Former athletes often struggle with maintaining physical activity levels post-retirement, potentially becoming detached from regular exercise.

After parting with sports, the majority of them shared that they are no longer engaging in physical activities as much as they used to and even stated that doing any form of exercise did not feel the same as it did in the past. Following their end of career in sports, there were also evident physical changes in their physique, affecting their self-confidence significantly. Athletes took pleasure in the confidence that physical fitness gave them as well as the way their bodies reflected their roles as athletes.

Furthermore, findings show that informants described a diminished focus on body image during their active athletic careers. However, upon transitioning out of sports, they began to notice and acknowledge the changes occurring in their body image and be more critical about it. In situations that draw particular attention to the body, former female athletes tend to be more self-critical about their bodies. This also led to them altering the manner of presenting themselves in the public, specifically in their choices of clothing due to increased self-consciousness. Data from the interviews also revealed that informants started to change the way they dress (e.g., wearing more cover ups) due to changes that happened in their physique. Feelings of embarrassment started to develop as they realized that they no longer have the athletic figure that they used to have in the past. Studies support this encounter whereas former female athletes are indeed becoming more self-conscious of their bodies in public due to the pressure to maintain a certain body weight or shape even after retirement.

Besides the changes in body image and the personal factors that are associated with it, the influence of the external environment which comprises interactions with different individuals – such as family, peers, and authorities – also showed great impact on the body image of former female athletes. One of the significant findings is focused on the drawbacks caused by the body commentaries that they receive from various groups. The statement of the informants clearly indicated that whenever they received unsolicited comments regarding the changes that happened in their bodies, they experience negative feelings that are affecting them, causing discomfort, and worse – negative body image. Research indicated that making unsolicited comments of the body may lead to severe emotional trauma, affecting both physical and mental health, causing distress, feelings of being treated differently, and discomfort in public situations. The majority of the comments are coming from their immediate family members making it more likely to cause negative body image as the family is considered to be with great value. With this, it is clear that family dynamics are a cornerstone in shaping body image that continues to influence how individuals perceive and interact with their bodies.

In a broader context, the cultural aspect with regard to the norms and standards of both the athletic industry and Philippine society showed that former female athletes eventually start to do internalization, greatly affecting the way they see themselves and their bodies. Still in the athletic mindset, most participants described their ideal bodies using terms like "physically fit," "muscular," and "visible abs," reflecting the lingering influence of athletic industry standards. Their habitus includes their ideal body as being strong and fit which was shaped by their old field's (athletic industry) physical activities. The informants' perceptions of a realistic and idealized body often mirrored the physiques they maintained during their active athletic careers. In simpler terms, the bodies they envisioned as achievable and desirable were remarkably similar to the ones they had sculpted through rigorous training. It is highlighted as a crucial factor shaping the body image of former athletes – the enduring significance they attach to their peak physical performance. This focus on past athletic prowess can lead to negative body image when they perceive themselves as less fit, toned, or physically capable than they were during their competitive years. Moreover, findings also revealed that the most common individuals that former female collegiate athletes are making comparisons with other athletes and influencers or celebrities. This certain result was not that surprising, considering the fact that celebrities are famously known to often portray unrealistic body standards that usually lead to body image disruption and negative psychological effects, even among the general population.

Following this, the findings for coping strategies also uncovered a variety of answers with the majority leaning towards positive practices that are employed to mitigate the negative effects caused by the personal, social, and cultural factors. In coping with the physical changes and dealing with their shift in self-confidence, the informants stated that they are doing their best to directly address the problems faced and engage more in physical activities to at least mitigate the negative effects brought by this factor. Additionally, having a stronger support system was crucial for them. The informants also asserted that acceptance of the changes has also helped them cope with the negative effects that they encounter.

Despite the positive practices of coping, it is worth noting that the negative strategies are likewise used by some of these former athletes. One of the most prominent is engaging in unhealthy habits in eating and exercise. This can be traced back to the negative comments that they continuously received about their bodies which led to settling on the fastest and unhealthiest ways to achieve their ideal body image. The decrease in body acceptance after retiring from athletics can lead to negative emotions and unhealthy behaviors like restrictive eating or excessive exercise focused solely on appearance. As a former female athlete who also practiced these maladaptive behaviors to fit the standards that people instill on me, this clearly shows that all of the good things you get from engaging in sports for years and feeling so used to getting compliments about the way you look can bring negative influence with the way you perceive yourself after you leave sports.

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