

The Effect of Athletic Identity on Life Satisfaction After Sport Retirement

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Abstract

Purpose: The likelihood of competing in sports professionally after college is extremely slim. Thus, sport retirement is a major life transition that the majority of student-athletes must navigate successfully after their NCAA eligibility expires. During this transition, the goal is to adapt to the new routine, lifestyle, and identity of post-sport life. There are numerous factors that impact the transitional experience and quality of adjustment, one factor being athletic identity. The purpose of this study was to determine how retrospective athletic identity impacts adaptation, with quality of adaptation being measured by present-day life satisfaction. Meaning in life was also explored as a mediator between athletic identity and life satisfaction. Meaning in life was measured as two categories, the presence of and search for meaning in life.

Method: Former student-athletes who retired from sports between 2015-2019 were recruited primarily through social media to complete a cross-sectional survey. The survey included demographic information along with the following instruments; Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, Satisfaction with Life Scale, Meaning in Life Questionnaire, and an adapted version of the Athlete Retirement Questionnaire.

Results: A total of 104 responses from former Division I student-athletes were included in the analysis. Mediation analysis was conducted following the process explained by Baron and Kenny (1986). We discovered that life satisfaction can be predicted by the presence of meaning and search for meaning in life. Retrospective athletic identity significantly predicted present-day life satisfaction only when mediated by the search for meaning in life. No direct relationship was found between retrospective athletic identity and present-day life satisfaction.

Conclusions: Results indicate that athletic identity does not directly predict present-day life satisfaction. Likely, this was due to athletic identity being measured retrospectively and life satisfaction being measured in present-day. Satisfaction with life can be predicted by both the presence of and search for meaning in life. Athletic identity significantly impacted the search for meaning in life, but not the presence of meaning in life. The lack of connection between athletic identity and presence of meaning likely indicates that former student-athletes have found meaning in life outside of athletics, leading to life satisfaction. Conversely, former student-athletes with higher athletic identities (i.e., males, draft-eligible athletes) may need to search for what gives their lives purpose and meaning beyond athletics. Diversifying identity and exploring interests outside of athletics prior to retirement may ease transitional difficulties

and promote successful adaptation.