Exploring The Sport Identity Of Female NCAA Division I Assistant Women’s Soccer Coaches

Kristin M. Cannon

University of New England

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EXPLORING THE SPORT IDENTITY OF FEMALE NCAA DIVISION I ASSISTANT WOMEN’S SOCCER COACHES

By

Kristin M. Cannon

BA (Assumption College) 2007
M.Ed. (Springfield College) 2012

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative, interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher explored the role of sport identity among a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Understanding the female assistant coaches’ experiences provided a richer exploration of the role of sport identity, which can guide other and emerging female assistant coaches as they persist in the profession. Since the introduction of Title IX in 1972, the number of opportunities to coach women’s sports has increased. There is more sport sponsorship and participation for women in NCAA Division I sports than ever before, which has created more coaching positions. However, there are fewer female coaches in college athletics than male. As of fall 2019, 18% of head coaches and 45% of assistant coaches in Division I women’s soccer were women. This study focused on sport identity, a subset of social identity theory. It explored the role of sport identity and its impact on female assistant coaches and their persistence in coaching in NCAA Division I women’s soccer. A thorough review of literature found sparse research related to the connection of sport identity and coaching. This study explored the lived experience of female assistant coaches with the intent of understanding their sport identity in the context of coaching persistence. The study was guided by the research question of how a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches described the influence of sport identity on their coaching careers. The researcher used semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with seven
full-time female assistant coaches in NCAA Division I women’s soccer. There are several significant findings that suggest that sport identity is connected to career persistence. A compelling finding is that participants persist in coaching to maintain their sport identity. Recommendations for future research include exploring the role identity of female student-athletes and their career choices.

Keywords: sport identity, athlete identity, female coach persistence, self-esteem, NCAA, role identity, female coach retention, collegiate soccer
University of New England

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Educational Leadership

This dissertation was presented by

Kristin M. Cannon

It was presented on
April 7, 2020
and approved by:

Laura Bertonazzi, Ed.D., Lead Advisor
University of New England

Leslie Hitch, Ed.D., Secondary Advisor
Northeastern University

Nathaniel Lie, M.S., Affiliated Committee Member
Xavier University
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Studies of sport identity among athletes have focused on self-identity and self-concept (Kotnik, Leskosek, & Topic, 2012; Masten, Tusak, & Faganel, 2006; O. Weiss, 2001). However, there is scant research about female National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches and their sport identity as coaches. Most existing research on female coaches focuses on their retention in the profession rather than on a richer exploration of sport identity (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Mazerolle, Eason, Ferraro, & Goodman, 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). This research explored the concept of sport identity and female coaches within NCAA Division I women’s soccer.

It is important to consider the role of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in order to gain a full picture of the history of playing and coaching opportunities for females. Title IX was an effort to overhaul discriminatory injustices on the basis of sex in the United States education system. Signed into law in 1972 by President Richard Nixon, Title IX was landmark legislation that prohibited sex discrimination in all education programs and activities that received federal funds (Antunovic, 2017; NCAA, 2017a). This legislation has given more females the opportunity to compete on more teams, and also more opportunities for women to coach. Figure 1, published in the NCAA database in November 2019, highlights the added sports sponsorship and participation rates for women in Divisions I, II, and III.

Since the introduction of Title IX, girls and women have had more opportunities to participate in developmental youth sports, recreational sports, and interscholastic sports in high school; intercollegiate sports at the university level; and in international competitions like the Olympics (Everhart & Chellaurai, 1998; Heinze et al., 2017; Yiamouyiannis & Hawes, 2015). Figure 2 shows the increase in NCAA and high school female participation levels since 1982.
This increase in opportunities to participate has also increased the number of openings to coach women’s sports. As Figure 2 shows, there is more sport sponsorship and participation in NCAA Division I sports than ever before, which has created more coaching positions. Even though there are more coaching positions, women do not necessarily hold them. A detailed study from 2012-2013 reported a decline in the percentage of female head coaches at the athletics
programs in seven major conferences in the 40 years following the passage of Title IX (LaVoi, 2016). According to LaVoi (2016), among the 86 schools in those conferences, the percentage of female head coaches only increased 0.9% in 3 years. As of fall 2019, 18% of the Division I women’s soccer head coaches were women. If Title IX was designed and intended to create equity, the decline in women holding coaching positions is of concern (LaVoi, 2016).

In 1972, women coached 90% of women’s sports teams across the three NCAA divisions. By 2012, that number had decreased to 43%, and it has hovered close to that since then (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; LaVoi, 2016). In contrast, 3% of men’s teams were coached by women across all three NCAA divisions. Despite more opportunities than ever before for female coaches due to increased sponsorship for women’s sports (NCAA, 2019c), the number of female coaches remains stagnant (LaVoi, 2016). According to inventoried data from the NCAA Division I women’s soccer program public websites (N = 335), 45% of NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches were female as of the fall of 2019.

Beyond Title IX and female coach retention, the recognition and reinforcement of an individual’s identity through sport has been connected to athletes; research, however, rarely references coaches. O. Weiss (2001) noted the importance of sport in validating and strengthening an athlete’s identity and self-concept. The influences of family, friends, coaches, and other outside constituents can determine the level to which an individual identifies as an athlete (Kotnik et al., 2012).

**Sport Identity**

This study focused on sport identity, a subset of social identity theory, by exploring the role of sport identity and its impact on female assistant coaches. Sport identity has historically been connected to athletes and their identity. Kotnik et al. (2012) noted that “a sport identity is
an integral part of a person’s self-identity and self-concept and gives the right value and meaning to people’s sport careers and sport activities and such” (p. 39). How this meaning relates to the careers of assistant coaches is critical as researchers consider the evolution of hiring practices and the retention of female coaches in NCAA Division I women’s soccer (LaVoi & Wasend, 2018; Wicker, Cunningham, & Fields, 2019). Sport identity often represents a principal part of self-identity (J. Taylor & Taylor, S. 1997), and this sport identity may remain when a player or an avid sports fan becomes a coach.

**Statement of the Problem**

College athletics is a billion-dollar industry for institutions, comprised of media rights, consumer products, ticket revenue, and donors (Hoffer & Pincin, 2016). In NCAA Division I women’s soccer, coaches are often hired and fired based on their wins and losses or their ability to bring in championships (Dabbs & Pastore, 2017). Championships and success are important to institutions because they can increase applications, revenue, and institutional selectivity while enhancing current student engagement (Hoffer & Pincin, 2016; Martinez, Stinson, Kang & Jubenville, 2010; Perez, 2012; Stinson & Howard, 2007). Although NCAA Division I women’s soccer is not as lucrative as the premier sports of football and basketball, its fully funded programs include full scholarships for student athletes and may have multiple full-time coaching positions. As such, an important consideration for these institutions and athletic departments is the return on investment. Studies have attempted to measure the benefit of intercollegiate athletics and quantify the indirect benefits of a successful athletics program (Conger, Gerstner, & Vogel, 2018). These benefits include increased donations (Martinez et al., 2010; Stinson & Howard, 2007), increased applications leading to improved student quality (Goff, 2000; Perez,
2012), and higher graduation rates for student-athletes (Bremmer & Kesselrig, 1993; Hosick, 2019; Huml, Bergman, Newell, & Hancock, 2019; D. R. Smith, 2009).

In higher education, the number of student-athletes on campus is directly related to the amount of money the institution spends on athletic programs (Hoffer & Pincin, 2016). This spending influences the student-athlete experience as schools also consider the importance of driving revenue streams for the institution (Hoffer & Pincin, 2016; Stinson & Howard, 2008). Increases in revenue, higher retention rates, and higher graduation rates help the NCAA and the institution be seen in a favorable light by prospective students and donors (Martinez et al., 2010; Wanless, Pierce, Martinez, Lawrence-Benedict, & Kopka, 2017). Division I athletics helps student-athletes do well academically and thrive in sociability, extraversion, and well-being (Aries, McCarthy, Salovery, & Banaji, 2004; Hosick, 2016). In addition to athletics being a revenue driver for institutions (Hoffer & Pincin, 2016), coaches and their relationships to student-athletes are influential (Varela, Cater, & Michel, 2011). Coaches, their relationships to the success of student athletes, and female student-athletes seeing female coaches may add value to each program (Kalbfleisch, 2000; Varela et al., 2011).

Research has shown the value of women as mentors and as educators (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 2000; Kalbfleisch, 2000; Lockwood, 2006; A. B. Smith, Taylor, & Hardin, 2016; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Varela et al., 2011). Educators, including coaches as those in this study, have the opportunity to play a critical role in a student-athlete’s development through formal and informal interactions (A. B. Smith et al., 2016; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Coaches may have a role in this development through a mentorship relationship with student-athletes. Specifically, female-to-female mentorship and education is seen as valuable, leading to better outcomes for female students (Dennehy &
Female role models play an important part in encouraging other women to consider leadership positions because they understand the barriers women confront (Lockwood, 2006).

Despite a thorough review of the current literature on sport identity and female assistant coaches, there is sparse research pertaining to the connection between sport identity and assistant coaches. Women join Division I women’s soccer programs as members of the staff, and little research on their experience identifying with sport could be located. The extant literature is full of role identity and sport identity insights pertaining to athletes, with little consideration given to how it is related to coaches, and specifically to female coaches (Brewer, van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Burke, Stets, & Cerven, 2007; Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2012; Busseri, Costain, Campbell, Rose-Krasnor, & Evans, 2011; Chen & Wu, 2014; Pope, J. P., Hall, & Tobin, 2014; O. Weiss, 2001). This study explored the lived experience of female assistant coaches in women’s soccer with the intent of understanding their sport identity in the context of low levels of female coach participation, persistence, and retention.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand the lived experience of the phenomenon of sport identity among a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Sport identity highlights the importance of sport in validating and strengthening identity (O. Weiss, 2001). Understanding the female assistant coaches’ experiences allowed a richer exploration of the role of sport identity, which can be used to guide other and emerging female assistant coaches in their coaching careers.
**Research Question**

The researcher explored the existence of sport identity among female coaches and how any experiences with it affect their lives. The study was guided by the following question: How do a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches describe the influence of sport identity on their coaching careers?

**Conceptual Framework**

The study was framed by social identity theory and its subset, sport identity. Social identity is a person’s sense of who they are, based on their group membership (Tajfel, 1978). Researchers suggest that the groups that people belong to provide a sense of belonging and self-esteem in the social world (Bochatay et al., 2019; Tajfel, 1978). Self-categorization and social comparison are two important processes involved in social identity formation. They accentuate the perceived similarities and differences between a person and the in-group to which they belong and the out-group to which they do not belong (Bochatay et al., 2019; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Stets & Burke, 2000). In this study, the in-group was the assistant coaches and the out-group was those who were not in the college coaching profession.

Identity theory, social identity theory, and sports identity served as the framework for this study. Previous research has classified identity theory and social identity theory as two different theories with more differences than similarities (Stets & Burke, 2000; Davis, Love, & Fares, 2019; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Three areas that link the two theories are differences in identity between groups and roles, the activation of identities, and the cognitive processes of depersonalization in social identity theory and self-verification in identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000). Both identity theory, where the core of an identity is the categorization of oneself as the occupant of a particular role, and social identity theory, where identity is a person’s knowledge
that they belong to a social group, impact a person’s sense of self (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; J. P. Pope et al., 2014; O. Weiss, 2001; Chen & Wu, 2014). Because of this overlap within the spectrum of identity and the assistant coaches belonging to a group, the researcher used social identity theory as the overarching conceptual framework and used sport identity, a subset of that theory, to guide this study.

Identity exists along a spectrum from personal to social, with personal identity connected to self-concept and social identity related to the importance of being part of a group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Because identity occupies a broad spectrum, this study treats sport identity as a subset of social identity theory. The researcher chose to use the concept of sport identity as the conceptual framework rather than athlete identity. Athlete identity is defined as the extent to which an individual relates to the role of an athlete (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; Gustaffson, Martinent, Isoard-Gautheur, & Hassmen, Guillet-Descas, 2018). Sport identity is more broadly defined and is not specific to athletes. Sport identity is how a person processes information connected to themselves (J. Taylor & S. Taylor, 1997). In a broader sense, sport identity is how one functions socially and how one’s professional self-image is related to sports (Kotnik et al., 2012). Sport identity has been connected to athletes and their self-identity and self-concept, based on the value people attribute to sports activities (Masten et al., 2006). Sports create many opportunities to recognize and reinforce an individual’s identity; if a sport is someone’s main occupation, this sport identity becomes their dominant identity (Kotnik et al., 2012). Because coaching is the main occupation of Division I assistant coaches, sport identity was important to explore. For the purpose of this study, sport identity was used rather than athlete identity because the researcher was distinguishing between the role of an athlete and the role of a coach. This
study focused on coaches. The application of sport identity allowed the researcher to discuss with participants whether and how their sport identity influenced their roles as assistant coaches.

**Assumptions and Limitations**

Through an interpretive phenomenological approach, this study described “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). The study population was comprised of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches who had at least 2 years of full-time Division I coaching experience. As of 2020, there were 335 NCAA Division I women’s soccer programs. The programs were split up into 32 different conferences across the country. The conferences were aligned according to many factors, including school enrollment, region of the country, mission and values, funding resources, and potential revenue (Farley, DeChano-Cook, & Hallett, 2017). Not all 32 NCAA Division I conferences were represented in this study. The seven coaches who were interviewed were all from one conference. This number of participants allowed for rich data collection and a thorough analysis, as suggested for IPA (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

One assumption of this study was that participants would answer all the questions openly, honestly, and with reflection on their life and their role to this point. Some participants worked at other institutions in a similar role, so it was assumed that they would be reporting on their collective time as an assistant coach at the Division I level. The researcher recognized that sport identity also included their time as athletes, if applicable, which was brought up in conversation as it related to their coaching profession. To ensure participants’ understanding of sport identity, they were provided a definition of the concept during the interview.
The purposive sampling used to identify participants was a limitation of this study. Participants were selected through contact information publicly available on athletic websites from each institution’s athletic department.

The researcher sought eight to 10 participants from one NCAA Division I conference so the schools would be similar in many areas, including student enrollment, location, national recognition, women’s soccer funding, level of competition, and academic rigor. The total possible number of participants from this sample was 11. Of these 11, seven coaches took part in the study, two did not respond, one did not fit the criteria of being a full-time coach for 2 years, and one declined to participate. A small number of participants is suggested for IPA methods because the intent of such research is not to generalize, but to explore context in depth (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). A final limitation of the study was the researcher’s relationship to the profession as a former female NCAA Division I women’s soccer assistant coach. The researcher had potential bias regarding the participants’ description of the phenomenon. The researcher sought to set aside experiences and past knowledge by using bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Rationale and Significance**

This research was needed to understand whether and how the concept of sport identity relates to female coaches. Using publicly available data from college websites as of fall 2019, all 335 NCAA Division I programs were inventoried. According to that data, 45% of the assistant coaches in NCAA Division I women’s soccer were female and only 18% of the head coaches were female. Coaching is not an easy profession, with challenges such as burnout, work and family conflict, job satisfaction, and gender norms (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Kamphoff, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Retention of female coaches has been a
topic for decades (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 1996; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Pastore & Meacci, 1990). In 1972, 90% of all women’s teams were coached by women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). As of 2016, 43% of women’s teams were coached by women, despite more women’s teams and sports sponsorships than ever in NCAA Division I (Everhart & Chellaurai, 1998; LaVoi, 2016; NCAA, 2019c). Reasons for the drop in the number of female coaches and how to retain these coaches in college athletics have been studied (Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Work and family conflict, job satisfaction, burnout, salaries, time and hours on the job, gender norms, gendered social well-being, and sociocultural factors have been connected to low college coach retention (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Kamphoff, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). The connection to sport identity and self-concept has been studied among athletes, but a gap exists in the literature regarding the relationship between sport identity and coaching.

Findings from this study help fill this gap in the literature by understanding sport identity among female assistant coaches. The study also contributes to the existing body of knowledge about sport identity and the role of women’s soccer coaches in the sport. According to O. Weiss (2001), sport identity helps researchers understand why people choose a particular role and how that role helps to validate and strengthen their identity. O. Weiss (2001) noted that human behavior “can be understood as a fundamental endeavor to confirm an identity, and self-esteem is rooted in identity reinforcement or social recognition” (p. 397). Athletes experience success through the approval or disapproval of society (O. Weiss, 2001). This study describes self-understanding among female assistant coaches, their motivations and connection to their sport and profession, and what that means for their present and future selves. It also connects to the importance of intercollegiate athletics for the university as a whole and the importance of the
female coach and female student-athlete relationship. The results of this study may assist soccer programs and athletic departments with their understanding of female assistant coaches and their motivation to persist in college coaching.

**Definition of Terms**

*NCAA* – A member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and success of its student-athletes across three divisions. It comprises more than 1,200 schools and conferences in the United States (NCAA, 2018). It is the umbrella under which Division I soccer teams compete.


*Social identity theory* – Refers to intergroup relations, how people see themselves as members of a group or category in comparison to another group and what it means to be in this role (Brown, 2010; Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010; Stets & Burke, 2000).

*Athlete identity* – The extent to which an individual relates to the role of an athlete (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; Gustaffson et al., 2018).

*Sport identity* – “A sport identity is an integral part of a person’s self-identity and self-concept and gives the right value and meaning to people’s sport careers and sport activities as such” (Kotnik et al., 2012, p. 39). This concept is used in all literature outside of the United States.

*Lived meaning* – Refers to the way that a person experiences the world (van Manen, 2016).

*Full-time assistant coach* – A coach who is paid full-time wages by a college or university as an employee. This coach must be allowed, per NCAA rules (2019a), to coach with soccer-specific instruction on the field and to recruit off campus.
**Cost of attendance** – “An amount calculated by an institutional financial aid office, using federal regulations, that includes the total cost of tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and other expenses related to attendance at the institutions” (NCAA, 2019a, p. 202). Other costs include childcare, costs related to disability, and other miscellaneous personal expenses (NCAA, 2019a).

**Graduation success rate (GSR)** – The proportion of first-year, full-time student-athletes who enter a school on athletics aid and graduate from that institution within 6 years. The GSR takes into account transfer students who began at one institution but graduated from a different institution.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of sport identity and female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. There is a gap in the literature regarding the role of sport identity among female assistant coaches. Social identity theory and sport identity theory helped the researcher understand the lived experience of female assistant coaches. Through semi-structured interviews with current female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches, sport identity was explored in this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study.

Through social identity theory and its subset concept of sport identity, the researcher explored recognition and reinforcement of identity as it related to the assistant coaching profession. As Kotnik et al. (2012) noted, sport identity is one’s social function or professional image. The literature review in Chapter 2 will explore the relevant research related to sport identity. The methodology for this phenomenological study will be outlined in Chapter 3, along
with the questions formulated for the semi-structured interviews. Chapter 4 will describe the findings of this study. Chapter 5 will provide a conclusion.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The main objective of this study was to explore the role of sport identity among female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Existing research on sport identity pertains to its role in athletes’ careers in sports (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; M. B. Brewer, 1991; Burns et al., 2012; Green & Weinberg, 2001; Kotnik et al., 2012). Little research has been conducted on the role of sport identity and coaching, especially among female assistant coaches. Many factors can have an impact on the careers of female assistant college coaches, and most research has focused on the retention of female coaches rather than on their sport identity (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Inglis et al., 1996; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Pastore & Meacci, 1990). This literature review provides a basis for considering the role of sport identity among female assistant coaches in their professional lives.

This thorough review of literature on the topic followed Callahan’s (2014) six questions: “W’s: Who, When, Where, How, What and Why” (p. 273). The researcher first identified keywords and combinations of keywords like coach identity, female sport identity, and athletic identity, as suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016). These keywords produced articles and books that connected sport and identity. The researcher utilized EBSCOhost’s Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, and the University of New England’s Library Services. Many additional publications were identified thorough the references at the end of each article related to the topic.

This literature review begins with the role of athletics in higher education, the role of coaching in higher education, and the NCAA philosophy. The conceptual framework then follows: social identity theory and its subset theory, sport identity. The conceptual framework is followed by an examination of the related literature, including general information about identity reinforcement, social recognition, motivation for sport participation, and athlete identity.
Gender equity in sport continues to be a focal point in mainstream culture. The number of female college coaches has remained stagnant or decreased even as opportunities have increased (LaVoi & Silva-Breen, 2018). According to inventoried data from the public websites of the 335 NCAA Division I women’s soccer programs, in fall 2019, 45% of NCAA Division I women’s soccer assistant coaches were female and only 18% of head coaches were female. Most research related to female coaches explores the multiple levels of influences on female coaches – cultural norms, gender ideologies, well-being, and sociocultural norms – and how these factors influence retention (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Inglis et al., 1996; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Pastore & Meacci, 1990). This researcher focused on the role of sport identity in the profession of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches.

Female assistant coaches are a small subset of the larger group of NCAA Division I college soccer coaches. Having a social identity means “being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group’s perspective” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 226). Both a connection to a group and having a particular role identity are important to the sense of self and to being part of a group. For these reasons, Stets and Burke (2000) advocated for connecting role identity theory (McCall & Simmons, 1978) with social identity theory. Linking these two theories can create a more integrated view of self (Stets & Burke, 2000), which helped this researcher connect the role of self as part of a group to female assistant coaches.

**The Role of Athletics in Higher Education**

The impact of intercollegiate athletics is seen in every aspect of American society (Won & Chelladurai, 2016). Institutions are affected by the millions of people who attend NCAA contests (NCAA, 2019b) the millions of dollars that are budgeted at individual Division I
institutions (Hoffer & Pincin, 2016); and the social impact of university traditions, community relations, and image (Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012; Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008).

The role of athletics in higher education is often debated and researched for its perceived positive and negative impact on institutions (Hickman & Meyer, 2017; Insler & Karam, 2019; Sung, Koo, Kim & Dittmore, 2015). The cultural significance of athletics in higher education has focused on the role of athletics in collectivism, integration, adaptation, goal attainment, desirable character traits, an emotional release, and a source of identity for those who are impacted by athletics (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Rezania & Gurney, 2014).

Feezell (2015) suggested that the role and value of intercollegiate athletics fall into three categories, which are the standard arguments for the importance of intercollegiate athletics. These three arguments center on education, economics, and community building. The education argument is that athletics contributes to the educational mission of universities through character building, because student-athletes learn valuable skills like responsibility, teamwork, leadership, time management, and competitiveness (Feezell, 2015). The economic argument is that the revenue generated by athletic programs can support not only athletics, but also the institution as a whole (Feezell, 2015). The community-building argument is that athletic programs may help unify a campus, encourage stakeholders to identify more strongly with the institution, and boost the self-image of the entire community (Feezell, 2015). These arguments can overlap; for example, successful high-profile sports teams will bring in more revenue and may also increase the prestige of the school, leading to an increase in the self-image of those who attend it. One counterargument is that athletics does not further the academic objectives of higher education (Hickman & Meyer, 2017). Another argument suggests that schools receive “indirect benefits generated by athletic programs, such as student body unity, increased student body diversity,
increased alumni donations, and increased applications, athletics may act more as a complement to a school’s academic mission than a substitute for it” (D. G. Pope & J. C. Pope, 2009, p. 751).

**The National Collegiate Athletics Association**

The NCAA is a member-led organization that is dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of student athletes (NCAA, 2018). As of April 2020, the organization included 1,117 colleges and universities, 100 athletic conferences, and 40 affiliated sports organizations (NCAA, 2018). The members who lead the NCAA in decision-making include college presidents, athletic directors, faculty athletics representatives, compliance officers, conference staff, academic support staff, coaches, sports information directors, and health and safety personnel. As a member-led organization, these voting members aim to prioritize academics, well-being, and fairness in an effort to encourage lifelong learning, individual development, and success on and off the playing surfaces (NCAA, 2018). This role of putting student-athlete welfare first is seen as a high priority on each campus and within the NCAA (Egan, 2019).

The NCAA is organized into three divisions: NCAA Division I, NCAA Division II, and NCAA Division III. The divisions were created to “align like minded campuses in the areas of philosophy, competition, and opportunity” (NCAA, 2019d). As of 2020, NCAA Division I had 351 member institutions, making up 32% of the full NCAA membership. Figure 3 shows some of the differences in membership across the three divisions.

This study focused on NCAA Division I, the highest profile division of NCAA and the one with the highest median total revenue (NCAA, 2019b). The yearly median total revenue of Division I schools is $113,640,00; for Division II schools, it is $7,000,600; and for Division III schools, it is $4,210,000 (NCAA, 2019b). Institutions, athletic departments, soccer programs, and coaching staffs are making a substantial investment in money, time, and resources for
scholarship and non-scholarship athletes. The average expense per female student-athlete in NCAA Division 1 is $27,233 (NCAA, 2017b), the Division II average is $11,800, and the Division III average is $3,800. This difference can be attributed to multiyear cost-of-attendance athletic scholarships, travel, and resources. This amount of money per student is associated with competition and recruiting and influences the retention of female coaches (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Kamphoff, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018).

Figure 3: The NCAA’s three divisions as of 2019. Retrieved from NCAA (2019d).
Brand, Prestige, and Giving

Intercollegiate athletics are “instrumental in shaping institutional image, the image of its students and graduates, and building bonds of community among supporters” (Roy et al., 2008, p. 15). Increased media exposure through intercollegiate athletics has transitioned schools into national markets. In 2016, the NCAA signed a broadcast extension deal with CBS and the Turner Broadcasting System for $8.8 billion from 2025 through 2032, an average of $1.1 billion per season (Tracy, 2016). This exposure has challenged administrators to consider the branding of the university and the athletic department from a unified front (Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012). Universities must consider their alumni, prospective students, legislators, public media exposure, and the monetary implications of increased exposure (Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012).

Athletic departments have often become the most visible department on college campuses, therefore branding and image are key components because they may reflect the university as a whole (Feezell, 2015; Putler & Wolfe, 1999). Through branding and prestige, intercollegiate athletics can bring increased media coverage, an increase in the enrollment of higher quality students, the ability to recruit distinguished faculty, increased donations from alumni and friends of the school, and increased campus pride (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Feezell, 2015; Goff, 2000; Wear, Heere, & Clopton, 2016; Wolfe, 2000). Through these impacts on various aspects of university life, universities have raised their public profiles because of athletic successes and have sought to capitalize on these successes by securing larger donations from alumni, gaining greater appropriations from state legislators, and increasing the size and quality of their student body (Alexander & Kern, 2009). Division I coaches are under pressure to succeed from a wins and losses perspective, which is an added stressor (Norris, Didymus, & Kaiseler, 2017; Walker, 2015). These athletic successes may enhance donor support for both
athletic and academic programs (Anderson, 2017; Stinson & Howard, 2008; Walker, 2015). This cultivation of donations is an additional role for Division I coaches (Walker, 2015). Walker (2015) found that NCAA Division I universities with athletic success, defined as making it to the men’s basketball Final Four or the football Bowl Championship Series, had more than double the percent increase of overall private contributions than universities that were not successful.

**Student Applications and Tuition**

With such a prominent role in higher education, success in intercollegiate athletics may increase enrollment (quantity effect) and increase selectivity (quality effect) (McCormick & Tinsley, 1987; D. G. Pope & J. C. Pope, 2009). Institutions can use the impact on the quantity and quality of incoming students through athletics to directly affect their reputation and prominence (Mixon & Trevino, 2005; D. G. Pope & J. C. Pope, 2009). This selectivity is an additional element for coaches in their roles and expectations as they recruit prospective student-athletes.

Increases in selectivity and revenue give institutions the ability to distribute funds across campus. Studies have shown that successful athletic programs can increase out-of-state applications and enrollments, which may increase revenue because out-of-state tuition can cost more than in-state tuition (McCormick & Tinsley, 1987; Mixon & Trevino, 2005; D. G. Pope & J. C. Pope, 2009; Walker, 2015). Winning has also been shown to increase academic reputation and incoming students’ SAT scores (Anderson, 2017).

One of the first schools to publicly capitalize on athletic success was Boston College, after its football team, quarterbacked by Doug Flutie, upset the defending national champion on national television in the waning seconds of the game. After that 1984 season, applications increased 30%; the phenomenon was called the “Flutie Factor” or “Flutie Effect” (Peterson-
Horner & Eckstein, 2015). Institutions can use the success of their athletic programs to shift demand and increase their selectivity (Anderson, 2017; Walker, 2015).

**Student Leadership Development**

Intercollegiate athletic participation, especially in team sports, promotes social leadership development by placing student-athletes in situations where they can grow as individual leaders (Huntrods, An, & Pascarella, 2017). Student-athletes train and compete in social situations “where action learning and collaborative leadership are important, thereby setting conditions that enhance one’s leadership (Huntrods et al., 2017, p. 201). Beyond training and competition, NCAA institutions provide leadership programming on campus (Huntrods et al., 2017). These programs have been shown to increase the leadership capabilities of female varsity athletes in leadership behaviors, cohesion, communication, athlete satisfaction, and peer motivational climate (Duguay, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2016).

One study found that female NCAA Division I student-athletes were significantly more likely to have high levels of transformational leadership and self-esteem than students who were not athletes (Galante & Ward, 2017). Intercollegiate athletics and the nature of sports help athletes elevate their skills and knowledge, which may increase self-esteem (Aries et al., 2004). Additionally, teams inherently create diverse formal and informal roles that lead to leadership opportunities that other cocurricular experiences may not provide (Duguay et al., 2016).

**Academic Support and Eligibility**

Providing academic support services for student-athletes was mandated by the NCAA in 1991, and programming, support personnel, and facilities have grown rapidly since then. The number of full-time academic advisors has increased 200% since 1995 (Huml, Hancock, & Bergman, 2014). The rigors and demands on Division I student-athletes have increased due to
relationship development, academic development, professional development, and mental strain (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2013; Cosh & Tully, 2015). Due to these stressors, research shows that support services help monitor academic eligibility and develop academic achievement and future achievement (Burns et al., 2013). They also assist athletes with mental health (NCAA, 2017a, career development (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Burns et al., 2013), and social development (Dudley, Johnson, & Johnson, 1997; Williams, 2015). Coaches are responsible for the facilitation and management of academic support services within their programs. The increases in services, in addition to the so-called arms race among institutions to attract prospective students and families, have led institutions to build multi-million-dollar academic support buildings (Williams, 2015). Texas A&M began the trend when it opened a $25 million academic center; many other large universities quickly followed by building premier academic facilities (Huml et al., 2014). Coaches also have a vested interest because academic incentives may be part of their contract and bonus structure (Wilson, 2017).

The academic support professionals working within these facilities also assist student-athletes by monitoring their academic eligibility, which includes the NCAA and institutional requirements for progress towards degree, course load, and grade point average (GPA) standards in order to be eligible to practice or compete (Greenlee, 2015). This academic reform is part of the reason NCAA graduation success rates (GSRs) are higher than ever before at 88% and why coaches are held to a high standard in their team GSRs (Hosick, 2019; Wilson, 2017).

If student-athletes are declared ineligible by their institution or the NCAA, this “can lead to negative consequences for the student-athlete including loss of playing time, negative publicity, and potential probation or expulsion from the institution” (Judge et al., 2018, p. 224). Being ineligible means a student-athlete does not meet minimum academic standards for GPA or
progress towards their degree as deemed by the NCAA and member institution (NCAA, 2019a). The athletic department and team may face NCAA and institutional sanctions that may include elimination from postseason competition, a decrease in the number of team scholarships, and fines (Hosick, 2011). These sanctions may influence the brand, reputation, and giving to the institution (Judge et al., 2018).

**The Role of Coaching in Higher Education**

Athletics has taken on a prominent role in higher education and has become a factor in universities achieving their performance goals (Rezania & Gurney, 2014). Coaches hold much of the responsibility for setting the culture of their programs through values, policies, and consistent best practices (Rezania & Gurney, 2014). Research has focused on coaches developing athletes’ skills physically, technically, or strategically because those skills were more controllable (Chevrier, Roy, Turcotte, Culver, & Cybulski, 2016; Hendricks et al., 2019; P. S. Miller & Kerr, 2002). The relationship between coaches and athletes has also been studied from a leadership approach (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2013). Other research has explored the effect of coaching behaviors on the coach-athlete relationship and how this impacts outcomes like satisfaction and well-being (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Poczwardowski, Barott, & Jowett, 2006).

**Coach-Athlete Relationships**

There has been substantial research into the impact of the coach-athlete relationship on outcomes like role behavior and performance and the influence coaches have on building and maintaining relationships (Rezania & Gurney, 2014). However, the impact of coach-athlete relationships in the NCAA has not been extensively studied. The coach-athlete relationship is defined as an interconnection of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Trust in a coach impacts team performance and the gratitude and self-esteem of athletes (Chen &
Wu, 2014; Dirks, 2000). This relationship is developed intentionally through mutual appreciation and respect (Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002) while impacting well-being and emotions (Ekstrand et al., 2018). Studies suggest that an effective relationship is critical for a successful coaching outcome (Lafreniere, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carbonneau, 2011; Light Shields, Gardner, Light Bredemeier, & Bostro, 1997), which may influence student-athlete satisfaction (Gabana, Steinfeldt, Wong, & Chung, 2017; Poczwardowski, Barott, & Jowett, 2006). Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) is often used when considering a leader’s relationship with followers (Peng, Gao, & Zhao, 2019). LMX suggests that when leaders create or build the opportunity for a high-quality relationship, the performance of the in-group members, in this case student-athletes, increases (Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982; Khorakian & Sharifirard, 2019).

Rezania and Gurney (2014) examined how the coaching behaviors of training and development, information sharing, and encouraging relate to commitment to the coach and to student-athletes’ behavior. They noted that sharing information from coach to athlete is more important than training, development, or encouraging teamwork (Rezania & Gurney, 2014). Rezania and Gurney (2014) suggested that coaches consider empowering student-athletes to make decisions about sport-specific issues, which will allow them to perform and contribute more effectively to the team. Another study found that transformational leadership and the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship predicts a positive developmental experience for an athlete, which can influence positive athlete outcomes (Vella et al., 2013).

**Female Mentoring in Athletics**

Gender matching and mentoring is important to consider because they relate to both female assistant coaches and their student-athletes and to female assistant coaches and their own head coach or assistant coach mentors (A. B. Smith et al., 2016). Mentors are individuals who
are more advanced in their careers and provide support, guidance, coaching, and advice to their protégés, helping them advance in their roles (Bower & Hums, 2014; Kalbfleisch & Keyton, 1995). Mentors also provide psychosocial support like acceptance, friendship, and counseling (Kram, 1985; Marshall, Lawrence, Lee Williams, & Peugh, 2015). Some studies have indicated that same-gender mentorship has advantages over cross-gender mentorships, suggesting that women being role models to women is important for the level of support (Koberg, Boss, & Goodman, 1998; Scandura & Williams, 2001; A. B. Smith et al., 2016). By sharing these gendered similarities, individuals may be more apt to become inspired and pursue achievements similar to those of their role models (Lockwood, 2006).

**Female Role Models in Athletics**

College coaching is a male-dominated profession (Inglis et al., 2000; Kamphoff, 2010). As such, female college coaches have described challenges to working and staying in their career, like gender stereotypes, gender discrimination, and work-family conflict (Mazerolle et al., 2015; Kamphoff, 2010; Norman, 2010). According to the researcher’s inventory of fall 2019 data from the publicly available websites of NCAA Division I women’s soccer programs, these challenges have led to women occupying fewer NCAA Division I women’s soccer coaching roles than men at the head coach and assistant coach positions.

Fewer female coaches means fewer female role models for female players and coaches alike. Lockwood (2006) suggested that because women are still the minority in many professional occupations, they have a greater need to connect with a role model who shares their minority status and may gain special benefits from the success of someone in their minority group. In a professional field like college athletics, it may be difficult for women to overcome
glass ceilings (Norman, Rankin-Wright, & Allison, 2018; Wicker et al., 2019). This makes it especially important for women to see someone like themselves succeed and break through gender barriers (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Wicker et al., 2019).

Female role models may also help undermine stereotypes that may negatively impact the performance of other women. If women are expected to perform at a lower level than men, this can induce anxiety that may lead to decreased performance in their role (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). Seminal research by Steele (1997) called these negative stereotypes *stereotype threats*. These may be remedied by women seeing successful female role models (Lockwood, 2006). For example, if female soccer players are reminded about positive stereotypes for their group, this can lead to improved performance or a stereotype boost (Shih, Ambady, Richeson, Fujita, & Gray, 2002; D. M. Smith & Martiny, 2018). Similarly, if a female coach sees the success of another female coach, this can lead to improved performance (D. M. Smith & Martiny, 2018). In international soccer, the United States Women’s National Team has been a positive role model for women since their historic and widely covered success at the 1999 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Women’s World Cup, most

**Figure 4.** Percentages of coaches in fall 2019. Developed from publicly available data on college websites.
recently in their back-to-back wins in the 2015 and 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup, during which they had a female head coach (G. Miller, Scheyer, & Sherrard, 2009). In 2019, 1.12 billion viewers watched coverage of the World Cup in France, with the final watched by over 260 million viewers (FIFA, 2019). This was more than double the 2015 viewership (FIFA, 2019). This provides an opportunity for women to see successful role models.

**Athletic Recruitment**

Coaching staffs have a critical role in identifying and contacting prospective student-athletes before they apply for admission (Huml, Pifer, Towle, & Rode, 2018; Schulman & Bowen, 2001). At the NCAA Division I level, some colleges and universities spend over a million dollars on recruiting, in addition to the human capital expended on securing prospective student-athletes (Magnusen, Kim, Perrewe, & Ferris, 2014). Coaches in NCAA sports are more like corporate executives than the human resources personnel who typically hire in other settings (Magnusen et al., 2014). College coaches “interact with their players on a near daily basis, and play salient roles in deciding student-athletes’ futures in college sports (Magnusen et al., 2014, p. 1267). Recruits may also look to their coaches as caretakers or surrogate family, guiding them as they start and traverse a new phase of life away from home. Because of this, coaches become very important to the recruits and their caretakers, with the team and coaches becoming an extension of the family (Lanning, 1979; Magnusen et al., 2014).

These relationships can grow because of long-term efforts to recruit prospective student-athletes. This may be a multiyear process that is competitive among interested schools, one that is focused on the relationships built with the prospective student-athlete, their family, and club and high school coaches (Feldman, 2007). As recruiting elite student-athletes becomes even more intense because of the competitive nature of sport and the high stakes of winning for
coaches, departments, and institutions, college coaches spend a lot of time developing and maintaining strong relationships with the recruited prospects to grow their programs and their careers (Magnusen et al., 2014).

The intensity of recruiting for coaches also connects to scholarship opportunities in Division I. Student-athletes at the Division I level may earn full scholarships, which include tuition, room, board, books, and additional cost-of-attendance stipends each month. The differences in scholarship amounts are shown in Table 1. Division I women’s soccer programs may offer up to 14 full scholarships per team, per academic year (NCAA, 2019a). The inclusion of scholarships requires coaches to understand financial aid compliance in their recruiting process. Women’s soccer is also an equivalency sport, meaning that the coaching staff can divide the scholarships among as many players as they see fit (NCAA, 2019a).

Table 1 The NCAA’s Three Divisions

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<th>Division I</th>
<th>Division II</th>
<th>Division III</th>
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<td>58% of athletes receive athletics aid</td>
<td>59% of athletes receive athletics aid</td>
<td>80% of athletes receive non-athletics aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiyear, cost-of-attendance scholarships</td>
<td>Partial athletics scholarships</td>
<td>No athletics scholarships</td>
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Another important differentiator among the three NCAA divisions is that Division I women’s soccer programs all have at least one full-time assistant coach, while some Division II and Division III schools have part-time coaches or graduate assistants, according to information publicly available on school websites in January 2020. Being a full-time assistant impacts the scope of the job (Potts, Didymus, & Kaiseler, 2019).
Student-Athlete Retention

A good relationship with the coaching staff influences student-athlete retention (S. M. Weiss & Robinson, 2013). A student-athlete’s college choice may be guided by athletic opportunity rather than academic fit (Hyatt, 2003). Once student-athletes enter the college environment, coaches work collaboratively with the student, administration, faculty, other students, and tutors to support the student-athletes academically, socially, and with their overall well-being (S. M. Weiss & Robinson, 2013). The rigors of Division I athletics place social and academic constraints on student-athletes, who often report that their participation in athletics isolates them from the general student population (Coakley, 2004; Hurley & Cunningham, 1984). Because of this isolation, the importance of teammate and coach relationships is increased (Coakley, 2004; Hurley & Cunningham, 1984; Woods, Price, & Crosby, 2019).

The coaching staff helps identify and build the culture and environment of each NCAA program. Factors that influence the retention of student-athletes include satisfaction with team performance, good relationship with the coaches, agreement with the coaching staff’s philosophy, and support from the coaching staff (S. M. Weiss & Robinson, 2013). A poor relationship and disagreements with coaches can undermine positive factors of the program, while a good relationship with the coaching staff can alleviate other deficiencies within the program (S. M. Weiss & Robinson, 2013).

Leppel (2006) found that collegiate varsity student-athletes are more likely to persist in higher education than students who do not participate in athletics. Leppel (2006) also found that sports participation increased the likelihood that men would transfer from the institution while female student-athletes were more likely to persist at their original institution. Barnhill, Andrew Czekanski, and Turner (2013) considered the importance of a psychological contract between
student-athletes and coaches. A psychological contract is a bond between an individual and an organization that is not necessarily written, but is rather a perception of role expectations and behaviors that an employee has based on promises made by the employer (Rousseau, 1990). These perceptions of a psychological contract begin during the recruiting process (Rousseau, 1990). In the case of a student-athlete, their employer is the coach. The study found that psychological contract theory may help predict a student-athlete’s intention to leave. This supported Rivera (2004), who found that the relationship between the coaches, players, and teammates plays a critical role in the retention of student-athlete.

**Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is an evolving roadmap that serves as an argument for why the topic of study matters and why the theory and methodology behind the topic are rigorous and appropriate (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). As Ravitch and Riggan (2017) described, the conceptual framework “organizes and informs research; ensures a close alignment between topic, questions, and methods; and provides a mechanism for integrating and new data, findings, questions, and literatures as a study evolves” (p. 193). Following a conceptual framework throughout this study has enabled a focused and organized exploration of the role of sport identity for female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches.

This research addressed gaps in the literature on the role of sport identity and may benefit past, current, and future female assistant coaches, soccer programs, athletic departments, student-athletes, and any related constituents who are impacted daily by female assistant coaches. Extensive research has connected sport identity to athlete satisfaction (Burns, Jasinksi, Dunn & Fletcher, 2012), coping skills and self-esteem (Gustafsson et al., 2018), self-concept (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993), identity motives (Thomas et al., 2017), and motivation for sport
participation (Curry & O. Weiss, 1989). While research has demonstrated the impact of sport identity on athletes, studies have not contemplated the role of sport identity on female assistant coaches. Most studies related to coaches have been more concerned with leadership styles and the behavior of coaches (Cummins, Boyle, & Cassidy, 2018; Powers, Judge, & Makela, 2016; Rocchi, Pelletier, & Lauren Couture, 2013; Ryska, 2009). Other studies related to female coaches have been centered on retention and the work-life satisfaction of college coaches (Allen & Shaw, 2009, 2013; Dixon & Sagas, 2017; Inglis et al., 1996; Pastore, 1993; Pastore & Meacci, 1990) or have been gender-specific research related to retention (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998; Norman, 2010; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Norman et al., 2018). Limited research has been conducted on the relationship of sport identity and sport commitment (Hagiwara, Kuroda, Oshita, Shimozano, & Matsuzaki, 2018), the role of persistence in sport participation for athletes (Gardner, Vella, & Magee, 2017), and role identity in coaching (J. P. Pope et al., 2014); no research was found on sport identity and coaches.

**Theoretical Frameworks: Social Identity, Athlete Identity, Sport Identity**

**Social Identity Theory**

The role of sport identity can be understood through social identity theory. Only recently and through the lens of coaching leadership have researchers begun to explore social identity principles in sport settings (Cummins et al., 2018). Social identity theory has been considered the most integral framework for understanding group phenomena (Brown, 2010; Hogg, 2001; Reicher et al., 2010). Researchers have sought to understand the motivations of people who identify within a group. Group life influences how people engage with others. It affects how social identities or group memberships form a lens through which individuals evaluate their own and others’ behaviors (Cummins et al., 2018). Some scholars believe that linking role identity
theory (McCall & Simmons, 1978) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) can help provide a more general and thorough view of self in connection to groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). A person’s social identity is their knowledge that they belong to a social category or group (Abrams & Hogg, 1999). These social groups consist of individuals who identify with a common social connection or see themselves as members of the same group. Female assistant coaches are members of the same group. They may be part of a group within their own program, conference, or nationwide. These social groups are categorized as either the in-group or the out-group. A social comparison process funnels people into the in-group or out-group.

The two processes involved in social identity formation are self-categorization and social comparison; these have different consequences (Abrams & Hogg, 1999). Self-categorization emphasizes the perceived similarities between the person and the other in-group members and the perceived differences between the person and the out-group members (Stets & Burke, 2000). In this way, assistant coaches may feel very connected to their fellow Division I assistant coaches or to college coaches in general, while feeling distanced from those in different divisions or in different professions. Stets and Burke (2000) noted that this emphasis on connection or disconnection to a particular group “occurs for all the attitudes, beliefs and values, affective reactions, behavioral norms, styles of speech, and other properties that are believed to be correlated with the relevant intergroup categorization” (p. 225). Belonging to a group, not belonging to a group, wanting to belong to a group, or not wanting to belong to a group may all be related how assistant coaches perceive themselves within the profession. The consequence of social comparison is that a coach may enhance their self-esteem based on viewing the in-group in a positive manner and the out-group in a negative manner (Stets & Burke, 2000).
**Sport Identity and Athlete Identity**

In identity research, the terms athlete identity and sport identity, though similar, are not used interchangeably. *Athlete identity* is most often used in research based in the United States to describe the degree to which an athlete identifies with the role of being an athlete and seeks acknowledgement from others in that role (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; Green & Weinberg, 2001). In research outside the United States, the term *sport identity* is used to describe a similar concept related to athletes and their self-identity and self-concept, but the term also relates to how one functions socially and within groups and society (Cabrita, Rosado, Leite & Sousa, 2014; Kotnik et al., 2012). Sport identity also allows sports to be a person’s main occupation even if they are not an athlete (Kotnik et al., 2012). This study focused on coaching as a main occupation and the role of sport identity through a social identity lens, making sport identity the appropriate framework. The term athlete identity refers to athletes, and this study is focused on coaches and the role of sport identity for coaches. For further clarification, studies that refer to athlete identity or sport identity will use their original terms to maintain the integrity of the study. The researcher did not find literature on the specific role of sport identity for female assistant coaches, though there is research on coach identity through a role identity lens (J. P. Pope et al., 2014).

**Sport Identity**

The role of sport identity in the profession of female assistant coaches was fundamental to explore because sport identity can become the most defined and dominant part of self-identity for individuals deeply involved in sports (Gustaffson et al., 2018; J. Taylor & Taylor, S., 1997). Because sports are such a pillar in the United States for many, individuals can confirm their identities through them, while sports can also influence a person’s self-perception, self-esteem, and self-worth through its social subsystem (Coakley, 2004; Gustaffson et al., 2018; O. Weiss,
J. Taylor and S. Taylor (1997) described sport identity as a personalized structure that creates a lens through which one processes and views information about oneself. Sport identity may also influence a person’s social activities and professional self-image, especially if sports are their dominant profession (Kotnik et al., 2012). Because coaching is the primary occupation of female Division I NCAA women’s soccer coaches, their sport identity may overtake their other identities. This is important for how it relates to their validation of their identity and their personal affirmation (Kotnik et al., 2012; O. Weiss, 2001).

Sport identity is a key component of a person’s self-identity and self-concept, giving value and meaning to people’s sport careers (Kotnik et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). Sports are not the only societal subsystems that develop and recognize identity, but “in modern societies there is no other social subsystem that gives so many people, regardless of their religion, gender, age, or social or educational level, access to a system of social validation and acknowledgement by others” (O. Weiss, 2001, p. 393).

This self-identification and need for social validation has been expanded in sport identity to include public and private dimensions. The concept suggests that one’s attitudes, beliefs, values, feelings, and emotions are private aspects of self-concept and identity that may not be up for public scrutiny (Nasco & Webb, 2006). Public orientation is the perception of how others view and judge individuals in a particular social role. This is similar to McCall and Simmons (1978), who noted that individuals base their actions on how they want to see themselves and how they want to be seen by others.

For athletes, the private dimension of an individual’s athletic identity is connected to an athletic persona, requiring the individual to think and feel like an athlete while using competition for self-expression (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The public dimension of athlete identity relates to the
awareness of the individual that an athletic persona has been given to them by others. Having a strong public athlete identity can be seen in an individual who:

Believes that he or she engages in athletics because of the attention it brings, that participating in athletics is a primary source of his or her popularity with others, and that by garnering public approbation is an influencing factor in one’s participation in athletics. (Nasco & Webb, 2006, p. 435)

These public and private dimensions may be more enhanced in athletes than other social identities for two reasons. The first reason is that athlete identity is typically formed early in life for elite athletes, and this identity is dominant throughout their life (Curry & O. Weiss, 1989). Gustaffson et al., 2018). Other social identities, like those related to occupation or spousal identity, are usually found later in life through different social groups. An individual who identifies as an athlete early in life spends much time refining and internalizing that identity, which enhances that identity over their lifetime (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The second reason that athlete identity differs from other social identities is the public nature of performing and competing in front of crowds. Researchers have discussed how athlete identity may be influenced by others (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; Gustaffson et al. 2018). There is a public burden associated with athlete identity, and others’ self-esteem may depend on the performance of the athlete individually and within a team (Nasco & Webb, 2006). Examples of this could be fans glorifying or shunning an athlete or the parents of an athlete relating their self-worth or parenting abilities to their child’s performance.

Identity reinforcement. The social recognition or reinforcement of identity has an impact on those involved in sport through internal and external influences to persist in sport. Role identity theorists, notably the pioneering McCall and Simmons (1978), saw identity as
being created through expectations from others that become shared expectations of the person in that role. Assistant coaches may learn these expectations through observing other people in the environment in the role of head coach or athlete. What it means to be an assistant coach is a learned behavior or a learned role. The more an individual internalizes a role, the more connection there is to understanding the extent to which the individual inhabits that role. Stets and Burke (2000) noted that “the energy, motivation, and drive that makes roles actually work require that individuals identify with, internalize, and become that role” (p. 38). This role may develop into the most dominant part of a person’s identity (Kotnik et al., 2012). Individuals may seek out situations where they can showcase their highly important roles in sport and plan their day around that role (Curry & Weaner, 1987; Gustaffson et al., 2018).

McCall and Simmons (1978) described these varying levels of identity as the identity prominence hierarchy. This hierarchy ranks the level of importance for each identity. For a female assistant coach with a high sport identity who used this identity more frequently, it would be central to their sense of self. If an assistant coach wanted to convey the level of sport identity in her role, the coach would state that being a coach is an important part of who she was and that being a coach was congruent with her core values (Kotnik et al., 2012). The literature exploring sport identity and identity in coaches is limited, with one study from Canada exploring coach identity though a role identity lens (J. P. Pope et al., 2014). Current literature on identity reinforcement and social recognition in sports is helpful for exploring the role of sport identity and persistence of coaching for female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches.

**Social recognition.** Because sport identity is a subset of social identity theory, the social aspect of coaching is important to explore. Popitz (1987) created a theory of social subjectivity
that categorized individual needs for recognition into five headings, each showing how sport can help individuals find acceptance and confirmation through a social arena (O. Weiss, 2001).

The first type of social subjectivity refers to the need to be recognized as a member of a group. This feeling of connection and belonging is critical to a person’s self-confirmation (O. Weiss, 2001). In team sports like soccer, there is often low individuality, with the group acting as the authority. The group decides who is accepted and can create an environment of belonging that perpetuates the need for self-confirmation (O. Weiss, 2001). Coaches, usually former players, may feel this same need for membership, intimacy, and security that they felt as players in their sport identity (O. Weiss, 2001). The second type of social subjectivity is recognition in an assigned role. Assigned roles like background and social class are typically cast at birth, which can also impact self-esteem (O. Weiss, 2001). Finding affirmation through a particular role in sport influences social recognition (O. Weiss, 2001). A third type of social subjectivity is recognition in an acquired role. Unlike an assigned role, this refers to achieving something in a role after developing special skills (O. Weiss, 2001), such as a coach winning a championship or being named Coach of the Year. Recognition in a public role refers to the need to perform in a place where one is visible to crowds. Sports is a logical place to fulfill this need, especially at the Division I level. Finally, the recognition of personal identity describes the need for social recognition as different or as an individual. In coaching, this allows the coach to stand out and be an individual through identifying both with a team and as an individual coach (O. Weiss, 2001).

**Self-esteem.** The connection of social identity and role identity continues with Abrams and Hogg (1999), who suggested that self-esteem is a core tenet in group identification. Self-esteem is an individual identity motive that connects to the social identity motives of belonging, meaning, and continuity (Thomas et al., 2017). The framework of social identity theory helped
Researchers understand that people are motivated to identify with groups to feel positively about themselves and gain self-esteem (Thomas et al., 2017; Vignoles, 2011). This self-esteem motive connects to a need to feel distinguished from others, included and accepted by others, and that life has meaning (Thomas et al., 2017; Vignoles, 2011). Researchers have also proposed that individuals connect with groups because of individual needs for self-enhancement (Thomas et al., 2017), inclusion, and differentiation (M. B. Brewer, 1991). This juxtaposition is provided through being included in the in-group to enhance self while also being distinctive through intergroup differentiation (Thomas et al., 2017). Others have argued that identifying with a group is driven by an individual’s need to increase certainty in life and validate meaning (Thomas et al., 2017). The social identity lens has demonstrated that self-esteem is an important factor in intergroup relations (Ellermers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Lee, Su, Gries, & Liu, 2018) and therefore may influence the role of female assistant coaches.

Research connected to athletes shows that “self-esteem increases or decreases in response to accomplishments, setbacks, and altered circumstances related to one’s contingencies” (Gustaffson et al., 2018, p. 57). Self-esteem and sport participation for female athletes have been linked through literature for a few decades. Research has suggested that sport participation influences self-esteem by increasing sport-related contributors to self-worth like physical competence and positive body image (Davelaar, 2019; Jackson & Marsh, 1986; Richman & Shaffer, 2000). Girls’ participation in sports in high school and their self-esteem during college has been related to their perceived physical competence, body image, and masculinity (Richman & Shaffer, 2000; Sabiston, Pila, Vani, & Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2019). There is nominal research on female coaches and self-esteem, so more research is needed to understand the role of sport identity in the persistence of female assistant coaches.
Motivation for Sport Participation

It is important to consider the motivation for sport participation when considering sport identity and female assistant coaches. According to identity development theory (Erikson, 1968), the dominant task for adolescents is to resolve their identity. The identity formation process has been extended in the last decade to include adults aged 18-25 who are in search of a better understanding of self to help them make long-term choices (Arnett, 2000). Individuals must explore and experiment to develop this understanding, and sport is a common activity for participation and development (Busseri et al., 2011). Sport participation provides opportunities for developing social skills (Brunelle, Danish, & Forneris, 2007) and often takes place within groups or teams (Bruserri et al., 2011). These opportunities in sports may help with self-identification and with developing an understanding of interpersonal roles and relations (Busserri et al., 2011).

Researchers have been concerned that the high commitment level of young athletes may divert them from other meaningful paths in life, notably delayed attention to career (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Gustaffson et al., 2018) and less exploration of social roles (P. S. Miller & Kerr, 2003). Commitment to sport may hinder athletes’ growth and development in other areas of their lives. This commitment may be connected with less mature forms of career-related ideology and interpersonal identity during an athlete’s lifetime (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; Menke & Germany, 2019). This study explored the role of sport identity among female assistant coaches rather than among athletes.

Persistence

Consideration of the role of sport identity among female assistant coaches must include the concept of persistence. Literature says that coaching is not easy. Burnout, job satisfaction,
gender norms, work-family conflict, well-being, and time commitment have all been noted as reasons why coaches do not persist in the profession (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998; Inglis et al., 2000; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Ryska, 2009). For those who do persist despite these challenges, sport identity may be a factor.

Persistence can be seen as a matter of choice stability, which is choosing to stay in a particular activity like a career, and the level of performance of an individual in their required or chosen endeavor (Lent & Brown, 2008). In work culture, persistence is often viewed as directly correlated with job performance: those who perform well will persist longer, elevate in their career, and acquire tenure (Mau, Ellsworth, & Hawley, 2008). Studies have tried to explain sport persistence and dropout from a psychological lens (Garcia Calvo, Cervello, Jimenez, Iglesias, & Moreno Murcia, 2010). Persistence is typically connected to self-determined motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. Studies have not considered the role of identity in the persistence of female assistant coaches. Persistence in sports has been considered from an athlete participation perspective (Hagiwara & Isogai, 2014; Jeon & Ridinger, 2009), while coaching has been considered from a retention perspective (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Said differently, studies related to female assistant coaches leaving the profession have been focused on why they leave and do not persist (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Kamphoff, 2010; Norris et al., 2017; Pastore, 1993), rather than on why they stay in the profession and persist.

Sport science has previously studied sport commitment as it relates to sport participation and persistence (Hagiwara & Isogai, 2014; Jeon & Ridinger, 2009). Sport commitment is the psychological state that represents the want and the resolve to continue to participate in sports; those with higher sport commitment participated in competitive sports more frequently (Jeon &
Ridinger, 2009). Brickman (1987) noted that commitment is both obligatory and independent, while researchers have also argued that sports also have two types of commitment (W. M. Weiss & M. R. Weiss, 2003, 2006). This means that individuals may persist both because they want to and because they have to. In sport research, wanting to commit has been labeled as enthusiastic, while having to commit has been labeled as constrained (Scanlan, Scanlan, Chow, Sousa, & Knifsend, 2016). Several studies have determined that athlete identity is an instrumental component of sport commitment from the athlete’s perspective (Carpenter, Scanlan, Simons, & Lobel, 1993; Hagiwara & Isogai, 2013). This study explored the role of sport identity and persistence in the profession among female assistant coaches.

**Conclusion**

Previous studies have not explored the role of sport identity among female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Previous research has focused on athlete identity, coach leadership, retention, and the role of identity in understanding self (Kotnik et al., 2012; J. P. Pope et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2017; Vella et al., 2013). This study addressed the gap in the literature regarding sport identity among female assistant coaches. According to publicly available data inventoried from the 335 NCAA Division I women’s soccer programs, in fall 2019, women held only 45% of Division I assistant coaching positions and 18% of head coaching positions. The study helped understand the experiences of female assistant coaches, moving beyond previous studies about the retention of female coaches.

Social identity theory, a person’s sense of who they are based on their group membership (Tajfel, 1978), and its subset, sport identity, were used as the framework for this study. This framework has helped lead researchers to understand that people are motivated to identify with groups to feel positively about themselves, thereby gaining self-esteem (Thomas et al., 2017;
Vignoles, 2011). This role of group membership and identity was a catalyst to understanding the lived experiences of female assistant coaches. Sport identity is a subset of social identity theory. Sport identity is a key component of a person’s self-identity and self-concept, giving value and meaning to people’s sport careers (Kotnik et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). Most research conducted on sport identity has used athletes as the subjects. A previous study considered role identity among coaches (J. P. Pope et al., 2014), but it did not consider sport identity or female coaches. This research study considered how sport identity affects female coaches.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In the United States and the United Kingdom, sport, gender, and coaching research has often focused on the real and perceived issue of women’s underrepresentation among coaches (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Existing research has increased knowledge about the many varying factors that influence the availability of coaching opportunities for women and their reasons for leaving the profession. This research includes the role of job satisfaction, work and family conflict, gender norms, and burnout (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Norris et al., 2017; Pastore, 1993). Additional research points to a male-dominated profession and therefore gendered language, pay and workload inequities, and time and family commitments as some of the main reasons women leave coaching (Inglis et al., 2000; Kamphoff, 2010). Existing research does not consider how identity theory, sport identity, role adoption, and identity reinforcement through sports relate to the experiences of female assistant coaches. This study addressed these topics by developing an understanding role of sport identity in the careers of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand the lived experience of the phenomenon of sport identity among a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Sport identity highlights the importance of sport in validating and strengthening identity (O. Weiss, 2001). Understanding the female assistant coaches’ experiences allowed for a richer exploration of the role of sport identity, which can be used to guide other and emerging female assistant coaches.
**Research Questions and Design**

The research question that guided this study was created to be broad and was asked from an open perspective, which allowed the researcher to investigate the phenomenon with more depth and a narrow focus, as recommended by J. Smith and Osborn (2008). The following question guided this study: How do a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches describe the influence of sport identity on their coaching careers?

**Research Design**

Phenomenological research seeks to describe the lived experiences that a group of individuals have with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of this study was to determine what an experience meant for those who had the experience, and how they were able to describe it (Moustakas, 1994). According to Merriam (2009), phenomenology focuses on the experience itself and how this experience is transformed in consciousness, namely how people understand the experiences they have absorbed. The basic purpose of phenomenology, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), “is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 75). One of the key reasons for using this approach is not to develop explanations or analysis, but to develop descriptions of the essences of these lived experiences through commonalities (Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions connect to what people experience and how they experience it (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers attempt to understand these commonalities. This type of research was appropriate for this study because it deeply explored the first-hand experiences of these female assistant coaches to understand their lived experiences with the phenomenon of coaching and identity.

To gain an understanding of the lived experience of female NCAA Division I women’s assistant soccer coaches, this study used the IPA method. IPA connects with everyday
experience. Because of this, IPA “also pursues an idiographic commitment, situating participants in their particular contexts, exploring their personal perspectives, and starting with a detailed examination of each case before moving to more general claims” (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 32). The researcher listened openly and genuinely to the stories told while connecting and reflecting on what they meant for the phenomenon of sport identity and how it contributed to the motivation and persistence of female assistant coaches.

IPA’s idiographic commitment manifests in two ways: through focusing on the details and a commitment to understanding individual perspectives and the context of the phenomenon. The researcher was committed to understanding the lived experience of a group of people and how they made sense of their social and personal worlds (J. Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is phenomenological because it is “concerned with exploring experiences in its own terms” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). This study captured a detailed view of the experiences of these assistant coaches in their own words. IPA researchers are most interested in what happens in everyday life and how it impacts a particular group of people. As J. A. Smith et al. (2009) wrote, “IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences takes on a particular significance for people” (p. 1). This significance often occurs when something specific has happened in a person’s life. The researcher was committed to understanding the experiences of the female assistant coaches as they related to their identity and motivation to continue in the profession.

A researcher’s role in the IPA process is detailed and systematic, using personal skills to interpret the data collected from interviews. This two-pronged process is called the double hermeneutic (J. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Hermeneutics refers to interpreting the story of the experience of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It gives IPA researchers the duty to
“make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their world” (J. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53) while listening to participants attempting to make sense of their own personal experiences.

Site Information and Population

This research sought participants from one NCAA Division I conference to increase uniformity and consistency. Of the 1,117 college and universities that make up the membership, 335 have NCAA Division I women’s soccer programs. NCAA Division I women’s soccer has 32 conferences, averaging 11 teams each. Within a conference, teams compete for championships, with the winner of the conference often earning an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament. The NCAA tournament uses a 64-team single-elimination format to determine the national champion.

The researcher focused on NCAA Division I women’s soccer because Division I soccer is considered the highest level of women’s intercollegiate competition in the United States and Division I assistant coaches typically are employed full time. Focusing on the role of sport identity among female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches controlled the environment more than if different sports had been included. The conference from which the participants were sampled had 25-37 players on their rosters, based upon their publicly posted rosters. According to the NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report (NCAA, 2019c), the average roster size for an NCAA Division I women’s soccer team during the 2018-2019 season was 28.4. Using the same conference yielded several similarities like student enrollment, academic rigor, funding, conference travel, level of competition, and recruiting.

Despite being from one conference, the participants had varied lived experiences in the profession. They differed in background, coaching experience, and connection to soccer. It also gave the researcher participants who had experience in all three NCAA divisions.
The participants in this study were female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. The participants had at least 2 years of full-time assistant coaching experience in Division I soccer, so they had detailed experiences to draw from and spoke to all aspects of the coaching role. The role of these coaches within their programs included but was not limited to conducting daily training sessions, recruiting student-athletes, film analysis, academic monitoring, scouting opponents, coordinating team travel, complying with all NCAA and conference rules, organizing alumni functions, organizing and implementing all camps and clinics, managing social media, and equipment ordering and tracking. Assistant coaches work under the direction of the program’s head coach and extensive travel is required for league and nonleague matches and recruiting. This study was not dependent on a single site; participants were selected from one NCAA Division I conference. This conference was comprised of 11 teams. The researcher contacted participants through publicly available information on their institutions’ athletics websites. The researcher interviewed seven coaches. This number of coaches allowed for rich data and thorough analysis, as is suggested for IPA research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The coaches had different institutional and soccer program experience, which allowed for maximum richness and depth in the collected data.

**Sampling Method**

This study utilized purposive sampling, a common nonrandom technique utilized in qualitative, and therefore IPA, research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) described the logic of purposeful sampling as “selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 148). The sample size when using the IPA approach has no agreed-upon number (J. Smith & Osborn, 2008): it can range from three to 15 individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). J. A. Smith et al.
(2009) suggested that four to 10 interviews is typical for doctoral work. The researcher sought eight to 10 current female assistant coaches for participation in this study. The coaches were identified through their institution’s athletic website and publicly available email addresses. For this study, assistant coaches were defined as full-time university paid coaches who were allowed to participate in on-field soccer-specific coaching and off-campus recruiting per the NCAA (2019a). This eliminated members of the staff with titles like volunteer assistants and director of operations, per NCAA guidelines (NCAA, 2019a). Seven of 11 possible participants took part in the study. Two potential participants did not respond to requests, one declined to participate, and one did not meet the criteria of 2 years of full-time experience in college coaching.

The researcher located these individuals within one NCAA Division I conference. This conference was given a pseudonym to protect privacy. Using one conference provided good control for the study. Conferences are aligned according to many factors, including similar student enrollment, mission, values, academic rigor, funding resources, and potential revenue (Farley et al., 2017). Being in the same conference also meant that the coaches had similar conference travel schedules, facing each opponent once in the regular season. According to publicly available schedules, if a school hosts a team one year, they travel to that school the next year to compete.

The researcher used publicly available information taken directly from each athletic department website as a resource for purposeful sampling. After approval by the University of New England (UNE) Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher sent emails inviting coaches to participate in interviews (see Appendix A). Those who did not respond received an identical follow-up email one week later. Emails were sent to each female assistant coach in the conference at the email address listed for them at their respective institutions. The invitation to
participate email explained the study and included an informed consent form (see Appendix C). The invitation to participate requested specific information, including confirmation that the participant met the criteria of at least 2 years of full-time Division I assistant coaching, how long they had been in the role, what conference they coached in, and the name of their institution.

The first eight to 10 to respond who met the criteria of having at least 2 years of full-time Division I coaching experience were to be selected for the interviews. Seven participants responded who met the criteria. Those seven were selected for the interviews.

The researcher expected this sampling method to create maximum opportunities for content-rich interviews that would facilitate strong data collection. This purposive sample of assistant coaches who had experienced the same phenomena of coaching in Division I soccer was necessary for this study.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures**

The IPA method was selected to allow for richer and deeper conversation and to ask open-ended questions to gain greater detail and context. Interview questions (see Appendix B) were developed, using the researcher’s own story as a guide, to connect with the framework of social identity theory and sport identity in the coaches’ careers. Critical thought was given to self-concept, self-validation, and connection to groups when interview questions were prepared.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study because of their ability to focus communication while still allowing for open and collaborative communication. This level of flexibility is critical to the depth and breadth of data and thus the exploration of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The purpose of IPA is to describe common meaning for several individuals through their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were conversational so the participants could share their experiences freely and openly.
Interviews were conducted by the researcher after IRB approval. The NCAA season finished in December 2019, so all coaches were done with their competitive seasons. There was ample opportunity to interview coaches during February 2020 because their fall competitive season was complete and they had not yet begun their spring competition schedule. Coaches were in the spring training and recruiting phases of their year.

Because participants were in a variety of locations, interviews were conducted via Zoom, a web-based conferencing application. The interviews were recorded on Zoom and data were collected by transcribing the audio recordings using Rev.com, a web-based conference and transcription application. This function was utilized for all interviews. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to provide or be provided with an individual and school pseudonym. If the participant referred to themselves or others (e.g., a head coach or another assistant coach) by their given names, that information was edited during the review process. To maintain confidentiality, those names were changed to a pseudonym when the interview was transcribed at Rev.com. All audio recordings, typed transcripts, notes, memos, and written records were saved as password-protected files and were stored on the researcher’s password-protected computer. All paper records were stored in a locked desk. No data with identifiable information were to be shared at any time unless the UNE IRB required an audit. This raw data would then have been shared only with the UNE IRB, committee, and chairperson. Once the study was complete, all audio and paper materials relating to the study were destroyed. The informed consent forms included privacy protections (see Appendix C).

Each participant was given a copy of their interview transcript from Rev.com so they could review what they said and make any clarifications.
Data Analysis

After data collection, the researcher organized the data and began analyzing it to identify patterns and themes. This created a framework for the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Data analysis moved from narrow ideas to broader ideas that created detailed descriptions and summarized the information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) advocated summarizing these elements into “what” the participant experienced and “how” they had experienced it.

The process of analysis followed J. Smith and Osborn’s (2008) approach. The researcher searched for themes in the first interview transcript, connected the identified themes, and then analyzed the other interview transcripts. The process followed for this study was:

1. read and reread transcripts,
2. initial noting concurrently with the rereading,
3. develop emergent themes,
4. search for connections across emergent themes,
5. move to the next case, and
6. look for patterns across cases (J. A. Smith et al., 2009)

The researcher initially read a transcript and then listened to the audio recording with script in hand. The researcher then reread the transcript, made initial notes, and coded for emergent themes. This note taking and coding involved underlining, highlighting, circling, and making notations in the margins. The researcher generated themes through significant statements in the transcript to understand how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) calls this horizontalization. Connections across these themes were then broken into clusters of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process was followed for each transcript. To
organize these themes and connections, the researcher created tables and charts to keep track of each participant and their individual interviews, then matched themes.

Limitations of the Research Design

The research initially sought eight to 10 participants who had experience as female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. This number is suggested for IPA methods because of the detailed and complex analysis of the description of these lived experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). As Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) noted, the intent in qualitative research, and therefore IPA, “is not to generalize, but to develop a particular context in depth” (p. 148). This sample size allowed the researcher to understand the descriptions from the participants, who were working as coaches. Although this sample size was suggested for this type of study, this also limited the number of descriptions and experiences the researcher heard. The final number of participants was seven out of a possible 11 within the conference. Of the four possible participants who did not take part in the study, two did not respond, one declined to participate, and one did not fit the criteria of having at least 2 years of full-time coaching experience. Having seven participants, although within the suggested range for IPA study (J. A. Smith et al., 2009), limited the full representation of the population of coaches living this experience.

Another limitation of this study was that only assistant coaches identifying as female were selected for participation. This was purposeful so the researcher could understand the lived experiences of an under-represented gender in NCAA Division I college soccer coaching. This study did not examine the lived experience of male NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches or of male or female coaches in other sports. A related limitation was the years of experience of the participants, with the researcher seeking participants with at least 2 years of
full-time assistant coaching experience in Division I. The reason for this was to obtain more information-rich cases from those with more experience in the field (Volpe & Bloomberg, 2016).

A final limitation of this study was the researcher’s relationship to the profession as a former female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coach. The researcher did not discuss personal experiences, relying instead on the participants’ experiences. By journaling, the researcher attempted to “identify personal experiences with the phenomenon and to partly set them aside so that the researcher can focus on the experiences of the participants in the study” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77). As a former coach fitting the criteria of the study, the researcher had a connection to and potential bias regarding the participants’ description of the phenomenon. The researcher sought to not let “past knowledge be engaged while determining experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77).

**Issue of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is important to address in qualitative research (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2016). Researchers must take every effort to try to mitigate or control the potential biases that may present themselves during different sections of a research study. Credibility and validity were of the utmost importance to the researcher. To ensure credibility, the researcher designed the study to use semi-structured interviews to gather descriptions of the lived experiences of female assistant coaches. These interviews helped explore the lived experience of the phenomenon of sport identity for female coaches. Another study could be conducted to consider the same questions and produce reliable findings.

Transcript review and triangulation were also implemented in this study. Member checking with the participants allowed the researcher to ensure descriptions were accurately translated to capture the participant’s viewpoints. The entire transcript was shared with the
participant to allow for edits and confirmation of data. Triangulation is probably one of the most well-known approaches to validating a study (Merriam, 2009). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) note that “to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, we employ various procedures, including redundancy of data gathering and procedural challenges to explanation” (p. 154). Multiple methods of data collection are key to clarifying meaning and achieving a clearer and richer understanding of the lived experience of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Triangulation came from a cross-case analysis, with each participant a new case.

Dependability of the IPA method in this study was addressed through the transparency of the method. This depended on the researcher keeping a journal and record of memos that showed the specific and detailed rationale and reasons for the interpretations and analysis of data (Merriam, 2009). Confirmability was realized through similar means, with the researcher realizing that objectivity in IPA research is not realistic. The researcher practiced reflexivity and examined how subjectivity and bias may shape the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016), which is a good research practice.

A final trustworthiness issue is transferability. IPA methods are not intended to generate findings that can be generalized (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016), but it was important to understand whether there was a possibility that the findings could apply to similar situations. The detailed descriptions of the participants and the researcher’s content-rich description of the participants and the phenomenon helped with transferability.

**Ethical Considerations and Participant Rights**

Throughout this study, the protocols set by the UNE IRB were followed. These required the researcher to respect and protect the rights and overall welfare of any individual involved in any aspect of the research. UNE (2010) notes that it is guided by the three ethical principles of
research that originated from the Belmont Report. The researcher willingly and thoughtfully abided by these principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Respect for persons incorporates the right of individuals to be treated autonomously and that persons with diminished autonomy have the right to protection. The researcher achieved this through voluntary participation in the study. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and any and all notes about their participation would have been destroyed. This was explicitly noted on the informed consent form (Appendix C) and repeated during any contact with the participant.

Beneficence refers to persons being treated in an ethical manner and securing their well-being. To uphold this principle, the researcher used an informed consent form (Appendix C) that detailed the study and fully informed the participants of the procedures and any possible risks (Roberts, 2010). Protecting the identities of the participants and ensuring confidentiality were of the utmost importance to the researcher. In order to ensure confidentiality, each participant, institution, and mascot was assigned a pseudonym before being interviewed.

The third prong of justice, though not fully relatable to this study, refers to when someone is denied, without good reason, a benefit they are entitled to or have a burden unjustly imposed. The researcher protected the participants from any harm by employer, institution, or character by maintaining the confidentiality of the coach, school, and any other details that may have led to exposure. As noted, all transcripts and information were securely stored.

**Conclusion**

This study used IPA to understand the lived experience of how the phenomenon of sport identity motivates female assistant coaches in their profession. IPA uses small numbers of participants and relies on content-rich, in-depth interviews. These semi-structured interviews
were conducted one on one (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). These interviews were transcribed and coded according to J. Smith and Osborn’s (2008) three-step approach.

The researcher generated themes from significant statements in the transcript to understand how the participants experienced the phenomenon, using horizontalization and clusters of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). While many studies have focused on the retention of female coaches in college athletics, little research was found that focused specifically on women’s college soccer, Division I college soccer, or the role of sport identity in female coaches in college soccer. This study documented the experiences of female assistant coaches to understand the lived experience of the phenomenon of sport identity for female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to explore the role of sport identity among female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches and to gain insights into their persistence in the profession. The IPA method allowed for richer and deeper conversation, using open-ended questions gain greater detail and context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This study sought to deeply explore the first-hand experiences of female assistant coaches and the phenomenon of coaching and identity. Therefore, this study explored and addressed the following research question: How do a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches describe the influence of sport identity on their coaching careers?

This research question, along with this study’s literature review, helped the researcher create the interview protocol (Appendix B). The researcher followed the suggested step-by-step guidelines for working with IPA data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The objective of the interview data collection was to identify emerging themes among study participants related to their lived experiences as female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches and the role of sport identity in their lives and careers.

The researcher invited all 11 full-time female NCAA Division I women’s soccer assistant coaches from one conference to participate via their publicly available university email addresses. The researcher conducted interviews over a 4-week period. Throughout the rest of the study, these participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms: Rebecca, Kristen, Erica, Maria, Angela, Karoline, and Jade. All interviews were conducted online and recorded using Zoom, a web-conferencing application that also records video and phone calls. The audio files from the interviews were saved on a password-protected computer and in a password-protected file on the researcher’s computer. This file was uploaded to Rev.com, a professional and confidential online
transcription service, using a password-protected account. Once transcription was complete, the researcher read the transcript and then listened to the audio recording with transcript in hand to initially review the document and ensure that no identifying information was included in the transcripts. Upon completion of data cleansing, a copy of her transcript was sent to each participant for member checking, allowing her to edit and confirm the data. This helped reduce the possibility that the researcher would misinterpret the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Throughout the study, it was the aim of the researcher to set aside her own experiences and biases as a former NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coach and to observe Moustakas’ (1994) idea of bracketing her feelings throughout all phases of the study. The researcher attempted to separate her own feelings and be mindful during the interview to reduce potential leading questions or disclose specific personal information that might influence the participants’ responses. The researcher did this while attempting to also build a sense of comfort and trust for the participants during the interviews.

**Coding of Data**

The coding process consisted of opportunities for the researcher to read and listen to each transcript several times across several days. The interview analysis was guided by the process described by J. A. Smith et al. (2009), which creates different levels of coding to produce emergent themes. The researcher made initial notes and coded for emergent themes. The note taking and coding included underlining, highlighting, circling, and making notations in the margins. Using horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), the researcher generated themes through significant statements to understand how the participants experienced the phenomenon. These themes were then broken into clusters of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process was followed for each case before searching for patterns across transcripts.
The initial coding for each transcript involved three separate processes: descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments. According to J. A. Smith et al. (2009), descriptive commenting is a process of highlighting key words, phrases, and other explanations of phenomenon shared by each participant. This descriptive highlighting was done in blue on each transcript. For linguistic commenting, the researcher used black ink to circle word choices and metaphors that were used by a participant to describe her experience. The third process of coding had the researcher interpret the participants’ comments. This commenting was done in blue ink in the margins.

Upon completion of coding for each individual transcript, the researcher created a table to organize the three levels of coding. Appendix D is an example of the tables created for each transcript. After each transcript was coded and organized into a table with emergent themes, the researcher approached the data from the holistic perspective of all seven interviews. At this point, the emergent themes from each interview were analyzed. Patterns between emergent themes were then identified to create superordinate themes (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This process sometimes led to emergent themes becoming superordinate themes. These themes were then connected based on their interrelated nature into key thematic findings.

**Participants**

The participants for this study were found through purposeful sampling of one conference in NCAA Division I. This sampling method allowed for good control in the study. Each school in the conference had similar enrollment, mission, values, academic rigor, funding resources, and potential revenue. Seven current female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches participated in semi-structured interviews that lasted between 41 and 75 minutes. Table 2 describes the participants. All participants were working in NCAA Division I institutions at the
time of the interviews. All participants had at least 2 years of full-time NCAA Division I coaching experience. Their positions were considered full time based on their wages being paid by the institution as a university employee. The coach was also allowed, per NCAA rules (NCAA, 2019a), to coach with soccer-specific instruction on the field and recruit off campus.

Table 2  Description of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years coaching in college</th>
<th>Years coaching in NCAA DI</th>
<th>Years coaching at current school</th>
<th>Competed in Division I soccer</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant 1: Rebecca

Rebecca, a 41-year-old, was the oldest participant. She was in her second year of coaching at her institution and eighth year in NCAA Division I at the time of the interview. She also had 3 years of experience in NCAA Division III. Rebecca had coached at three different institutions as part of the women’s soccer staff. She had lived in several different states throughout her college coaching career. She was a former NCAA Division I college soccer player and transitioned into coaching at age 30. Rebecca expressed that in her current role as an assistant coach with her current staff, she felt more like herself than in previous positions. She said she had grown in confidence as a coach and a person and was finding her voice. She expressed great passion for being a life coach and a mentor for her student-athletes, wanting to provide them with a positive experience.
Participant 2: Kristen

Kristen was a 31-year old coach. She was in her third year of coaching at her institution and her eighth year of coaching in the NCAA overall. Kristen had worked at seven different institutions as part of the women’s soccer staff. Kristen had worked at both large and small universities all over the country. She had spent one year coaching in NCAA Division III. Kristen was a former NCAA Division I women’s soccer player and expressed that she still loved to jump in and play with the players at practice when needed. She explained in detail that she wanted to build meaningful relationships with her players that would transcend sport and last beyond their playing days. She explained that she had learned how to separate success or failure in sport from her self-worth, as the two could not be intertwined.

Participant 3: Erica

Erica was a 27-year old and, at the time of the interview, was preparing to leave her current institution and accept a new job at another institution. She had spent one year in her current role. Erica had competed in NCAA Division I for 4 years and found it to be a catalyst for her growth in the game and transition to coaching. She had worked mostly in one region, at three different colleges. She expressed that she was not sure whether she wanted to be a head coach, as relationships with players seemed to change with that new title. Erica’s identity as an athlete shaped her life for as long as she could remember. She said some of her self-validation came from seeing her players grow as people and players.

Participant 4: Maria

Maria, at 24 years old, was the youngest participant. She accepted the position at her current institution right after graduating from college. During her time competing in NCAA Division I women’s soccer, she had played for her current head coach and assistant coach.
Having worked at one school, Maria drew from her experiences at her current institution, as well as her club coaching and playing days. She recounted that she could not remember a time in her life when she did not consider herself an athlete: her life had revolved around sports. Maria said that the “soccer world is a massive world. I mean there’s thousands and thousands of soccer players and thousands of soccer coaches, but I also think it’s a very small world.” She explained that these communities help female coaches form friendships and also contribute to networking and future job opportunities to grow in the profession.

**Participant 5: Angela**

Angela was a 27-year old with 3 years of experience at her current institution. She coached at an NCAA Division III institution for a few months before transitioning to her Division I alma mater. The former NCAA Division I athlete had coached at two different institutions. Angela played professionally overseas and expressed the importance that soccer and her relationships to her teammates and coaches had on her as person. A self-described introverted and reserved person, soccer allowed Angela to grow as an individual while also sharing her story with her players as a coach. Angela spoke of her experiences with having no self-esteem and how soccer helped her open up and be more like herself. Being surrounded by other athletes and people who love the sport helped her become more confident.

**Participant 6: Karoline**

Karoline was a 29-year old who spent her entire college coaching career at the same NCAA Division I institution. A former professional soccer player, Karoline explained that she found coaching after her playing career ended. The transition to a new role had been a challenge because she felt such a void when she stopped playing. Karoline found coaching helped her transition into a new role as a mentor and inspirer. She was thankful to be able to give back to
the next generation and influence them in a positive way. She expressed that she stayed in sports coaching for many reasons, two of which were to fulfill her competitive edge and to see players grow and develop.

**Participant 7: Jade**

Jade was a 29-year old who had coached in NCAA Divisions I and III. She had spent a total of 8 years coaching, 5 of them at her current NCAA Division I institution. At the time of the interview, Jade was working for her former college coach at her alma mater. Through her experience as a female assistant coach, Jade noted that she and other female coaches gravitated towards each other in the profession to provide a layer of support for each other. She mentioned that the female coaching group was connected and that they wanted to help keep each other in the profession. She had not thought about having any other profession other than college coaching. She found meaning through seeing players leaving the program after having grown as people and players.

**Emergent Themes**

Two emergent themes resulted from coding the data. Each theme had subthemes, which are discussed in detail in this section. Table 3 presents the themes and subthemes identified through this analysis. While these are the predominant themes, it is important to note that the themes were intertwined in many of the interviews. In the following presentation of the findings, there are times when identical or very similar words appear in more than one theme or subtheme. This will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5.
Table 3 Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Seek purpose and self-validation</td>
<td>1. Finding role identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Building relationships enforces self-validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Role of Division I in self-validation and social validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-esteem</td>
<td>1. Belonging to a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Importance within female coaching group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. The value and role of being a coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Mentoring as a coach reaffirms identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Persistence in coaching to maintain identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Seek Purpose and Self-validation**

The participants’ responses to these questions appeared to indicate a commonality in seeking purpose in their lives and careers through soccer and finding self-validation in their individual pursuits and in the growth and development of their student-athletes. There was a consensus in the responses to these questions, with all seven participants indicating that they found self-validation through seeing growth and progress in their student-athletes on and off the field. They expressed that seeing the players succeed helped them know that they were in this career for the right reasons. Throughout the conversations, all seven participants also noted that they were seeking their own individual purpose in life and looked for it through the familiar lens of being an athlete, coaching, and being part of a team. Seeking purpose and self-validation also extended to the role of being a coach. Kristen said of being a coach: “A big part of it satisfies that competitive edge or that competitive desire I should say.” Erica said of finding self-validation: “A lot of self-validation comes through the success you see out of your players.”

All participants noted how important it was when they felt like they were making a difference in players lives, which helped them find their purpose. Erica noted, “Self-validation for me, too, comes from the players that you might not have any more texting you and saying,
‘Was just thinking about this time and I really appreciate all that you did for me.’” Rebecca said, “But I also find [self-validation] in the little conversations; is someone being more mindful of someone else or that we tried to make them more aware of, or being more thoughtful of, how they speak to people.” Five participants discussed how the Division I community impacted their purpose and self-validation, currently or in the past. Karoline said being in NCAA Division I:

Brings its own validation, its own type of prestige that you’re the best of the best, you’re at the top. For me, it’s just what I’ve known. I don’t feel any different validation being a Division I coach verses being anything else.

All participants noted their self-validation in seeing the progress of student-athletes and knowing they did the right thing to get them better. Maria noted that players of this generation want to be heard and “crave deeper relationships” with coaches; she wanted to provide that for them.

**Subtheme 1: Finding role identity.** All seven participants were searching to find their own identity through sports. Each coach expressed the importance of sports, and soccer specifically, in her life from a young age. When asked if their athlete identity influenced the way they saw themselves as people, all seven responded affirmatively. In describing the role that being an athlete and sports played in her life, Erica made her deep-rooted connection to being an athlete clear. She responded immediately to this question with an emphatic “Absolutely.” She then said sarcastically, “I mean, I only saw myself as an athlete 95% of the time.” She continued, “If I didn’t have athletics, I honestly don’t know how I would have identified or what I would be doing.” Maria had similar sentiments about the importance of sports in her life. She explained that sports and soccer were the foundation of her childhood, with everything in her life revolving around them.
This identification through sports continued through all of the participants’ playing careers and left them each with a life transition from playing to no longer playing. All seven participants described the challenge of transitioning away from their core identity and activity and into the unknown. Angela said, “My only passion was soccer; never thought further into the future. Only thought about soccer.” This dominant identity and focus led the participants to make difficult decisions about their future and career, thinking about what they could do to fulfill their sense of self and identity. All participants noted that sports and playing soccer had been the main focus of their lives. Being an athlete influenced the way they viewed themselves and the world around them. Karoline explained how her athlete identity tied into how she saw herself:

The best example to how it’s tied in is when you’re done playing, and then you have to shift and refocus and figure out what life’s like without games and sports and things like that. Which is why I decided just to get into coaching. But yeah, I think it’s…that’s the hardest part for most athletes is that transition when it’s all over and what do you do next, and that kind of void that you feel when it is over.

Kristen and Karoline both used the term “DNA” to describe how much soccer was part of their lives. They emoted how inherent their connection to soccer was to describe the feeling of loss when their playing days were over. The transition out of playing was described using the terms “lost,” “struggle,” “hard,” “crisis,” “identity crisis,” and “not ready to hang up the cleats.”

Kristen explained the process of changing from an athlete to a nonathlete. She said she no longer considered herself an athlete. Maria, the youngest participant, was the only one who still considered herself an athlete. The other six participants noted that though they were still active, they no longer considered themselves athletes because they could not do what they once could as elite athletes. Each participant used the word “competitive” to describe themselves as players and
mentioned that they “struggle” with their view of either their new bodies, older age, or decreased athleticism. Kristen, at age 31, said “I’m just old. My body just doesn’t…it can’t do that anymore. It doesn’t move the same, it doesn’t feel the same.” This physical change also impacted the “identity crisis” that the participants felt in shifting from player to coach. Kristen continued by saying that she had to learn how to cope with these changes. She said she always considered herself a soccer player her entire life; now, that was no longer the case and she had to figure out her new role and new identity outside of being a soccer player. All seven participants said that filling the void of competition and athletics was one of the reasons, if not the sole reason, for originally getting into coaching. All seven participants noted that being a coach allowed them to fulfill their competitive edge and find a sense of self-identity.

Although the participants were not asked what they missed about being an athlete, each described what they missed using descriptors like “competition,” “grind,” “control,” “lifestyle,” “teamwork,” and “relationships.” To cope with these changes, or to “satisfy the thirst” as Kristen said, the participants needed to find something that “quenched the thirst” of competitiveness and to “occupy the brain and body.” The “natural” step, as six coaches explained, was to transition into coaching.

Being a coach allowed the participants to satisfy their “new competitive mentality” as a coach, be part of a team, and to find the relationships with players and staff that they were so accustomed to throughout their lives as soccer players. Erica said she “still gets to be part of the team environment as a coach and be competitive.” Soccer was such a critical part of life for the participants, that to stay in the sport in some capacity appeared to be the best option. Angela said that she started coaching because soccer gave her everything she had in life, and she wanted to give the student-athletes the type of life-changing experience that she had. Karoline talked about
how coaching “fulfills every value I have in my own identity. So that alone, take the satisfaction I get from seeing a player grow and develop, I enjoy just coaching for myself and then for my own game as well.”

This connection to the game and desire to provide student-athletes with the same experience that the participants had in their college careers was another reason that they became coaches. The years spent playing college soccer were described as “formative years” when participants learned so much about themselves. Erica said, “I had such a good experience being a collegiate soccer player that I just want everybody to have that same experience that I did and that’s really why I coach.”

Subtheme 2: Building relationships enforces self-validation. All seven participants described in detail the importance of building relationships with players and how that made them feel positively about their self-identity, position, and careers. Each participant gave specific examples of how building meaningful and positive relationships with student-athletes made them feel more validated in their work, in turn making them feel more validated in themselves. Each participant noted that people outside the profession typically “have no idea what it is that we do” and may not see college coaching as “a real profession.” The validation of helping players grow and develop on the field, and more notably off the field, helped motivate these participants to remain in the profession and find value in what they did and who they were as people. Erica said:

The main reason I do this, it’s certainly not for the money and I know people joke about this all the time, but the connections that are built with the players is something that I find really, really special and something that you can’t find in every job.
Erica had such a great experience as a player, as did the other six, that she wanted to be able to provide that same experience for her players, no matter the monetary cost or questioning of job credibility. Erica continued by saying of providing a good experience:

Any way that I can help effect that, I wanted to make sure that I was doing it. I definitely think that the relationships that you build and how much these people mean in your life, the good and the bad, you always remember. But that’s what makes it all worth it… It’s something special that you can’t find everywhere.

A consensus among all participants was the importance of empowering their female student athletes to be better players on the field and better people off the field. Four participants spoke of their ability to use their own life experiences to give players advice. They described being able to relate to and connect to the student-athletes on a personal level as “important” for providing them with “perspective” and a “bigger picture” beyond college athletics. Rebecca said:

So trying to empower these student-athletes to be the best version of themselves and to grow and to give them different ideas and different perspectives so that once they get into the real world, they’re able to maybe find a little bit more success.

The human development of the student-athletes and helping them see the world from a different perspective and a new lens was what brought the most self-validation to each participant. When asked about how they found self-validation as a coach, six participants talked first about “making a difference,” “seeing improvement and growth,” “success as a human being,” or “watching the journey of the person.” Kristen talked about the great responsibility of coaching and helping them “navigate this very, very, impressionable period of time in their lives, which is college.” In terms of empowering, she mentioned that she got to help them “find that path in life” and “help them through that process” so they could succeed. Maria spoke about the
time that she saw her first class of players that she came in with have their last game and the
hugs and tears because of the connection to that group. This ability to help gave each coach a
sense of self-validation. Erica shared a similar sentiment when describing how she gained self-
validation in lifelong friendships with student-athletes and feeling like her work mattered.

The participants also said gaining acknowledgement from former players impacted their
identity, self-validation, and social validation. All seven participants said that was important and
detailed specific instances of keeping connections with former student-athletes. Each participant
acknowledged her commitment and said strong relationships helped push student-athletes to be
better versions of themselves. Karoline recounted a time when one of her players was drafted to
play professionally, and the player called Karoline in tears thanking her for all that she had done
to help her get to that point. Kristen talked about the feeling of validation when her players, past
or present, reached out to her about life circumstances outside of soccer. She appreciated the
trust and strong relationships she had built with these players, such that they wanted to go to her
with anything, good or bad. She spoke of a graduate who she had talked to every month since she
graduated 2 years ago and called this past fall with a life crisis. Kristen said she wore “so many
hats” as a coach and considered herself much more than “just a soccer coach.” She said she went
from “a counselor to a therapist to a mentor to a soccer coach to a crisis handler” and continued
to say she was also an “interventionist.” Angela, Erica, Maria, Rebecca, and Jade all spoke about
how the acknowledgement of their players, direct or indirect, helped them to gain self-validation
that they were doing “the right thing” and that “their profession meant something.”

**Subtheme 3: Role of Division I in self-validation and social validation.** Participants
also discussed the importance of acknowledgement from others in finding their identity through
sport. Beyond current and former student-athletes, the participants discussed the importance of
acknowledgement from colleagues or peers in the profession, particularly in NCAA Division I women’s soccer. When asked how they found self-validation through being part of the Division I community, the participants gave a range of answers. Three coaches used the word “prestige,” while the other four mentioned that it was helpful to have Division I on their resumes for future jobs and networking. None of them believed that Division I was the best, and Jade specifically mentioned that she would work in Division III soccer again. When talking about the perception of Division I and the self-validation that Division I brings, Rebecca started laughing. She said:

Yes. I’m laughing because there’s this perception that Division I is the best and the greatest thing. Everything like that. But my perspective is a little bit different. I think it’s great, but it’s more about who you are working with than the Division I label. But being labeled as a Division I assistant coach, you do get more attention, people pay more attention.

Erica and Jade spoke about the benefits of having people in Division I recognize what you were doing and to see the good work you did for the benefits of friendship, but also for networking and upgrading to future jobs. The amount of effort and energy put into the profession were described as “worth it,” especially after receiving acknowledgment for good work from players, colleagues, or peers. Rebecca explained that people’s opinions meant more and that she cared more about what people thought of her because of how much she had put into the profession. Because of this, the level of disappointment was also greater when things did not go well. This all connected to the “perception,” as she described it, of her as a person and coach from other coaches. She wanted to be around prestigious coaches so others would perceive her to be as good as those coaches, or better than she was at her profession.
The need to feel that others perceived them as important was helpful to the participants’ sport identity. Not every participant said she felt validated by being part of the Division I community. Karoline said that she recognized it helped her, but she had never been part of anything different, so she did not have anything to compare it to. She was “lucky” to play at a well-known undergraduate school and coach for one of the top teams in the country, so she said she knew she was fortunate to have an opportunity that others did not have. Kristen said she no longer thought she found self-validation from being part of the NCAA Division I community – she used to, but now was the polar opposite. Finding self-validation and her identity through Division I coaching had been important to Kristen. She used to care about who she coached with, who she sat with on recruiting sidelines, where she worked, and how many games her team won so she could talk to other coaches and recruits about her successes and feel important. She said she no longer felt that way and, being in her 30s, she had matured and had more experience so these external validation factors did not impact her as much anymore. Kristen said she tried to find self-validation and identity outside of the sport. She continued, “I sit on the parent side and I try not to be identified as a college coach.” Kristen described that she would rather be that way than to find her validation and sole identity in coaching because that would just set her up for failure. This level of self-esteem and self-worth was a common theme among the participants.

**Theme 2: Self-esteem**

There was a common theme of soccer impacting the participants’ self-esteem as players and as coaches. Self-esteem was an influential factor in how the participants found their identity through sport; both self-esteem and identity influenced their careers. Six participants said that playing soccer from a young age and identifying as an athlete helped them “find their voice,” “be confident,” and “grow as a person.” These participants found that being an athlete and competing
helped them “express themselves” and “build self-esteem.” The participants’ chosen profession of college coaching impacted their self-esteem in similar ways as playing did when they identified as athletes. However, all participants also discussed how their self-esteem may “fluctuate” or “waver” and said there were “ups and downs” depending on whether the team won, whether they felt like they did a good job as a coach, and whether others validated the job that they did. Karoline talked about how winning championships or having a good season “will boost your self-esteem in the short term.” Angela talked about how being with teammates and like-minded people who are similar “or view sports the same way allowed me to be more open and like myself because I felt like I was surrounded by, I guess, other athletes and other people that love this sport.”

When asked whether their involvement in coaching sport impacted their self-esteem, four participants described how coaching influenced their self-esteem both positively and negatively. Rebecca said in a matter-of-fact tone that coaching had given her a voice that she did not think she would have found without the profession. She explained how her confidence as a person had grown during her time as an NCAA Division I coach. Rebecca and Maria were both emphatic that their self-esteem was a direct reflection of their coaching, which impacted their self-identity. These four participants noted that whether their day as a coach went positively or negatively affected their personal lives and feelings of self-esteem outside of soccer. These connections to self-esteem, according to participant responses, included the subthemes of belonging to a group, importance within the female coaching group, the value and role of being a coach, mentoring as a coach reaffirming identity, and persistence in coaching to maintain identity.

**Subtheme 1: Belonging to a group.** The importance of connection to a group started early for all seven participants, as soon as they began to play sports. This group identity was
described as a key component to finding their identity as people, and it carried over into their careers as coaches. Group identity within a team contributed to decisions the participants made throughout their lives. According to Karoline, children begin playing sports for many reasons, such as to have fun, be social, and hang out with friends. The social aspect of sports created a built-in community of friends and like-minded people who shared sports in common. From an early age, this affected the social aspect of life for the seven participants. Maria remembered how sports affected the social aspect of her life, saying: “Sports kind of came before everything else. I found my friends through sports, I found all my hobbies, all my likes and dislikes through sports. So, I think it’s kind of circulated everything.” This connection and group membership carried across boundaries and into everyday life for Rebecca and Angela. Their day-to-day choices, from fashion to friends, were influenced by their teams. It was also their teams and soccer that helped them to learn to lead rather than to follow and to find their own identity and confidence.

All seven participants spoke about how being part of a group or group identity influenced their self-esteem. These groups were described either as the teams that the participants coached or the group of coaches who they called peers or colleagues. In talking about her team, Kristen said that she could not have her “self-worth tied up in the success of thirty 18-22-year-old kids or players or student-athletes.” She continued by saying that if she did that then she would be doomed to disappointment and negative self-perception. But she said that not allowing the success of the team to impact her self-esteem and self-perception was not easy and could waver. Other participants had similar experiences, saying that their self-esteem wavered depending on whether the team was succeeding on and off the field. If they, as coaches, had let the team down, that impacted them on a personal level. The participants’ individual well-being was a theme
throughout their responses. They noted that the success of the team affected their self-esteem and how they viewed themselves as people.

When asked whether their self-esteem was connected to their group identity, six participants said that it was connected. Three participants noted that the soccer community was a small world and the other four noted that the community was very connected. Karoline and Maria discussed the importance of this community in detail, particularly the female coaching community and how being part of that community also impacted self-identity. They said that as a coach one naturally fit into a certain community group, or a subgroup, as Maria called it.

Karoline said, “You naturally kind of turn to each other when you need it.” Maria said that her self-esteem was “heavily influenced” by her group identity. She specifically spoke about how at the university level, the most important factor in having good self-esteem related to a group was whether her players, staff, and administration were happy with the results.

One participant said that coaching did not influence her self-esteem and another said that coaching influenced her self-esteem “a little bit.” These two participants said that coaching either did not influence their self-esteem or that the influence was only minor. However, both described ways in which coaching did influence their self-esteem. One of them, Karoline, said that self-esteem was internal, but there were certainly moments like winning championships that boosted her individual self-esteem. Kristen said that her self-esteem and identity used to be attached to her job, so wins and losses were how she found value. She longer did that because “that’s not how I should judge myself and that’s not what I should base my self-worth on.” She continued to say that not allowing wins and losses and other aspects of the profession to influence her self-esteem was a challenge at times, although it was much easier now than when she was a younger, less experienced coach.
Subtheme 2: Importance within female coaching group. The participants spoke frequently and most passionately about being part of their current team and staff and about being part of the female coaching group in NCAA Division I women’s soccer. This was related to belonging to a group. All seven participants talked about the importance of being around female coaches and how that influenced their self-identity and self-validation.

Emma described how female coaches were “like-minded” and “gravitate[d]” towards each other. Rebecca, Erica, and Jade also used the term “gravitate” to describe their sentiments towards other female coaches. Erica continued:

I try to identify with females more, but they are harder to come by. But I think that I gravitate towards the females just because I know that it is a little bit more rare. So when you find them you want to stay close to them and you want to have them be in that little subgroup that you have because they are hard to find.

Four participants talked about how their group identity and “moving up the ladder,” “networking,” or “building relationships” within their group of coaches, especially female coaches, was important for their self-esteem. Jade described her need to feel accomplished within the group and her profession. She spoke about the time and effort she had put in during over 10 years of coaching to build relationships with other coaches. Jade said that this was helpful “so that when I do either need something on the field or need a recommendation or want to work with someone, those kind of friendships are always there and I’m confident in them.” She talked about the importance of feeling accomplished, needed, and liked as part of her self-identity through sport. Karoline felt similarly, explaining that career growth and opportunities came from networking, so the coaching peer group that she spent time with was important. She said that it affected her self-esteem when more coaches approached her about higher level job
offers. Rebecca agreed, saying that coaches gained “self-esteem” and “validation” by being in Division I athletics through “recognition” and “status.” This also impacted her self-identity.

All seven participants spoke more specifically about the male and female dynamic in the coaching groups. Kristen said:

I try to be intentional about making female friends in this profession. Not fake, obviously not forced, but just try to get to know some people better. Because it gets tiring to have to talk to males all the time and be around males all the time and having to hear what they have to say all the time. And then evaluate females that they really don’t know, they’re not females. That’s for sure, they’re men.

Karoline summed up the consensus of the group well when she said that coaches become close friends because of the “crazy schedule,” holding the same values, and having similar drives. She said that others outside the groups they belong to in college athletics do not understand their profession or their worlds, so they try to “stick together.”

Subtheme 3: The value and role of being a coach. As participants shared their experiences and some of the reasons they coached, the perceived or real importance of their career as it related to their self and group identity was a recurring subtheme. This seemed to be where several of the other themes merged together. All seven participants felt that their influence as a role model or mentor for their student-athletes was what fulfilled them most as a coach in their sport identity. Four participants noted that they loved to win, but they all also said that adding value and meaning to a student-athletes life was what brought them the greatest fulfilment in finding their purpose and identity. Kristen described her role as a coach and how she believed she helped her student-athletes. She explained:
I think I’m able to share my experiences. Like again, sympathize, empathize with the experience of the student athletes that I’m interacting with or interact with often. I’m able to help them through certain situations that might be exactly similar to things that I went through. Whether it be soccer related or life related. Honestly, it’s more often life related than soccer related.

This level of coaching helped the participants reinforce their identity and see themselves in the student-athletes they coached. As Erica stated, she joined the coaching profession in part because of the positive experience she had as a student-athlete. She wanted to give that same experience to others, which would help her fulfill her own identity. Rebecca, on the other hand, did not have a female mentor as a coach growing up or in college. She said she became a coach so she could be the mentor that she never had.

Erica described similar views in that she gained self-validation in “lifelong friendships” with student-athletes, even after they had graduated. She said that this self-validation occurred when former student-athletes texted her to say that they appreciated what she did for them. These relationships and the relationships with her coaching peers also allowed her to find self-validation, both of which have kept her in coaching.

The connection and role as a coach is something that the participants said could not be found in other professions. They would not find fulfillment if they could not have this connection. Karoline shared stories of players being grateful for all that she put into their lives as student-athletes, which was being a big reason why she was “hanging on” to the profession: to “prove” that she was impacting lives. She also said:

One of the biggest pieces of self-validation is the improvement or growth in someone that you’re working with. That for me, kind of comes full circle, and that for me is the
validation that I need that I know what I’m doing in this job, and that I’m having an impact.

This impact connected to the subtheme of mentoring.

**Subtheme 4: Mentoring as a coach reaffirms identity.** All seven participants spoke about the impact they wanted to have off the field for their student-athletes and how it reaffirmed their own self-identity to help the next generations. All participants spoke about how important they found their role as female mentors to be to their current and former student-athletes. Kristen spoke from experience about how she knew she could relate to women because they are treated and viewed differently their entire lives. She said they have greater pressure on them because of:

Body image and how you’re supposed to be, how you’re supposed to look, how you’re supposed to carry yourself, the success you’re supposed to have. You’re still supposed to do well in school and behave perfectly and all of these things.

Rebecca said she wanted to use her life experience to help advise the student-athletes and make them more aware of their relationships. She said that there are few female mentors for student-athletes in the male-dominated industry of coaching, so it is hard for female players or coaches to relate in soccer because there are “few to look to.” All seven coaches talked about the importance of their roles as female mentors to their student-athletes and how it helped drive their connection and feeling of accomplishment as persons. They wanted to help guide their student-athletes and be a visible example of the possibilities of a career in sport and of being a strong woman. The participants acknowledged their own identity roles through mentorship and reaffirmed their self-worth and validation through working with current and former players.

**Subtheme 5: Persistence in coaching to maintain identity.** During these conversations, all seven participants were asked whether they had ever pictured themselves not coaching in
college and also why they persisted in college coaching. Five of them said they had considered not coaching, one participant said she had just started to think about it, and one, Maria (the 24-year-old) said, “not a chance.” When asked to elaborate why they stayed in the profession, all of the participants talked about the connection of soccer to their self-identity and reverted to the feelings of loss they felt when they transitioned out of identifying as an athlete and away from competitive soccer as an athlete.

Rebecca said she had a long-term plan to leave coaching in the next 10-20 years, but for right now, she “has more work to do” and said that she was “not done yet,” with more to learn and to develop professionally. A common thread among the participants was that they persisted in coaching to fulfill their identity, help people, be a female role model, and, as Rebecca said, make sure that the student-athletes had someone to “believe in them.” Erica said that the relationships between female coaches were also very important to persistence and that she was still in the “sport world” largely because of her sport identity. Despite this connection to sport identity, most participants had considered leaving the profession.

Six participants had considered alternate professions. One participant said she had recently started to think about it more, as she had thought more about her future, a family, and what kind of job and career she wanted for the rest of her life. Another coach passionately stated that she had often thought about changing careers. She described wanting a better work-life balance, getting married, and having children as reasons she had considered leaving the coaching profession. She noted that she had seen few coaches successfully balance a career and family.

Another participant said that she had not really considered it but could see it in her future. She said her current work-life balance was good, even with having an infant at home. Another participant said she had pictured herself not coaching, but at this point in her life she was not
ready for that shift. She explained, “I’m not completely ready to make that change, and not what I want right now for my personal life.” She continued: “Being part of [coaching and soccer] communities helps you realize that you’re not alone in certain ways you feel.”

Each participant also found that her identification as a female coach was imperative to staying in the coaching field. All seven participants spoke about the need to keep women in coaching; they took it as a personal goal to bring the female coaching community together and to keep women in coaching. Erica spoke about how she knew she would not be in coaching if not for the female mentors that she had in the sport. She said, “I wouldn’t be a college coach right now if it wasn’t for the head coach I played for, as well as the three female assistant coaches that I played for.” To see women doing something in the profession and making a difference in her life helped her strive to be a Division I coach. Rebecca noted that she also saw that women looked to take on the role of mentor for young coaches to help “build and cultivate the community a little bit more.” She said that there were successful female coaches trying to do more to build the community, help them understand that “they do have a voice,” and try to “instill that voice.” Jade said that she was also trying to create this type of environment. She talked about the social connectivity among female coaches and the importance of supporting and including women so they feel like they are part of a community. She explained that this community was critical to women persisting in college coaching.

In an attempt to keep women in coaching, and also to build friendships and relationships with like-minded people, Erica spoke with conviction about the importance of building those relationships early. She said of female coaches: “You grab them and want to hold on tight to them because you want to keep them in the industry.” This desire to keep women in the industry seemed to have a deep-rooted connection to gender conflict in coaching. Two participants talked
about “sexism,” specifically in sports, while four others talked about gender ideologies and work-life balance in sports, relating them to either the ability for females to coach and have a family or to the way they were treated in the profession as women.

Karoline said one reason she wanted to stay in coaching was to help get women into the profession. She talked about the profession of NCAA Division I women’s soccer being a “good ole boys club world.” She clarified:

What I mean by that is that you have a lot of predominantly older, not to stereotype, a lot of older guys who’ve been around for 20, 30 years who don’t see females as equals in the profession, and it’s something where it’s small comments, it’s just how they divvy up goals to their coaches, and things like that, that are kind of demeaning enough that make it clear that they don’t think a female could do a good of job as them, and so those types of situations you’ll see that coaches will get phased out a little bit.

All participants explained that they stayed in coaching because they had more to learn, loved the sport, wanted to continue to develop people, and continued to fulfill their competitive desires. Kristen spoke at length about the lack of women in coaching and its impact on female student-athletes. She candidly spoke about the perceived negative effects of fewer female coaches coaching female student-athletes.

Related to this, Angela talked about how it is “almost expected” that women “aren’t going to be in the field as long as males.” She said it created a divide and a questioning of women in their profession that she did not believe men had because they were not asked the same questions. She said, “It kind of creates that, okay, well you’re coaching now, but are you going to do that forever?”
Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the role of sport identity among female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches and their persistence as female assistant coaches. Findings based on seven semi-structured interviews revealed that these female assistant coaches and their careers were influenced by their sport identity. The participants sought purpose, self-validation, and self-esteem within their roles as coaches. Participants also indicated that their role identity, social recognition, social validation, belonging to a group, the value of being a coach, and persistence in coaching were valued by female Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Seeking to fill the void after being an athlete for their entire lives was a significant factor in becoming a coach for the participants. Feeling a sense of belonging and recognition that their worked mattered was mentioned by all seven participants. A detailed interpretation of the findings, informed by the literature review, will be presented in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to explore the role of sport identity among female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches and their persistence in the profession. By analyzing each narrative, the researcher attempted to make sense of the lived experience of seven female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. The basic purpose of IPA is not to develop explanations or analyses, but to develop descriptions of the universal essences of the lived experiences through commonalities among the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This chapter presents findings and interpretations from the interviews that were conducted with these female assistant coaches.

Sport identity, a subset of social identity theory, is a key factor in a person’s self-identity and self-concept that adds value and meaning to people’s sport careers and lives (Kotnik et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). Because sports was the dominant profession of the full-time assistant coaches, research suggested that this sport identity may override other identities (Kotnik et al., 2012). Therefore, their sport and careers may influence their self-validation as it relates to their own self-image and how they functioned within a group (Kotnik et al., 2012; O. Weiss, 2001).

Previous studies explored sport identity as it related to athletes, with little consideration of how it related to coaches (B. W. Brewer et al., 1993; Burke et al., 2007; Burns et al., 2012; Busseri et al., 2011; Chen & Wu, 2014; J. P. Pope et al., 2014; O. Weiss, 2001). This study sought a better understanding of the role of sport identity for female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches and their coaching careers.

Many connections have been made between the retention of female coaches and work-family conflict, burnout, gender ideologies, gender norms, and job satisfaction (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Inglis et al., 1996; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Pastore &
Meacci, 1990). In order to address this gap in research, a goal of this study was to explore the role of sport identity for female coaches who persisted in the profession. The following research question was used to guide this study in an effort to understand the lived experience of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches: How do a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches describe the influence of sport identity on their coaching careers?

**Summary of Findings and Interpretations**

This chapter begins by discussing how the findings are connected to the relevant literature. Following this interpretation, the implications of the study are presented. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research into the role of sport identity for female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches and their coaching careers. The five key thematic findings (KTF) in this chapter are derived from the themes and subthemes presented in Chapter 4, highlighting the interrelated nature of the findings. Appendix E shows how the KTFs, themes, and subthemes are interrelated, particularly in exploring the role of sport identity and career persistence. This chapter discusses the interrelated narratives in more specific detail, connecting the data with relevant literature.

The interrelated themes and subthemes were the foundation of the KTFs. Throughout the interviews, the participants often used identical words or phrases to describe their experiences, despite the interviews being completely separate from one another. Through the data analysis process, it became clear to the researcher that the responses of each participant related to sport identity and persistence in coaching were connected across themes and subthemes. The participants, when asked about their own self-validation, self-esteem, or sense of self, expressed that others in their soccer community were important for allowing them to find their identity.
This aligned with researchers who suggested that linking role identity theory (McCall & Simmons, 1978) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) can help provide a more general and detailed view of self in connection to groups (Stets & Burke, 2000), much as the participants described. Because sport identity is a subset of social identity theory, the KTFs highlight the connections between self, group, and career persistence.

The lived experiences of assistant coaches were explored through semi-structured interviews with seven participants. Purposeful sampling was used, and participants were identified through publicly available email addresses on their institutional websites. The participants were all current NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches at the time of the interviews. Participants were chosen based upon their gender identification as female, had worked for at least 2 years as a full-time coach at a Division I institution, and worked in the same conference to provide good control for the study.

Interviews were transcribed via a web-based software company and edited to remove any identifying factors. These edited transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking. The interview analysis process was guided by J. A. Smith et al. (2009). It involved reading and rereading the transcript while listening to the audio, initial coding, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, and searching for patterns across transcripts. The initial coding was categorized by descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. After the initial coding, the researcher began to look for connections between the comments and develop emergent themes. These emergent themes and subthemes were then connected into KTFs to highlight their interrelatedness.
Key Thematic Finding 1

All participants \((n = 7)\) expressed the challenge of finding role identity, seeking purpose, and seeking self-validation after transitioning out of their athlete identity. Participants indicated that athletics and soccer were important in their lives from a young age, which was a reason they were still involved in sports. Research states that the athlete identity is typically formed early in life and will likely be a dominant identity throughout an elite athlete’s life (Curry & O. Weiss, 1989; Gustaffson et al., 2018). All seven participants, when asked, said that their athlete identity influenced how they viewed themselves as people. This aligned with McCall and Simmons (1978), who noted that individuals may base their actions on how they want to see themselves and how they want to be seen by others. The participants’ deep-rooted connection to being an athlete was resounding, which also described their level of identity reinforcement. Stets and Burke (2000) explained this connection as meaning that the more an individual internalizes a role, the more the individual feels connected and becomes that role.

Participant accounts of the importance of being an athlete in their lives aligns with research noting that this drive and internalization of the role of athlete may be the most important part of their identity (Kotnik et al., 2012; Stets & Burke, 2000). Participants said that soccer had been the main focus and driver in their lives, explaining that “my only passion was soccer,” “sports have been everything my entire life,” and, as Kristen and Karoline said, soccer was in their “DNA.” When the participants’ playing careers were over, they each recounted the feeling of loss, struggle, and crisis that accompanied this lifestyle shift. Each participant had to reimagine a new life, different from what they had ever known.

As Nasco and Webb (2006) explained, the private dimension of the athlete identity requires an individual to reconsider how they find self-expression when that athletic persona and
competition are removed. The participants explained the level of “coping” that was necessary when dealing with the “identity crisis” of no longer being a competitive soccer player. All seven participants said that one of the reasons they began their coaching careers was to fill the void they felt as a person and to fulfill their competitive edge.

**Key Thematic Finding 2**

All participants \((n = 7)\) found that coaching college soccer fulfilled their role identity. They all remembered that they began their coaching careers in part to fill the void they felt after no longer being a competitive athlete and to attempt to find their identity. This void was not only felt because soccer was removed from their lives, but because of what soccer came to mean to the participants. The participants said that soccer gave them “a sense of self,” “a voice,” and a way to feel comfortable with “like-minded” people. These responses align with research stating that sport participation can be a critical part of forming an identity for adolescents (Erikson, 1968), who are seeking a better understanding of self to make long-term choices (Arnett, 2000). Sport participation allowed these participants to develop social skills (Brunelle et al., 2007) and to help self-identify to help them understand interpersonal roles and relationships (Buserri et al., 2011). Self-esteem and sport participation for female athletes have been linked as contributors to positive self-worth like physical competence and positive body image (Davelaar, 2019; Jackson & Marsh, 1986; Richman & Shaffer, 2000). These participants, now all former Division I soccer players, spoke of their current perceived diminished ability and body image: six of them no longer considered themselves athletes. The participants used words or phrases like “old,” “unfit,” “out of shape,” and “my body can’t do what it used to” to describe how they felt in their current role as persons and coaches.
When participants were asked what they missed most about being an athlete, they used words like “competition,” “grind,” “teamwork,” “relationships,” and “daily control.” Kristen said that in order to cope with the identity crisis of no longer being a competitive athlete, she needed to find something that “quenched the thirst” of competition and sport. Kristen, like five other participants, explained that the “natural” next step was to get into college coaching to maintain the status quo. This followed what research has described as individuals seeking situations where they can continue to showcase their highly important roles in sport and plan their day around that role (Curry & Weaner, 1987; Gustaffson et al., 2018). In this instance, the participants chose to make coaching take the place of their playing careers to fulfill this role. The participants described this step as a shift in their competitive mentality. Karoline spoke about the change from being an athlete to being more of a mentor or inspirer as a coach. She said that the shift was hard and continued to be hard, but with time and experience the shift became easier. Karoline continued talking about being 5 years into coaching:

> My competitive edge in that sense has shifted. It’s more of a long-term development mentality, where as in that first year, everything I took way too personally. Every loss, every win, it really effected the day to day. Just because I still had an athlete mentality as a coach, and with a little bit of time and experience, you start to have to shift in that.

**Key Thematic Finding 3**

All participants ($n = 7$) found that building relationships enforces self-validation. The shift from an athlete to a coach was described as a challenge by each participant because it was a change in their identity. Karoline said that even after coaching for 5 years, she still struggled with the shift in mentality, though it became easier with time and experience. Kristen said that the “subconscious and conscious coping” of realizing she was no longer a competitive player and
her life shifting took until her mid to late 20s to accept. This connection to a team was something that the participants discussed at length and in detail. The participants spoke specifically about their connection with their student-athletes and how, as Erica said, she “still gets to be part of the team environment.” O. Weiss (2001) described this feeling of connection and belonging as necessary for a person’s self-confirmation. The participants discussed this feeling of belonging as players, and then the need to find their identity again, though still through sport, as a coach.

The participants all noted that they found self-validation in the growth and development of their student-athletes. Emma spoke about her need to be liked by her student-athletes, while Rebecca spoke about the importance of connecting with the current team. Both Emma and Rebecca, along with the other five participants, explained that they became college coaches for one of two reasons. The participants either had such a great college experience playing soccer that they wanted to give that to others or they did not have a great experience and wanted to provide that to others. These sentiments aligned with what O. Weiss (2001) described when explaining people’s need to feel accepted. O. Weiss (2001) said that the group decides who is accepted, which can create an environment of belonging that perpetuates the need for self-confirmation. The participants, former players with a strong athlete identity, needed what they felt as players: membership, intimacy, and security through being part of the group and team (O. Weiss, 2001).

This was all in an effort for the participants to feel like their life had meaning and they could feel included and accepted by others (Thomas et al., 2017; Vignoles, 2011). Social identity theory has helped researchers understand that people are motivated to identify with groups, in this case the team the participants coached, to gain self-esteem by feeling positively about themselves (Thomas et al., 2017; Vignoles, 2011). Rebecca talked about her awareness of her
self-esteem being potentially impacted by the team based on how much she could connect with them throughout the year. She said that it was tough for her over the winter break because she found herself wondering what they were doing and wondering why they may not be responding to her messages. She said “Sometimes it’s maybe they didn’t get my message? Well why didn’t they respond to my message?” This lack of connection and the unknown was a challenge for Rebecca.

Kristen spoke about the importance of her connection to her student-athletes and the importance of her role as a mentor. She said, “So it’s a mentorship and I identify with that role because of the conversations, the interactions, and just the enjoyment that I get out of that selfishly.” Her connection to her former players was also critical to her, as she described a life conversation with one of her “former players that I’m really close with that graduated 2 years ago; she and I talk every month” or another former player who called about an engagement, or another who was seeking advice about a breakup. All seven participants talked about their relationships with current and former players and that they wanted to connect with student-athletes on a personal level to help them have a good experience, grow, and gain perspective beyond soccer. Researchers have also noted that coaches may feel connected to their social identity by seeing themselves as part of the athlete group again (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Stets & Burke, 2000) and by being able to process their self-perception, self-esteem, and self-worth through being a member of the group (Coakley, 2004; Gustaffson et al., 2018; O. Weiss, 2001).

The participants’ need for connection to their group can also be viewed using Popitz’s (1987) theory of social subjectivity, which describes how sport can help individuals find acceptance and self-confirmation through a social arena (O. Weiss, 2001). As the participants described, there is often low individuality in team sports like soccer. The group creates the social
norms and acts as the authority that decides who is accepted. This may create an environment of belonging. This need to belong is created and continued due to this environment (O. Weiss, 2001). As Rebecca stated, she felt the need to do what the group was doing, dress like them, and be like them to fit in. Rebecca’s example was described as a negative and a positive, giving her a world in which to connect, though different from how she perhaps wanted to be. Each of the other six participants also described their soccer teams as “close” and like “family” after going through so many hard times together. Jade summed up the consensus about the value of relationships and helping others when she said:

I think again the smaller things where certain people are asking for help with situations, whether that be soccer related or completely socially related, family related, when they feel comfortable enough to ask me either just to talk because they’re stressed out of they need help or any of those things. I think that is kind of where I know I’m doing the right thing in terms of career.

**Key Thematic Finding 4**

All participants \( n = 7 \) reported that group identity influences self-esteem. Participants indicated that they felt like they were seeking purpose in their lives and coaching careers through soccer. Participants expressed that they found self-validation through their own pursuits and through the growth of their student-athletes. Specifically, the participants looked for this self-validation and purpose through their core athlete identity, sport identity, or having always been involved in sport. This aligns with the findings of Kotnik et al. (2012) and O. Weiss (2001), who noted that the sport identity of individuals may overtake their identities, which is important for how it relates to their self-validation and personal affirmations.
Researchers explained this relationship to sport identity as the individual connecting their self-identity and self-concept through how one functions socially and within groups and society (Cabrita et al., 2014; Kotnik et al., 2012). Participants said that identifying as an athlete from a young age helped them find their “voice” and be more confident persons. This progressed into their roles as college coaches, where each participant felt that they could “relate” or “connect” to not only the players, but also to the system of college soccer and athletics. This allowed them to “have a voice they may not have otherwise had,” according to Rebecca. This connection, self-esteem, and gaining of self-concept and self-worth through the sport and the community helped the participants find their place or, as one participant said, “my path” and “my journey.” O. Weiss’s (2001) research connects to this notion, saying that sport is the only societal subsystem that gives so many people a way to validate themselves socially and be acknowledged by others. This increases self-esteem because an individual’s self-esteem is rooted in their “identity reinforcement and social recognition” (O. Weiss, 2001, p. 397).

As Karoline said, winning is a short-term boost of self-esteem. Erica said that impacting a student-athlete or not being able to help them influenced her self-esteem. Rebecca said that her well-being and self-esteem were impacted by results and her ability to impact her student-athletes. Jade explained that her self-esteem wavers when she has to make a big decision on the field that may not have positive results. Maria said that her self-esteem was “heavily influenced” by her group identity: if those in her group of players and staff where happy, she was happy. The framework of social identity theory helps explain this because people are motivated to identify with groups to feel positively about themselves, gaining self-esteem (Thomas et al., 2017; Vignoles, 2011). According to the participants, the main element to gaining self-esteem within the group was the feeling that they could help their student-athletes, “share their experiences”
with them, and provide “comfort” when they were “struggling on the field or in life.” The participants felt a sense of validation and self-worth when they could be there for the student-athletes, and former student-athletes, in times of need. Karoline shared this anecdote:

We have a player right now who’s going through her parents’ divorce, and struggling quite a bit and she feels comfortable enough to come to me and say “Hey, I’m struggling, what can I do?” And I can point her in the direction of resources that’s going to help her a little bit.

Kristen explained having a different view of self-esteem as it related to being part of a group. She described how she had to learn how to detach her self-worth from her identity or profession to protect her self-esteem. She said:

Four years ago, I lost all my ego in coaching. Like I finally had an epiphany that it wasn’t about me. Kind of what we talked about at the beginning of this. And my self-esteem couldn’t be attached to this and my self-worth couldn’t be attached to this. And my ego had nothing to do with it and it wasn’t making me a better coach. And it wasn’t making me a better person either.

Thomas et al. (2017) argued that identifying with a group is the way in which individuals seek more certainly in life and validate their meaning. Kristen explained how she no longer felt the need to validate herself through being a Division I coach or the prestige that goes with which school or coach she worked for. She said she now tried to blend in when recruiting and not wear school-specific gear. This detachment contrasted with Kristen’s connectivity to female coaches in the profession. She explained that she wanted women to stay in the profession and actively sought connection with them and mentorship. This connects with KTF 5.
Key Thematic Finding 5

All participants \((n = 7)\) persisted in coaching to maintain their sport identity. The theme of persistence in coaching was represented across all KTFs. All seven participants, in a time of identity crisis and struggle while transitioning from an athlete to the next stage in life, joined the sports profession as Division I college coaches. They understood this profession from an individual identity perspective and from a group perspective as former student-athletes. Despite their “need to fulfill a competitive edge,” to “quench the thirst” for being an athlete, to “find self-validation through the relationships” built by being part of a team, and to find a sense of belonging, six participants said they had thought about leaving the profession. Two participants said that they were “hanging on” or “holding on to the profession” and all six mentioned thinking about alternative professions. This sport commitment was described by Jeon and Ridinger (2009) as the psychological state that represents the desire and resolve to continue in sport. Sport science has studied this sport commitment through a sport participation and persistence lens for athletes (Hagiwara & Isogai, 2014; Jeon & Ridinger, 2009), without necessarily considering how it affects those who identified as athletes and became coaches.

Studies related to female coaches have focused on why female coaches leave the profession, rather than on why they stay (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Kamphoff, 2010; Norris et al., 2017; Pastore, 1993). Although 85.7% of these participants said that they had considered leaving the profession, also said they were persisting with it for various reasons, all connected to maintaining their self-identity in sports. Only one of the six participants who had considered leaving college coaching had a “long-term plan” to leave coaching “10, 15, 20 years down the road” when she would be in her 50s or 60s. The participants were persisting in the profession because they felt like they had “more to learn” and more to give to their players and their sport.
They persisted because of the feeling and need for connection. They persisted because of the need to “feel liked” and to “belong” to a group. They persisted because they felt like they had to “hang on” to what they had always known.

This need and desire to commit was described by W. M. Weiss and M. R. Weiss (2003, 2006) as two different types of sport commitment. W. M. Weiss and M. R. Weiss (2003, 2006) argued that individuals persist in sport because they want to and because they have to. Several studies have described athlete identity as a critical factor in sport commitment from an athlete perspective (Carpenter et al., 1993; Hagiwara & Isogai, 2013). These participants described their commitment to sport from a coaching perspective, though that may still be intertwined with their athlete identity and sport identity. These findings suggest that the persistence to coach is an internal, sport identity connection, while leaving the profession is because of external factors like role, norms, and expectations.

Although not the direct focus of the research, sexism and gender norms in coaching NCAA Division I women’s soccer were key topics for six participants, which suggests a connection to identity and career persistence. All seven participants initially discussed how they believed it was part of their duty as female coaches to help keep women in coaching. The participants felt a need to connect with and “gravitate” towards other female coaches in NCAA Division I women’s soccer. This gravitation was described by Lockwood (2006) as the greater need for women, who are in the minority in college coaching, to connect with others who share their minority status.

Participants noted that they tried to take on the role of mentor so their current players could see that they could pursue the sport as a career, even outside of playing. Researchers noted that women seeing women break through gender barriers and succeed is critical to their
persistence in the field (Ragins et al., 1998; Wicker et al., 2019). Five participants discussed
female role models they had in soccer who helped them see that they could be college coaches.
The other two participants, Rebecca and Maria, said their connection to female role models
shaping their career choice was a little different.

Rebecca said that she had female role models outside of sport, but none in sport, and
wanted to be the soccer mentor that she never had. Maria said she never had a female coach until
college. Although her college head coach was a role model for her, she did not necessarily
impact her decision to become a college coach.

Despite these differences, all participants agreed that there should be more women in
coaching because, as Lockwood (2006) also substantiated in research, gendered similarities
make women more inspired to pursue similar achievements. Six participants said that female
coaches in NCAA Division I women’s soccer wanted other female coaches to succeed. Part of
the need and desire to connect with other female coaches was to help them be successful and
legitimize them.

Kristen spoke about what Steele (1997) described in seminal research as stereotype
threats. She said she felt a great need to help female coaches connect and wanted them to be
successful because it impacted all female coaches. She said that if a female assistant coach
became a head coach and was fired within 3 years, it would take female coaches a step back.
That might even deter women from wanting a head coaching job or deter them from persisting in
the profession. If these female coaches expected to not do as well as men in the profession, it
may induce anxiety that could lead to decreased performance in their role as a coach (Spencer et
al., 1999, 2016). Conversely, if a female coach saw another female coach succeed, that could
lead to improved performance and a stereotype boost for other female coaches (Shih et al., 2002;
D. M. Smith & Martiny, 2018). Kristen talked about this at length and explained that Title IX had led to more female head coach hirings in the last few years. However, she noted that many were unqualified, did not do well, and lost their jobs; this accounted for the low percentage of female head coaches. Now, Kristen said, assistant coaches may be cautious of applying for head coaching jobs because of these stereotype threats (Steele, 1997).

Kristen continued by talking about how the same method was very recently repeated and connected it to the low percentage of female head coaches in Division I. She found the low number of female head coaches “shocking” and “disappointing.” She believed that there were more young female coaches because there is a “rule, unspoken requirement of having a female on staff so the players feel more comfortable and they have someone to go to.” She wondered how many of those assistants would retain for more than 3 years.

Additional topics brought up by the participants that were related to gendered persistence in coaching connected to the work-life balance of female coaches. Six participants said that they considered leaving college coaching to achieve more work-life balance. All six mentioned that they considered this because they wanted to have a family, a personal life, or a social life, or else that they had felt some burnout from their position. As Kristen said, due to this, female coaches “end up just having to quit or leave at some point.” This aligns with research stating that coaches do not persist in the profession due to burnout, gender norms, work-family conflict, and time commitments (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998; Inglis et al., 2000; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Ryska, 2009).

All seven participants also discussed the male dominated field, the “ole boys network” as Karoline called it, or the sexism that three participants explicitly described related to coaches and student-athletes. Literature states that college coaching is a male-dominated profession (Inglis et
al., 2000; Kamphoff, 2010). Karoline and the other participants pointed to the challenges women face as the minority, with fewer role models in the profession, gender stereotypes, gender discrimination, and work-family conflict (Lockwood, 2006; Kamphoff, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman, 2010). Gender discrimination was explained in detail by three participants as it related to established male coaches demeaning and phasing out female coaches. With fewer women as role models in the profession, fewer episodes of stereotype boost can occur (Shih et al., 2002; D. M. Smith & Martiny, 2018). The participants noted that the real or perceived notion of women not doing well as head coaches led to men think they were more capable, but men were more successful simply given the ratio of female to male coaches. Angela said that Division III male assistants could not get any Division I assistant jobs because schools were only hiring women. She said she once asked a male coach “Why don’t you get a job in men’s soccer?” Research says that it may be challenging for women to overcome these imposed glass ceilings and break through these gender barriers (Norman et al. 2018; Ragins et al., 1998; Wicker et al., 2019).

**Implications**

NCAA Division I has more sports, participation, and therefore coaching opportunities for women than ever before. Despite this, the number of female coaches remains stagnant across all sports (LaVoi, 2016). According to inventoried data from publicly available websites, in fall 2019, 45% of NCAA Division I women’s soccer assistant coaches were female and only 18% of head coaches were female. This study explored the role of sport identity and career persistence for these assistant coaches in order to address the gap in literature related to sport identity, coaching, and persistence in the field. Much important research has been conducted related to female coaches leaving the profession (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Inglis et al., 1996; Mazerolle et al.,
2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Pastore & Meacci, 1990). Additional research has been conducted on sport identity and athletes’ sport careers. This study addressed the research question of how a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches describe the influence of sport identity on their coaching careers.

These findings suggest that female coaches have a need and a desire to be in the NCAA Division I women’s soccer coaching profession because of their sport identities (Carpenter et al., 1993; Hagiwara & Isogai, 2013; W. M. Weiss & M. R. Weiss, 2003, 2006). While six of the seven participants said they had thought about leaving the profession, they each talked about the importance of soccer, coaching, and changing young people’s lives for their personal validation and sense of self. This aligns with research that has found that sport and careers may influence self-validation and self-image related to how people function within a group (Kotnik et al., 2012; O. Weiss. 2001). The participants’ responses suggest that they coached to help support female student-athletes and also to help support their own values and meaning in life.

The participants also credited the power of female mentorship with persisting in coaching. All participants noted that they either had engaging female mentors in soccer or that they wanted to be female mentors for their student-athletes. The participants explained a two-pronged approach to mentorship: the value in seeing other women succeed in the field and the value of being a mentor for other coaches or their student-athletes. The participants talked about how they learned from their mentors, and they also wanted to provide support like acceptance, friendship, and counseling to their student-athletes; this also matched research (Kram, 1985; Marshall, Lawrence, Lee Williams, & Peugh, 2015). Lockwood (2006) explained that the need for women to see positive stereotypes may increase their level of performance, which coincided with what these participants noted. The participants explained that the discrepancy in the amount
of male and female coaches in NCAA Division I women’s soccer was because of gendered differences, work-family conflict, and young assistants being phased out by predominantly older men in head coaching positions. One participant also explained the higher number of male coaches in the profession by saying that men believe they can transition to the women’s game, while women do not feel confident transitioning to the men’s game. The participants and the research both suggest the importance of female mentorship.

Six of the seven participants described their need and desire to keep other women in coaching, despite what research shows to be the reasons women leave coaching, like work-family conflict. Perhaps helping this cause, NCAA Division I women’s soccer has made legislative changes over the last few years that have created small ripple effects on the work-life balance of those in coaching profession. As one participant said, these changes built in recruiting dead periods, meaning that no institutions are allowed to recruit during certain times of the year. The NCAA also implemented recruiting restrictions on those younger than juniors in high school. One participant said this had somewhat shifted her work-life balance. Research points to work-life balance as being an important driver of retention among female coaches (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Norris et al., 2017; Pastore, 1993).

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of the phenomenon of sport identity among a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. Understanding these experiences gave greater insight into why the participants chose coaching as a profession, why they persisted in the profession, and how to keep them persisting in the profession. The additional purpose of this study was to be foundational, guiding additional research on sport identity and the coaching profession. The researcher also sought to help guide female assistant coaches in understanding their experiences with sport identity as they pursue
their chosen profession. Its implications are to pursue further studies related to sport identity and persistence in coaching for women.

Given these findings, this research may connect to retention of female coaches and provide a different lens for considering how to keep women in coaching and how sport identity may influence that persistence. Knowing more about why women begin and persist in their coaching careers will help researchers, coaches, and those influential in hiring and retaining provide female student-athletes with female coaches. Future research will allow further understanding of the interconnection of sport identity and persistence in college coaching.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The role of sport identity in the coaching persistence of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches is a complex yet under researched topic. Female coaches and retention have been studied for over 30 years. Until now, there has been no substantial research on the role of sport identity in the persistence of female coaches. This study used participants’ lived experiences to better understand why women stay in coaching, as opposed to why they leave coaching. The participants suggested that they persist in coaching because of an internal need and desire related to their athlete and sport identities. While the participants suggested that women leave coaching, or consider leaving coaching, because of external expectations or roles, there is little research on men and their persistence or retention in coaching. Because this research on sport identity and coaching is in its infancy, the following research is recommended to help increase the understanding of sport identity and female coaching persistence in NCAA Division I soccer and beyond:

- the role of sport identity in male coaches and their career persistence,
- role identity of female student-athletes and their career choices,
• the relationship between male and female coaches within college soccer,
• the effect of male coaches on female athletes’ self-identity and self-esteem,
• the influence of male head coaches on female assistant coach persistence in the coaching profession, and
• the early childhood impact of sport on female athlete career choice

Conclusion

The themes and key thematic findings that were identified in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 support and inform this study’s research question. Based on the themes and findings, implications and recommendations for future research have been presented. The participants articulated in great detail their experiences as female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches. The participants were also asked to consider and explore their own connections to sport identity. The researcher asked each participant interview questions that were created to support this research question: How do a select sample of female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches describe the influence of sport identity on their coaching careers?

The findings of this study suggest that female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches sport identity brought them into the profession and has kept them in it. Previous research on female coaches has focused on retention. This study addressed this gap in literature by exploring how sport identity may connect to female coaches’ persistence in the profession, rather than why they leave the profession. Existing research has provided varying factors for why female coaches leave the profession, such as job satisfaction, work and family conflict, gender norms, burnout, gendered language, pay and workload inequities, and a male-dominated profession (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Inglis et al., 2000; Kamphoff, 2010; Norris et al., 2017;
Pastore, 1993). The seven participants in this study described the same reasons for why others have left coaching and why six of them had considered leaving.

The participants also, however, pointed to reasons for staying in the profession that were connected to their athlete or sport identity, a subset of social identity theory (Kotnik et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). Exploring the participants’ sport identity allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth insight into their lives as athletes and now as coaches. Each participant talked about her childhood, and always remembered identifying as an athlete. Though six of the seven participants no longer considered themselves athletes in terms of how they remembered their elite abilities, each of them began coaching to fulfill their sport identity. So while research has shown that women leave coaching because of outside roles, expectations, or norms, this study suggests that one of the ways to address the need to encourage women to become coaches and persist in coaching is through the recognition and celebration of their sport identity.
References


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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPATION REQUEST EMAIL

Dear Coach,

My name is Kristin Cannon. I am a doctoral candidate at The University of New England, and I am seeking volunteers who would like to assist me in conducting research for my doctoral dissertation, which will explore the role of sport identity among female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches.

Criteria for participation are:

- You must currently be an NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coach. For purposes of this study, this must be a full-time position with wages paid by the college or university as an employee. You must be allowed, per the 2019-2020 NCAA Division I Manual, to coach with soccer-specific instruction on the field and recruit off campus.
- You must identify as female.
- You must have at least 2 years of full-time Division I soccer assistant coaching experience.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview. The interview should take between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom, a web-based conferencing application. Zoom will record the calls for data collection purposes. Your name, institution, conference, and any identifying information from the interview will be kept completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to mask your identity. During the interview I will ask you to tell me about the role of being an athlete and coach in your life and career and about your experiences as an NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coach.

Interviews will be conducted face-to-face (if you are near New York City) or via an online medium. All interviews will be recorded on Zoom. Each interview will be recorded, and additional notes will be taken. Participation is entirely voluntary and please be aware that you are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time; even after we start the interview.

If you are interested and able to assist with my research, please respond to this email with your preferred contact information so we can schedule your interview.

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please contact me either at kcannon@une.edu or by telephone at 401-787-7599. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kristin Cannon
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, I am working towards finishing my doctorate degree at the University of New England.

Thank you for voluntarily agreeing to be interviewed and for taking the time to share your experiences today. With your consent, I would like to record our interview today so I can transcribe it and analyze it later. This analysis will contribute to the findings in my dissertation. Do I have your consent to record the interview?

Your confidentiality is of the utmost importance to me. Your identity and any identifying factors that could impact this confidentiality will be replaced with pseudonyms to protect you. Any raw data with identifying information will only be seen by my chairperson, committee members, and the UNE IRB in the event of an audit. Your name will not be used in the final written findings of the study. Your status as a participant will not be disclosed to other participants or to the public.

If you have a preferred pseudonym for yourself and/or your school, please let me know now.

I will also change the names of any individuals you may mention by name in the interview to protect you and those who may be named. If you are uncomfortable answering any questions, you can opt out of answering at any time.

Part One:

We are going to start with an introduction. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself by answering the following demographic questions?

1. What is your age?
2. What is the highest level of degree you have earned?
3. What is your marital status?
4. How do you identify for your race/ethnicity?
5. How do you identify for gender identity?
6. How do you identify for your sexual orientation?

Thank you for sharing. And for full transparency, can you describe the nature of any preexisting professional relationship with me?

We will now transition to some more topical questions about your specific experience in college coaching.
1. How many years have you been coaching in Division I?
2. How many years have you been coaching across all divisions?
3. How many years have you been coaching at Division II and at what institutions?
4. How many years have you been coaching at Division III and at what institutions?
5. In which conference does your team compete?
6. At how many colleges have you coached?
7. Have you ever worked at the college level with a female head coach? Assistant coach? For how long?
8. Have you ever worked at the college level with a male head coach? Assistant coach? For how long?
9. Have you always coached women’s teams?
10. What institution do you coach at now? How many years have you been at your current school? How many years have you been in your current role?
11. Describe your role as an assistant coach. What does your day-to-day role look like? What functions of the program do you support?

Transition: Thank you for telling me a bit more about yourself and your coaching experiences. As you know, my study focuses on the role of sport identity for assistant soccer coaches. I will now give you some background information on the meaning of sport identity to give you a base of knowledge for the next questions.

Let’s first talk about social identity.

1. Do you identify as a member of a coaching group or community? If so, how?
2. Does how you connect with your staff and team make you feel any particular way about your role? About yourself?
3. How is or isn’t your self-esteem connected to your group identity?

Thank you for your thoughtful answers. We will now transition to the role of athlete identity. In research conducted in the United States, mostly on athletes, the term athlete identity has been used to describe the degree to which an individual identifies with the role of an athlete and seeks acknowledgement from others in that role (Brewer et al., 1993; Green & Weinberg, 2001).

1. How would you describe yourself as a person?
2. How would you describe yourself as an athlete?
3. Do you see or have you ever seen yourself as an athlete? Please tell me more about that.
4. To what extent did your athlete identity influence the way you saw yourself?
5. Do you think your athlete identity in any way relates to the way you see yourself as a coach? How so?
6. In what ways is being a coach different from being an athlete?

Thank you for sharing. Now to the concept of sport identity. Sport identity is a subset of social identity theory that relates to the degree to which an individual identifies with their role in sport and seeks acknowledgement from others in that role.
Sport identity also allows for the connection of that sport to be a person’s main occupation, not necessarily as an athlete (Kotnik et al., 2012). In my study, I am using the term sport identity to study how the degree to which someone identifies with their sport and how sport identity motivates them.

For those highly involved in sport, their sport identity can become their most defined and dominant part of their self-identity.

1. Can you describe how you identify with the role of a coach?
2. In what ways does identifying with the role of a coach contribute to your self-identity or self-concept?
3. In what ways does identifying with the role of a coach contribute to your sport identity?
4. How do you find self-validation as a coach? How do you find self-validation being part of the Division I soccer community?
5. How and how often do you connect with your college team?
6. How do you find meaning in your career as a coach? How do you see yourself as a coach? How do you want others to see you?
7. In what ways does identifying with a group, in this case college coaches, contribute to your social identity? Can you describe any social comparisons with other coaches? How do your personal and professional groups connect?
8. For those involved in sport, self-esteem can play an important role in their private and public self. Would you say that your involvement in coaching sport impacts your self-esteem? Can you describe how?
9. Have you ever pictured yourself not coaching in a college setting? If so, what have you considered as a profession? Do you have plans to leave? If not, why are you staying?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add at this time?

Closing: This concludes our interview. Thank you so much for your level of depth and thoughtfulness in each of your responses. This has allowed me to gain a rich and detailed insight into your perspective on the role of sport identity as a female NCAA Division I women’s soccer assistant coach. This information will be useful for gaining a better understanding of the role of sport identity for coaches and their motivations to persist in the profession.
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** Exploring the Sport Identity of Female NCAA Division I Assistant Women’s Soccer Coaches

**Principal Investigator(s):** Kristin Cannon

**Introduction:**
- Please read this form. You may also request that the form be read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study and, if you choose to participate, to document that choice.

- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study now, during the project, or after it is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Why is this research study being done?**
This study allows for a richer exploration of the role of sport identity for female assistant coaches. This study is also a dissertation requirement for the researcher to earn a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of New England.

**Who will be in this study?**
Eight to 10 female NCAA Division I assistant women’s soccer coaches from various institutions across the United States.

**What will I be asked to do?**
As a participant, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting about 60-90 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom, a web-based conferencing application. Zoom will record the calls for data collection purposes. You will also be asked to review the transcript of your interview and provide any corrections, clarifications, or additions.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**
The risks are minimal, because your identity will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used for you, your conference, your school, mascot, and any other possible identifying factors.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**
There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, your participation may help add context and experience to understanding more about the role of female Division I assistant coaches and how sport identity may impact how you see yourself in that role.
What will it cost me?
There is no monetary cost associated with the study. The only requirement is volunteering ample time for the interview.

How will my privacy be protected?
Privacy will be protected at all costs. The researcher will not disclose your identity or your status as a participant to any other participants or to the public. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym for the study. Any other identifying factors like your institution, mascot, and conference will be given a pseudonym. Your name and any other identifying factors will not be used in the final written findings of the study.

How will my data be kept confidential?
All audio recordings, typed transcripts, notes, memos, and any written records will be saved as password-protected files and will be stored on the researcher’s password-protected computer. Any paper records will be stored in a locked desk. Once the study is complete, all data will be destroyed. No data with identifiable information will be shared at any time unless the UNR IRB requires an audit. This raw data will then only be shared with the UNE IRB, committee, and chairperson.

What are my rights as a research participant?
- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the university.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with your colleagues, institution, student-athletes, or any other stakeholders.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of this research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

What other options do I have?
- You may choose not to participate.

Whom may I contact with questions?
- The researcher conducting this study is Kristin Cannon.
- For more information regarding this study, please contact kcannon@une.edu or call 401-787-7599.
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research-related injury, please contact Laura Bertonazzi, lead advisor, at lbertonazzi@une.edu.
• If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board, at (207) 221-4567 or irb@une.edu.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**
• You will be given a copy of this consent form. The researcher has signed the form. Please sign this form and return a copy to Kristin Cannon at kcannon@une.edu and retain a copy for yourself.

---

**Participant’s Statement**

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

____________________________________________________________________

Signature of participant or legally authorized representative

Date

---

**Printed name**

**Researcher’s Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

____________________________________________________________________

Researcher’s signature

Date

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**Printed name**
## APPENDIX D

### TABLE OF EMERGENT THEMES FROM KRISTEN’S INTERVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive/ frequently used</th>
<th>Linguistic/ key words</th>
<th>Conceptual comments</th>
<th>Emergent themes</th>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify as female soccer coach, club coach, former DI player who now coaches</td>
<td>Greater perspective</td>
<td>When younger, associated failure with failure as a person. Identity in coaching alone.</td>
<td>Coaching gives sense of athlete identity – sport identity</td>
<td>Athlete identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disassociate and compartmentalize</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much of my identity was in coaching. I had less experience and was less mature. Unsuccessful season thought was part of my shortcomings as a person. I had to learn how to disassociate and compartmentalize. Try to keep greater perspective.</td>
<td>Connecting – building relationships</td>
<td>Still attaches success to what she does for the team</td>
<td>Self-validation through helping SAs</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not wanting to fail</td>
<td>Fear of failure – says failure now not attached to self-worth</td>
<td>Ego</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Letting people down</td>
<td>Fear of failure – value, ego</td>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failure and self-worth</td>
<td>Mental health impacted by self-worth being tied up in success of teenagers</td>
<td>Self-esteem and perception</td>
<td>Identity crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Find purpose and value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I still attach our success a little bit to how much I feel that I need to do for the team in connecting and building relationships with players... I identify as not wanting to fail. But I think it’s a much healthier way of avoiding that failure now that I don’t attach it to my self-worth.”</td>
<td>Help people</td>
<td>As a coach relate to SAs because of searching for identity after playing – only thing have known</td>
<td>Mental health effects of coaching</td>
<td>Find voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coaching path</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doomed for disappointment</td>
<td>Gives two specific examples of graduated SAs calling</td>
<td>Relating to SAs – self-worth</td>
<td>Female peers/ mentors</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Negative perception</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identity crisis</td>
<td>Player stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>Need female mentors – females are treated differently in life with pressures, body image, behavior, social norms etc.</td>
<td>Role identity as coach- life coach, mentor etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selfless person – value in giving</td>
<td>Males have a negative effect on females in the game. Inappropriate and not best intentions. Can lead to unhealthy future relationships because of how that can be talked to.</td>
<td>Empower females</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relates to SAs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can’t base my self-worth on the success of 30 18-22-year-olds – impacts negativity and mental health</td>
<td>Identity crisis</td>
<td></td>
<td>Female mentorship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Females viewed differently in life</td>
<td></td>
<td>Toxic male coaching culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coping with changing identities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invest in others, available for people, empathetic, sympathetic, be there for people</td>
<td>Satisfy thirst, occupy body and mind, talk to mentors</td>
<td>Athlete identity transition is a crisis because all ever known, life was regimented and controlled and meaningful</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

KEY THEMATIC FINDINGS LINKED TO THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

Key Thematic Finding 1:
- 100% of participants (n = 7) expressed the challenge of finding identity, purpose, and validation after transitioning out of their athlete identity
  - Correlating Theme 1: Seek purpose and self-validation
    - Correlating Subtheme 1: Find role identity
  - Correlating Theme 2: Self-esteem
    - Correlating Subtheme 5: Persistence in coaching to maintain identity

Key Thematic Finding 2:
- 100% of participants (n = 7) found that coaching college soccer fulfills their role identity
  - Correlating Theme 1: Seek purpose and self-validation
    - Correlating Subtheme 1: Finding role identity
    - Correlating Subtheme 3: Role of Division I in self-validation and social validation
  - Correlating Theme 2: Self-esteem
    - Correlating Subtheme 5: Persistence in coaching to maintain identity

Key Thematic Finding 3:
- 100% of participants (n = 7) found that building relationships enforces self-validation
  - Correlating Theme 1: Seek purpose and self-validation
    - Correlating Subtheme 2: Building relationships enforces self-validation
  - Correlating Theme 2: Self-esteem
    - Correlating Subtheme 5: Persistence in coaching to maintain identity

Key Thematic Finding 4:
- 100% of participants (n = 7) reported that group identity influences self-esteem
  - Correlating Theme 2: Self-esteem
    - Correlating Subtheme 1: Belonging to a group
    - Correlating Subtheme 2: Importance within female coaching group
    - Correlating Subtheme 5: Persistence in coaching to maintain identity

Key Thematic Finding 5:
- 100% of participants (n = 7) persist in coaching to maintain their sport identity
  - Correlating Theme 1: Seek purpose and self-validation
    - Correlating Subtheme 1: Finding role identity
    - Correlating Subtheme 2: Building relationships enforces self-validation
    - Correlating Subtheme 3: Role of Division I in self-validation and social validation
  - Correlating Theme 2: Self-esteem
    - Correlating Subtheme 1: Belonging to a group
    - Correlating Subtheme 2: Importance within female coaching group
    - Correlating Subtheme 3: The value and role of being a coach
    - Correlating Subtheme 4: Mentoring as a coach reaffirms identity
    - Correlating Subtheme 5: Persistence in coaching to maintain identity