“Zero Preparation for Life After Sports”: Former College Athletes’ Use of TikTok to Express Transitioning out of Sport

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“Zero Preparation for Life After Sports”: Former College Athletes’ Use of TikTok to Express Transitioning out of Sport

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A B S T R A C T

Every college athlete will transition out of competition, and this transition often is tumultuous for athletes who have dedicated years to the sports they love. Despite these challenges, athletes rarely are given a platform to discuss their transition with peers experiencing a similar situation who can offer support. However, through social media, former college athletes are creating platforms to center their transition successes and struggles. Through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981), this study used thematic analysis to examine transition experiences of former college athletes responding to a viral TikTok video. Comments (n = 869) demonstrated former athletes primarily discussed two components of Schlossberg’s (1981) theory: Characteristics of the transition environment and characteristics of themselves. The former category centered around general statements of agreement/support and emotional support between users, while the latter highlighted negative physical and mental states of health and negative self-attitudes. Implications center on (1) using social media to better support athletes transitioning out of sport and (2) establishing an Athlete Transition Director position in athletics departments to ease athletes’ move out of college sport.

Keywords: Institutional Support, Schlossberg, Social Media, TikTok, Transition

College sport participation often is seen as an avenue for holistic student development as it can enhance participants’ various skills including time management, critical thinking, and the ability to work with diverse others (Weight et al., 2020). However, as athletes dedicate copious hours to sport in order to grow these skills, their athletic identity may become all-encompassing, making the transition to life after college sport particularly challenging (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017).

A transition is an event or non-event resulting in a shift in an individual’s assumptions about themself and the world that subsequently leads to a change in behavior and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981). There are more than 500,000 athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and all of them will transition out of college competition. While roughly 2% will move on to their respective professional leagues, the other 98% will transition into a career, identity, and social sphere outside elite competition (Stokowski et al., 2019).

With this transition comes a host of emotions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, and loss (Harry & Weight, 2021). And while some athletics departments have implemented athlete development programming to prepare athletes for such emotions, most programming is not related to transitions (Cummins & O’Boyle, 2015; Navarro, 2015). Thus, athletes often lack resources and support from others experiencing similar transition tribulations (Miller & Buttell, 2018; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). More recently, however, athletes have found transition-related support through social media (Brougham, 2021; Park et al., 2020).

Some scholarship does note disadvantages of social media outlets like Twitter and Instagram when it comes to athletes’ encountering negative commentary or distractions (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Still, more recent research demonstrates current and former athletes generally see social media platforms as positive communities that maintain relationships while also providing an outlet for relieving stress (Brougham, 2021). Indeed, current and former athletes see value in social media and have taken to these platforms to share their transition experiences and find support and camaraderie (Brougham, 2021; Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Stokowski et al.,
Thus, social media platforms are an important yet relatively under-examined area for further exploration into the transition experiences of college athletes. One increasingly prevalent social media outlet is TikTok.

TikTok is the fastest growing social media platform with more than 1.5 billion users worldwide (Ruby, 2023). The site hosts users who submit short videos – up to three minutes – on any topic (D’Souza, 2023). Each day more than one billion videos are consumed by TikTok users (Ruby, 2023). Research demonstrates that social media visuals and post brevity make outlets, like TikTok, more appealing than other social media platforms (Ruby, 2023). D’Souza (2023) claimed, “With its personalized feeds of quirky short videos set to music and sound effects, the app is notable for its addictive quality and high levels of engagement” (para. 1).

TikTok is particularly popular among the younger population in America, with almost 50% of TikTok users ranging from 10-29 years old (Howarth, 2023). Similarly, the majority of TikTok creators are 18-24 years old (Howarth, 2023). These demographics on users and creators align with the age range of college athletes, further justifying the importance of exploring this burgeoning phenomenon among this unique student group.

TikTok’s usage among college athletes also has increased due to the relatively recent passage of name, image, and likeness (NIL) policies allowing athletes to monetize their publicity rights (Leitner, 2023). Thus, athletes use TikTok to attract followers, promote their own businesses, and endorse other companies and products/services (Leitner, 2023). Additionally, athletes can use social media, like TikTok, to create interpersonal connections that are not bound by geographical or socioeconomic constraints, which can limit an athlete’s ability to engage with other communities (Manago et al., 2012). Considering NIL and the growth of the platform, it is likely that even more current and former athletes will take to TikTok to connect with social communities (Leitner, 2023). So, exploring athletes’ TikTok commentary about exiting sport offers not only a unique dataset, but also the opportunity to expand the field’s knowledge on athlete transitions. For example, on January 30, 2022, Heather Harmon, a former Division II women’s basketball player at Drury University, posted a TikTok video reflecting on her experiences transitioning out of sport and her subsequent issues with the gym. She stated:

Anyone else a retired college athlete who now hates their body, has a horrible relationship with food, and also despises working out? You’re still struggling to find your space in life without your sport and aren’t sure you’ll ever find something that makes you feel like competing did? Follow along and let’s break this awful cycle together.

Soon after this post, her video went viral, sparking commentary from former athletes. This study explored Heather’s TikTok video and comments (n = 869) from this viral exchange to better understand how college athletes perceived their transition out of sport. The following research question was addressed: How do former college athletes use TikTok to share experiences with transitioning out of athletics?

Literature Review

Post-College Athlete Transitions

Arguably the greatest transition an athlete faces is their navigation into life after sport (Park et al., 2013). The transition out of athletics can be mentally, physically, and socially challenging to the approximately 130,000 NCAA athletes who experience this each year (NCAA Recruiting Facts, 2022). There are two avenues for exiting sport. The first avenue is through a normative transition or a “definite sequence of sports- and age-related events” such as the transitions from high school to college athletics, junior to senior level, or the ending of participation in competitive sports (Wylleman et al., 2004, p. 16). This normative transition aligns with Schlossberg’s (1981) notion of an anticipated transition. The second avenue is akin to an unanticipated or non-event transition in Schlossberg’s (1981) theory and is a non-normative transition such as career-ending injury or not being drafted to a professional league when it was expected (Wylleman et al., 2004). Regardless of the type of transition an athlete experiences, they often encounter psychological, emotional, and social repercussions at the conclusion of their athletic career (Hansen et al., 2019; Park et al., 2013).
A significant component of these difficulties stems from the loss of their athlete identity (Brewer et al., 1993). One’s athletic identity is the degree to which a sport participant identifies with their athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993). It is a self-concept that is internalized, often due to external forces and actors encouraging athletes to adopt this as their primary identity, while forsaking others, such as their student identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Brewer et al., 1993). In a comparative analysis, Brewer and Petitpas (2017) examined the identity development of college athletes and non-athletes at one institution. Using an ego identity scale and athletic identity measurement, they discovered that upper-classmen non-athlete students reported less identity foreclosure compared to athletes. For athletes, as competition level and age increased, so did their athletic identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Other literature also has noted that when athletes have higher levels of athletic identity salience, they are more likely to struggle during their transition out of sport, experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Stokowski et al., 2019; Wylleman et al., 2004).

In a systematic review of studies exploring athletes’ experiences with transitions, Park and colleagues (2013) found that former athletes reported feelings of depression and anxiety. In line with other research, athletes’ depression stemmed from the loss of athletic identity, the inability to compete, actual or perceived social isolation as the sport community dissipated, and struggles with bodily changes (Park et al., 2013; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019). Similarly, former athletes reported anxiety surrounding new routines (i.e., work, social, and physical) and finding new passions and identities (Park et al., 2013; Stokowski et al., 2019). Despite most transitions happening in a normative manner, symptoms of depression and anxiety can be long lasting, prolonging athletes’ abilities to cope and adapt to their new life (Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Because of the aforementioned struggles, athletes may find unhealthy ways to cope without sport with one of the most concerning and common outcomes being various forms of disordered eating (Papathomas et al. 2018). Prior to retirement, athletes tend to view their bodies as vehicles for sport; however, when sport ends, athletes’ bodies change due to different eating and training regiments, leading to a host of body image concerns (Papathomas et al., 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019).

For example, Buckley and colleagues (2019) performed a systematic literature review to examine athletes’ experiences with compensatory behaviors and body change upon retirement, finding three key themes related to athletes’ body image concerns post-transition. First, athletes noted intense dissatisfaction with their body and grieved the loss of the figure and capabilities they once enjoyed. Next, athletes experienced disordered eating and forms of maladaptive compensatory eating patterns to potentially deal with the grief. Buckley et al. (2019) discovered that college athletes, compared to non-athlete peers, are 2.4 times more likely to develop symptoms of eating disorders, especially if they perceive poor social support, have nagging sport injuries, and are dissatisfied with the ending of their sport career. Lastly, Buckley and colleagues (2019) found that these issues stemmed from the longstanding influence of sports culture that emphasized physical appearance and capabilities without preparing athletes for changes in these areas upon transitioning out of sport. As a result, former athletes developed a “complex relationship with food and body” (Buckley et al., 2019, p. 2).

Another bodily relationship for athletes as they transition is with the physical pain from sport that remains despite no longer playing competitively. Such physical pain and discomfort are particularly common for athletes who are forced to transition due to catastrophic and career-ending injuries (Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). Physical pain and injuries lead to longer transitions out of sport, while also adversely influencing athletes’ states of health (i.e., negative mental and physical health) and psychosocial competence (i.e., negative self-attitudes, world attitudes, and behavioral attributes).

The aforementioned scholarship revealed athletes’ transition hardships related to food and body can be further exacerbated without appropriate support. Unfortunately, transition programming, when offered by NCAA members, does not often address such issues. Rather, the most common topics discussed center around career planning, psychological health, educational planning, athletic identity, and financial planning (Kiefer et al., 2023). While psychological health and athletic identity are related to the athletes’ bodily relationships, there is clearly a need for more transition programming in other important athlete transition areas (Kiefer et al., 2023).
Support Via Social Media

Social media platforms are a growing source for support among a host of different populations, including college students (Brougham, 2021; Drouin et al., 2018; Manago et al., 2012). For example, Drouin and colleagues (2018) surveyed college students on their preferred support outlets in times of distress. Students experiencing depression and/or anxiety expressed that they felt more comfortable turning to similar peer communities and social media rather than parents or mental health professionals for support. In another study, Manago et al. (2012) explored college students’ social media network size and perceptions of social support, finding that social media sites helped participants form and maintain relationships. Furthermore, students with larger social media networks noted higher levels of life satisfaction and higher perceptions of support from their network (Manago et al., 2012).

Thus, social media, especially outlets fostering community and relationships for students in similar situations, is likely appealing to students (Drouin et al., 2018; Manago et al., 2012). Social media also has grown as a support outlet in college athletics, particularly with TikTok (Leitner, 2023). However, research has demonstrated that social media usage may lead to negative outcomes for some athletes who engage with such platforms frequently. For example, Brougham (2021) examined almost 100 athletes’ use of social media and its impacts on their mental health. Overall, results did not indicate a significant negative influence of most social media platforms on athletes’ mental health. Still, the use of Facebook and self-esteem did have a negative correlation, and for male athletes, Instagram and Snapchat were negatively correlated with depression and anxiety (Brougham, 2021). Interestingly, however, results highlighted that athletes’ TikTok usage and self-esteem had a positive relationship.

In this digital age, comments, likes, favorites, and reposts can be used negatively to berate an athlete or even harass them; however, they also can be used to communicate support, unity, and validation for individuals or ideas (Harry, 2021b). Such actions also are ways for current or former athletes to connect with other athletes, represent themselves and/or their brands, and receive and give informational and emotional support. Smith and Hardin (2018) noted that former athletes who found it difficult to transition felt a sense of responsibility to help other athletes struggling to transition out of sport. Thus, commenting and engaging with other athlete TikTok users may result in a potentially impactful, but under-examined, community for athletes transitioning out of sport participation (Stokowski et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Former athletes’ perceptions of transitioning out of athletics were examined using Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory. Transition Theory is a framework focused on where and how an individual develops, rather than what they develop (Goodman et al., 2006). Schlossberg’s (1981) theory has five key areas: (1) the transition itself, (2) perception of the transition, (3) characteristics of the transition environment, (4) individual characteristics, and (5) adaptation to the transition. Given the breadth of sport management literature using Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory (Lally, 2007; Harry & Weight, 2021; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019; Wylleman et al., 2004), our manuscript focuses on components three and four as they emerged as particularly significant in understanding this sample of athletes’ move out of sports.

First, transitions are anticipated or unanticipated events or non-events (Goodman et al., 2006). Anticipated transitions are those that are predictable or scheduled, such as an athlete graduating college, while unanticipated transitions are not predictable or scheduled, such as an athlete having a career ending injury. Non-events are transitions that are expected to occur but do not, such as an athlete anticipating being drafted by a professional team but failing to make a roster.

The second component to Transition Theory is an athlete’s perception of that transition (Schlossberg, 1981). For college athletes, the transition out of sport often is externally caused, on-time but sudden, and permanent (Harry & Weight, 2021; Navarro, 2015; Park et al., 2013; Stokowski et al., 2019). Additionally, previous research examining athletes exiting sport generally notes this population has a negative affect and usually sees exiting sport as a loss of an important
role and identity (Harry & Weight, 2021; Knights et al., 2016; Lally, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019; Weight et al., 2020).

Third, Schlossberg (1981) described the transition environment. This environment includes the physical setting and institutional supports like programming for athletes experiencing the end of their college careers. Schlossberg (1981) noted institutional supports could be formal or informal “agencies to which an individual can turn to for help” (p. 11). Generally, institutional support for athletes comes from the school or athletics department. In a sport context, institutional support is dependent on providing those in transition with access to meaningful services like counseling, academic advising, or athlete development workshops (Navarro, 2015; Smith & Hardin, 2018). However, institutional support for transition often is lacking or reactive rather than proactively implemented (Fuller, 2014; Kiefer et al., 2023; Park et al., 2013). In fact, across the entire NCAA less than 50% of athletics departments have established retirement programming for athletes moving out of sport (Kiefer et al., 2023). When such programming is offered, it is significantly more common at institutions with more financial and personnel resources (e.g., Division I) compared to institutions with fewer financial and personnel resources (e.g., Divisions II and III; Kiefer et al., 2023).

Another vital component to the transition environment is the internal support system (Cummins & O’Boyle, 2015; Park et al., 2013; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). Internal support systems are intimate relationships with significant others, familial support, and friend and teammate networks (Park et al., 2013; Weight et al., 2020). Indeed, internal support systems are critical in providing informational and emotional support to create a foundation for athletes’ healthy coping mechanisms during and after their transition (Harry & Weight, 2021; Miller & Buttell, 2018). Informational support involves offering information about available resources, opportunities, and networks (Park et al., 2013). Informational support is demonstrated when individuals (i.e., coaches, teammates, guardians) share information that was beneficial for them in the hopes that it will help someone experiencing a similar situation (Harry & Weight, 2021; Park et al., 2013; Schlossberg, 2005).

On the other hand, emotional support is encouragement and companionship (Hansen et al., 2019; Harry & Weight, 2021; Park et al., 2013). To receive emotional support, it may be particularly important for athletes to connect with other athletes going through transitions as this shared experience builds empathy. As Schlossberg (2005) stated, “Knowing that others are experiencing transitions like one’s own provides a kind of emotional support” (p.178).

In fact, Fuller (2014) found many athletes are afraid to seek informational or emotional support, as they perceived others could not relate to their sport loss and feared being seen as weak. However, had the athletes known of peers going through similar transitions, this opportunity for informational and emotional support could have eased their transition out of athletics (Fuller, 2014). Similarly, in examining both informational and emotional support, Rohrs-Cordes and Paule-Koba, (2018) interviewed athletes about a hypothetical online support program for individuals who experienced an unanticipated transition out of sport due to injury. Athletes stated they did not know of other athletes who had suffered a career-ending injury. So, they expressed that talking with others who had successfully navigated that situation or were in the process of doing so would have been helpful. Thus, enhanced institutional support could begin simply by introducing athletes in transition to one another. Social media outlets, like TikTok, can offer athletes an expressive opportunity to connect with others and discuss transitioning.

The fourth component to Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory consists of the eight characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition. These qualities are previous experiences with a similar transition, class, race and ethnicity, age, sex and sexual identity, values orientation (i.e., forms of meaning-making), state of health, and psychosocial competence. It is the latter two individual characteristics concerning state of health and psychosocial competence that are examined further in this study.

State of health concerns physical health, and often physical health decline, of the person experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Previous research has noted athletes’ health struggles while transitioning (Miller & Buttell, 2018). For example, Miller and Buttell (2018) completed a literature review on Division I athletes’ transitions out of sport finding athletes experience increased rates of not only physical pain, but also high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality when their time competing ended. Importantly, Schlossberg (1981) did not deeply
address mental health as a component to an individual’s state of health while transitioning; however, mental health is included as a key component to state of health in this study.

Characteristics of psychosocial competence include three areas: self-attitude, world attitudes, and behavioral attributes. Self-attitudes include perceiving an internal locus of control, and fostering a sense of self-responsibility (Schlossberg, 1981). World attitudes involve an individual constructing optimism and trust to have constructive interaction with the world around them. Finally, behavioral attributes involve an active coping orientation, realistic goal setting, and learning from success and failures (Schlossberg, 1981). Previous scholars note that this psychosocial competence undergirds (1) how individuals perceive and cope with their sport exit and (2) how individuals foster personal resiliency when it comes to life transitions (Cummins & O’Boyle, 2015; Miller & Buttell, 2018). However, Schlossberg’s (1981) theory focused on psychosocial competence, rather than psychosocial incompetence, during a transition, and this study addresses this latter notion as not all athletes competently navigate transitions (Fuller, 2014; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019).

The last component to Schlossberg’s (1981) theory is adaptation or how one moves through the transition and reorganizes their thoughts and actions (Goodman et al., 2006). During an adaptive phase, “an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7). Adaptation depends on how different the pre- and post-transition environments are from one another and one’s resources to adjust to and through the transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Generally, transition adaptation involves modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the transition, and managing stress post-transition. Thus, adaptation aligns with behavioral attributes and how an athlete copes with and through their transition out of sport.

Method

This study investigated one viral TikTok video and subsequent comments (n = 869) to enhance the sport management field’s understanding about college athletes’ perceptions of their transition out of sport. With this in mind, the following research question was answered: How do former college athletes use TikTok to share experiences with transitioning out of athletics?

Data Collection

While going “viral” is hard to define, it is generally categorized based on two characteristics: (1) volume and widespread diffusion and (2) unusual spike in diffusion (Han et al., 2020). Virality of content, such as videos, signal that the topic is of interest to a significant number or group of people (Han et al., 2020). Similarly, previous research also has noted the importance of the interaction of the content (TikTok video) and the creator (Heather) and how this interplay, such as the creator responding about the content to other users/comments, increases potential virality of the social media content. With this in mind, in one day, Heather’s TikTok had 869 comments. Our study delimited the commentary collection and analysis to this one viral day. Comments were collected via a social media “scraping” service called exportcomments.com.

Importantly, commenters who described being a current college athlete, former high school athlete, or participant in another physical activity that was not college athletics were not included in this study, as the focus of this work was to examine the use of TikTok as a community for former college athletes to express their experiences with transitioning out of sport participation. Additionally, there is potential for sampling and confirmation bias among the users (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Former college athletes who did struggle with their transition out of sport would be more likely to comment on Heather’s post compared to a former athlete who felt they had an easier transition out of sport.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to discover trends and patterns in the comments from users on Heather’s TikTok video (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). Thematic analysis is used to systematically organize and uncover patterns of meaning, or themes, within a dataset (Braun &
Clarke, 2021). With this process it is possible to find shared sense making and collective experiences across a dataset. Thus, thematic analysis can help uncover the meaning making and cross-experiences of former athletes who have transitioned out of sport who engaged with this TikTok video. Similarly, researchers examining the intersection of social media and intercollegiate athletics have used thematic analysis and/or cultivated themes from social media commentary, adding further credibility to this method (Harry, 2021b; Roussin et al., 2022; Sanderson & Browning, 2013).

The thematic analysis process we used in our study was deductive based on Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory. A deductive process is beneficial as it works to “harmonize” the theoretical foundation and research questions (Saldana, 2021, p. 65). Still, our analysis was partially inductive as we did not have preconceived notions about which components of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory would come through in the TikTok comments. A coupling of deductive and inductive analysis bolsters the internal validity of the study (Miles et al., 2020).

To begin, we used process and emotion coding as our first cycle coding methods (Saldana, 2021). Process coding assists in describing action in the data and how an individual perceives a situation. Thus, this coding style was particularly beneficial in understanding how commenters described their transition environment and support or lack of support (Schlossberg, 1981). Saldana (2021) posited that process coding uncovers how actions are connected to time and change, which also are key factors influencing athletes’ perceptions of the transition environment and themselves as pre-, during, and post-transition (Park et al., 2013). For example, athletes’ comments discussing content related to teammates and significant others were coded for internal support systems, while comments about coaches and programming (or lack thereof) pertained to institutional supports.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated, “One can’t separate emotion from action; they are part of the same flow of events, one leading into the other” (p. 7). Thus, emotion is connected to action—or processes—making emotion coding an appropriate additional method for understanding the transition experiences of former college athletes. Emotion coding labels and describes the emotions and feelings experienced by participants, or in this case, commenters, on the TikTok video. Emotions are tied to distinct thoughts, biological states, and actions (Goleman, 1995), which connects this form of coding to Schlossberg’s (1981) individual characteristic components of transitioning, including those at the heart of this study: state of health and psychosocial competence. For example, comments about physical pain and depression were coded for negative states of health, while instances of overcoming adversity and optimism about next steps were coded for positive psychosocial competence. Furthermore, emotion coding is especially helpful in examining intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences and actions, which commenters conveyed as they described their transition environment and their use of TikTok for community. This aligns with the internal support systems from transition theory and the significance of emotional and informational support through the transition itself (Park et al., 2013; Schlossberg, 1981).

During the analysis we first coded one-third of the comments separately to create our individualized codebooks (Saldana, 2021). Next, we met to discuss the first one-third of comments regarding the codes we created and where similarities and differences emerged in our codes and meaning making of the comments (Miles et al., 2020). Once we came to an agreement on the codes established, we coded the remaining two-thirds of the comments together and discussed any discrepancies throughout this stage until consensus was reached (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Ultimately, this strategy helped strengthen our interrater reliability (Miles et al., 2020). Additionally, we individually memoed about this process and the findings as they emerged, which led to rich discussions about the users’ commentary, particularly concerning their ways of processing the transition out of sport and their emotions (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

One key topic for discussion that emerged via memoing was commenters’ use of emojis and potential meanings behind these emojis. Emoji usage is a growing area of study across a host of research fields, particularly concerning social media communication (Bai et al., 2019), an area this research falls into. Emojis are graphic symbols that represent facial expressions along with concepts and ideas, and thus, are both linguistic and emotional (Petra et al., 2015). With 35% (n = 303) of the comments using text and emojis (most commonly hearts, empathy face, and laughing-crying face), we felt it necessary to examine scholarship on emoji usage and meaning. To determine the meaning behind emojis, we used Emojipedia.com, which has been referenced and used by other scholars exploring the definitions and purposes behind individuals’ usage of emojis.
across communication platforms such as Twitter and Instagram (Fernández-Gavilanes et al., 2018; Petra et al., 2015). As with previous literature, the emoji usage aligned the sentiments in the comments (Petra et al., 2015).

The above first cycle coding methods transitioned us into the broader process of theming the data or attaching outcomes and higher-level meanings to the codes (Miles et al., 2020). Our themes were “directly observable in the information” we collected and, as with the codes, tied explicitly to Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory (Saldaña, 2021, p. 267). The major themes from the TikTok users’ commentary were a significant need for increased institutional support for improving athletes’ transition environment and enhancing athletes’ individual characteristics.

Findings and Discussion

This study explored how former college athletes used TikTok to share their transition experience. Specifically, 61% of comments expressed support for Heather’s post, highlighting the significance of athletes’ struggles with the transition out of sport. Examples of former athletes agreeing with Heather included statements like: “THIS!!! like I know HOW to work out, I just can’t. it still feels like punishment,” and “I thought I would get over this SAME exact feeling, but I’m 41 and still struggle!”

Former athletes in this sample predominantly used the social media platform to discuss their transition environments, mainly providing internal, emotional, and informational support, and to express a lack of institutional support. Additionally, TikTok served as an outlet for former athletes to share struggles with negative self-attitudes resulting in poor states of physical and mental health (Schlossberg, 1981). However, other subcomponents to Transition Theory also came through in users’ commentary.

Table 1

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<th>Presence of Components to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory</th>
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<td>Transition Component</td>
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<td>Characteristics of Transition Environment</td>
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<td>Internal Emotional Support</td>
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<td>Internal Informational Support</td>
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<td>Lack of Institutional Support</td>
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<td>Characteristics of the Individual</td>
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<td>Negative Physical State of Health</td>
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Transition Environment

Emotional support includes encouragement and companionship (Harry & Weight, 2021; Park et al., 2013). In responding to another user, one former athlete offered encouragement: “Wow, [you're] in law school!! It’s amazing to see student athletes getting post grad degrees! I’m getting
a phd in psych! We got this though, keep pushin.’” Similarly, two expressed feelings of encouragement they experienced after watching the video. The first user stated: “This made me want to burst into tears. Thank you for validating the pain I’ve felt for so many years & for helping me feel like I’m not alone,” while the second offered, “I have literally searched so long for someone to put this into words. Leaving softball in college had me so lost mentally and now physically.” Regarding companionship, many users noted that they were going to use this space as a “community” to “cheer each other on” and “be friends,” highlighting a unique opportunity for building an emotional support network through social media platforms like TikTok. Others showed companionship through following Heather and other commenters: “Omg I’m so happy to see a group of people who feel the same way I do! Immediate follow!” and, “yes, exactly!! I feel so unmotivated. thank you for making me feel normal. following you!” Former athletes’ discussion of TikTok community and companionship align with previous research on social media’s role in creating and maintaining networks, particularly for individuals working through challenging times (Drouin et al., 2018; Manago et al., 2012).

The platform also gave former athletes the chance to give informational support, which athletes in previous transition studies noted as potentially beneficial for navigating life after sport (Fuller, 2014; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). Information about resources, networks, and opportunities encompasses informational support (Park et al., 2013). Thirteen percent of comments offered informational support for former athletes struggling with their transition out of competition. The most common outlets were other forms of competitive exercise like CrossFit (i.e., “Y’all……CROSSFIT, trust me,” and, “I urge all of you to try CrossFit! It’s a healthy type of competitive feel that pushes you and you’ll be told what to do every day”), Orange Theory Fitness (i.e., “Orangetheory was the 1st thing I found that actually helped the transition to enjoy working out again”), and Peloton (i.e., “Guys. Peloton. That’s where it’s at. Ex college softball player here. I love to work out again. I have the tread. Trust me. They are everything”).

Other users expressed the importance of other outlets like arranging a 5k and telling friends and others so that you are accountable to finish, which would make it “like a contract.” Another user added that they became involved in martial arts and “it changed [their] perspective. Athletes never retire.” Finally, a handful of users offered titles of books, TEDtalk videos, and commented about other accounts that could be helpful for former athletes during this stressful transition.

In line with previous transition literature (Cummins & O’Boyle, 2015; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018), athletes expressed a desire for more emotional informational support and noted that TikTok was a helpful outlet for them when it came to finding other former athletes experiencing similar situations. Thus, TikTok provided social networks that bolstered their support. Furthermore, the companionship and relatability expressed in athletes’ comments intersects with Brougham’s (2021) study noting a positive correlation between athletes’ TikTok usages and self-esteem as athletes could gain confidence knowing they are “in this together” as many commenters stated. Such social media companionship has been found to foster more optimistic world views among non-athlete college students (Drouin et al., 2018; Manago et al., 2012); thus, similar findings also are likely to emerge with college athletes. Still, former athletes were missing institutional support.

Lack of Institutional Support

A final reflection in the commentary about the transition environment was the lack of institutional support/resources (n = 63, 7%). While only 7% of comments were categorized here, previous research on sport social media commentary has included such percentages (Coche, 2017; Harry, 2021b). Indeed, qualitative scholars have noted that just because a finding is less common, does not mean it is not significant or valuable to study or a participant’s experience (Miles et al., 2020; Rossman & Rallis, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Similarly, we also felt it appropriate to include smaller findings pertaining to Schlossberg’s (1981) theory as they align with or extend previous research (Fuller, 2014; Hansen et al., 2019; Harry & Weight, 2021; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). Many commenters stated something to the effect of “this is the part no one talks about or prepares you for… never felt so lost” or “all the preparation in the world to go into competition, but zero preparation for life after sports. felt this.” When requesting support from her coaches as she transitioned out of volleyball, one former athlete described her experience:
Once I got back home I asked my coach for help and she straight up said no… I even asked her to make me workouts similar to our volleyball ones and her exact words were ‘that won’t help you at home.’

First, this volleyball player’s reflection supports previous studies noting the importance of the coach, a key player in institutional support, in helping athletes transition out of sport (Harry & Weight, 2021). Second, the athlete’s statement also aligns with some of the informational support comments noting that certain gyms will do everything for the participants and “just tell you what to do.” This sentiment and desire was reflected across a host of comments from former athletes, which also indicates autonomy was not a fostered skill in their athletics programs (Hatteberg, 2018). For example, one athlete echoed: “as an athlete we also never HAD to learn how to create the workouts…they were made specifically for us. idk how to create a workout.” Another asked: “OMG THIS!!! I know what to do in theory, but where is my coach and my lift partner??!!”

Still, a few former athletes offered ideas on how to improve the transition process, with their suggestions often aligning with previous scholarship on how athletics departments can better support athletes (Harry, 2021a; Navarro, 2015; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). For example, one user provided: “There needs to be a bridge program and counseling for college athletes when our career is over. Like what else am I good at??” Statements about the lack of institutional support also are interconnected with former athletes’ individual characteristics.

**Individual Characteristics**

Schlossberg (1981) noted eight individual characteristic components, two of which are the focus of this study: state of health and psychosocial competence. State of health has four subparts including positive and negative physical health and positive and negative mental health. Psychosocial competence is comprised of six subparts including positive and negative self-attitudes, positive and negative world attitudes, and positive and negative behavioral attributes.

**State of Health**

Ten and nine percent of comments reflected negative states of physical and mental health, respectively. Regarding negative physical health, many former athletes expressed a need/desire to lose weight but found it hard to accomplish this goal. Such perceptions and issues with physical health post-college are supported by previous studies (Buckley et al., 2019; Papathomas et al., 2018). One commenter stated: “I’ve been struggling so bad, law school stress makes it even harder and I’m just stuck. I’m considering weight loss surgery.” Another former athlete described a conversation they had with their partner, “Was just telling my husband (also retired college athlete) that we may not get back down to that size again,” while a third stated, “I weigh SOO much now. I feel gross.”

Others who described negative physical states of health expressed feelings of pain and discomfort from previous injuries from competition (Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). For example, one user stated: “I swear my body was abused playing a D1 sport. I get frustrated not being as fit as I once was. But I physically can’t do it anymore w/o being in pain.” Another added: “I slipped a disc right before my senior season and rushed the recovery and now it hurts every day.”

Athletes reflecting on negative states of mental health generally expressed feeling unempowered, lacking motivation, or experiencing mental health issues, especially with identity (Lally, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019 Wylleman et al., 2004). A former athlete noted that this video resonated with them and continued that they have been trying for years to “get back to loving myself.” Others noted similar issues with feeling shame and insecurity when it comes to the gym. Regarding identity, one user described their “genuine mental health struggle that has come along with having to relearn [their] entire existence as a person while trying to fill the void” sport left behind. Building off this struggle, another user commented: “When we leave we all experience a loss. That constant high is gone! Depression sets in. You chase the high!!!!”

Some comments also reflected both negative mental and physical states of health. A former volleyball player expressed that she struggled with gaining weight and that her “relationship with food is horrible. The amount of guilt I feel is ‘eating me alive.’” Another former track and field
athlete offered: “I’ve had an awful relationship with food and the gym. If I’m not doing something extreme like training for marathons I have no self-worth.”

While less common, a few athletes did describe positive states of mental (5%) and physical (2%) health, findings that also are less pervasive in the athlete transition literature (Harry & Weight, 2021; Stokowski et al., 2019). Regarding positive mental health, two former athletes offered that the process got easier for them with time. One noted that this used to be them, but “it gets better. Try everything out until you find something you genuinely like doing for exercise,” while another reflected, “your relationship with exercise comes and goes, especially after doing it every day without thought for years. Fall in love with the process!!!” A few others noted the transition “wasn’t that bad,” with a former soccer athlete offering a contradictory stance: “I just finished playing soccer in college and I now all of a sudden I like my life.”

Positive physical states of health was the least common code across the comments, but one athlete expressed support for CrossFit and noted learning how to make programs and learning nutritional information helped them through the transition process. Additionally, some users offered sentiments of positive mental and physical health. For example, a handful of athletes did express that the transition was hard, but that they knew their body and mind “needed a break” from the intensity of college competition. Similarly, others noted that the transition to being mentally and physically healthy after leaving sport was a process, but a good one: “I stopped playing 6 years ago and I’m just now getting back to the gym consistently and loving it. It’s been a long journey but worth it.” This athlete’s comment demonstrates how a growth mindset—as shown not only through positive states of health, but also through positive world attitudes and behavioral attributes—is beneficial for successfully navigating difficult transitions, which complements previous scholarship using Schlossberg’s transition theory to explore athletes’ movement out of sport (Knights et al., 2016; Smith & Hardin, 2020). So, a growth mindset also can be appreciated as a component of healthy psychosocial competence (Schlossberg, 1981).

Psychosocial Competence

Simply put, psychosocial competence is an individual’s ability to cope with situations – good and bad – in everyday life (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg (1981) offered three categories of psychosocial competence (self-attitudes, world attitudes, and behavioral attributes), which we have further broken down based on research noting athletes’ struggles with transitions, to also reflect forms of psychosocial incompetence. Former college athletes expressed some positive (3%), but more negative (11%), self-attitudes in their responses to Heather’s TikTok video. Self-attitudes include individuals’ opinions of themselves along with their locus of control and sense of responsibility to overcome adversity (Schlossberg, 1981). One athlete offered an example of a positive self-attitude reflecting an internal locus of control and sense of responsibility: “It’s hard but it can be done. Take your time to find the solution that works best for you.” Similarly, another former athlete added: “GIRL YESSS!! I had been there in that situation for two years and last year I decided I had to get up and stop feeling sorry for myself. You got this!” In coupling positive self-attitudes with emotional support, one user stated: “It gets better!! You have so much more to you than your sport you just haven’t found it yet! Focus on you and what makes you happy and what you LOVE!”

However, most athletes expressed a mentality of negative self-attitudes, which also aligns with the findings for athletes’ more negative states of mental health (Harry & Weight, 2021). Thus, a unique connection emerged in our findings concerning negative self-attitudes and negative states of mental health. This mentality consists of an external locus of control, lacking responsibility, and low opinions of oneself. Many former athletes described sentiments like: “Nothing motivates me. I count every calorie and I can’t find the motivation to leave my house.” Others commented “I hate my body” or “I hate myself.” In a harsher tone, a former volleyball athlete stated: “It’s amazing how f*cked I am.”

World attitudes, defined as optimistic, hopeful, and trusting interactions with the surrounding environment and others (Schlossberg, 1981), came through less frequently. And, surprisingly, despite the more negative states of health and negative self-attitudes, there was a slight preference toward more positive worldview statements from users. In highlighting the importance of trusting the process, many users offered statements about knowing things would work out for them. For
example, one former athlete stated, “I started to just hope and trust that things would work out, and when I did that, the transition wasn’t so bad.” Another former athlete, coupling self-attitudes and world attitudes, offered, “For me it was important to learn to trust myself since I didn’t get to do that in college and also trust that the universe would work in ways that were best for me. You got this girl!!!” With an optimistic outlook, two former athletes said they were “convinced that the best is yet to come!”

Athletes’ more negative world attitudes reflected more pessimistic perspectives of their future based on struggling with the transition. In aligning this lens with negative states of mental health and negative self-attitudes athletes with negative world attitudes continued to reflect on how “lost” they still were and how this pain they “endure and continue to endure is exhausting.” Similarly, another user elaborated: “My life and world will just never be the same. Ur life and world are your sport, and then, they’re just not. Like what’s next for my life.. idk.” These negative statements support previous studies addressing athletes’ role and identity losses when they transition out of elite competition (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013).

The final component of psychosocial competence is behavioral attitudes consisting of coping orientations, goals, and learning from failures and successes. This sample had a slight lean toward positive behavioral attribute statements (4%) compared to negative behavioral attribute statements (3%). A former athlete noted that she would not be able to fill the hole leaving college athletics left her with: “No matter what you try to fill the void with, it’s still there. and even though my experience was traumatic, it was still a part of me.” This quote demonstrates a negative world attitude, but a more positive behavioral attribute based on accepting the void/transition and learning from the experience. Another athlete expressed how she was taking action to change this transition struggle for other athletes: “This is why I am studying to become a wellness coach for retired/ex-collegiate athletes to make sure there is a solution to break the cycle!” Similarly, another athlete reflected on the significance of goals: “Being an ex-athlete is what drove my fitness journey. Set goals for yourself, not just physical but strength goals. You will fall in love with it.” Former athletes with negative behavioral attributes noted being unable to cope with the transition and a lack of goal setting. For example, one athlete responded, “literally the struggle. 5 years out and I’m still not sure how to cope,” while another offered, “No matter what goal I set for myself, it all feels unattainable because I just can’t do it anymore…”

Overall, the findings suggest former college athletes generally struggle with their individual characteristics navigating the transition process. However, the findings also suggest that this sample of athletes saw TikTok as a potential resource for maneuvering through a transition. Specifically, TikTok appeared to offer these athletes internal emotional support through solidarity in commentary about mental and physical health struggles with transitions. Former athletes’ responses also indicated that after finding out about these experiential connections with peers that they could move toward healthier psychosocial competencies in their self- and world-attitudes and behavioral attributes (Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Schlossberg, 1981).

First, these findings bolster the use and extension of Schlossberg’s (1981) Transition Theory and the significance of athletes’ environment and individual characteristics in their transition out of sport. Regarding the environment, our study signals the importance of social media as a component to athletes’ transition environment, as it can help build communities of emotional and informational support. Our findings also demonstrate that social media is potentially even more significant for athletes’ successful transitions given this sample’s commentary about the dearth of institutional support. For individual characteristics, our study further emphasizes the role of health in transitions and draws connections between mental health and psychosocial competence (or incompetence). These areas were not discussed at length by Schlossberg in 1981. Second, our findings build upon previous scholarship, such as the work of Rohrs-Cordes and Paule-Koba (2018), who found athletes with career-ending injuries wanted to engage with other athletes who went through or were going through similar transitions. In this study, TikTok offered a platform and avenue of support to former athletes in their transition out of sport.

Discussion

Based on our findings and the previous transition literature, there is a need for more proactive support for athletes (Hansen et al., 2019; Harry & Weight, 2021). Heather’s video expressed her
own struggles with her body, food, and the gym, which could be the outcomes of poor institutional support. And while only 7% of former athletes’ comments explicitly noted a lack of institutional support, 61% of the comments were statements of agreement with the struggles Heather brought to light in her TikTok video. This agreement could be seen as former athletes aligning themselves with Heather and implicitly expressing a desire for more support.

Athletics departments can couple social media and proactive support for athletes while potentially combatting some of the criticisms from scholars who argue many athletes leave college without having developed the autonomy, internal loci of control, or a sense of responsibility necessary for healthy transitions and futures (Harry, 2021a; Hatteberg, 2018). With this in mind, our main recommendation for NCAA athletic departments is to establish the position of an Athlete Transition Director (ATD) to ensure graduating athletes transition healthfully into their lives after sport.

There is a clear need for this position, as less than 50% of NCAA members have formal sport retirement programming for athletes (Kiefer et al., 2023). Similarly, a handful of athletes in the sample even reflected on how helpful more bridge programming for life after sport would have been for their transition process. We expand on this novel support position by exploring key ways the ATD can improve the transition environment and enhance individuals’ characteristics as athletes approach their sport exit.

**Athlete Transition Director**

The proposed ATD would join staff located in athlete development or support related units and work closely with physical and mental health coaches and directors (i.e., strength coaches, athletic trainers, sport psychologists, etc.). With this, the ATD is tasked with gathering informational and emotional support from other athletics leaders to ultimately enhance institutional support for athletes. Still, the ATD would need to be well-versed in physical and mental health areas, offer strong communication and collaboration skills, and be able to foster relationships across the various athletic department units and with the athletes they are supporting. Thus, it is recommended that the ATD have a graduate degree in a related area (i.e., sport or exercise psychology, sport management, counseling, etc.) from which they can build the foundation of the program.

Because previous scholarship has encouraged more proactive strategies in preparing athletes for life after sport (Cummins & O’Boyle, 2015; Hansen et al., 2019; Navarro, 2015; Stokowski et al., 2019), the ATD would begin working with athletes in their junior years and continue working with them through their senior years. This timeline is appropriate given that this period is when athletes generally also start to consider next steps after athletics and form stronger behavioral attributes like coping strategies and goal setting (Navarro, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981). Graduate athletes would have the option to enroll in the ATD’s program.

**Athlete Transition Programming**

Based on the narratives in the TikTok comments, the focus of the ATD’s program centers on improving the transition environment and individuals’ characteristics for navigating the transition out of sport (Schlossberg, 1981). Such areas are critical, as previous research has shown that even when athletic departments do have sport retirement or transition programming, they fail to cover “many essential retirement topics, such as body image, nutrition, athletic identity, and transferable skills” (Hansen et al., 2019, p. 79).

Helping athletes understand and manage their transition environment is key to ensuring a more positive and healthy transition after their college athletics careers come to an end. Internal support is so critical that Schlossberg (1981) stated it is “important — even essential — to successful adaptation” (p. 10). However, one cannot separate the transition environment from the individual experiencing the transition. Thus, the transition environment and individual characteristics are coupled here to provide example programming for athletes retiring from college sports.

The two individual characteristics emerging as most seminal to the former athletes in this study were positive and negative physical and mental states of health and psychosocial
competence and incompetence. The majority of TikTok comments from former athletes indicated negative physical and mental states of health, along with psychosocial incompetence. Thus, a primary focus of the ATD should be promoting positive states of health and competence through the transition programming.

Many athletes experience negative states of physical and mental health after retiring from athletics (Stokowski et al., 2019; Weight et al., 2020). In this sample, negative experiences with physical health generally concerned a need or want to lose weight and pain or irritation from sport-related injuries. Regarding negative mental health, athletes commented about lacking autonomy and motivation and attempts with managing mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Both negative physical and mental health states largely centered on issues navigating the gym, changes in diet, and grieving a loss of a former physical aesthetic. Such findings align with previous studies noting maladaptive behaviors with the gym and food during an athlete’s transition into retirement (Buckley et al., 2019; Paphatma et al., 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Thus, there is a growing need for athletics departments to address this potentially dysfunctional relationship athletes can develop with the gym and eating patterns during their transition out of athletics (Buckley et al., 2019; Kiefer et al., 2023).

One avenue to address poor self-attitudes and behavioral attributes regarding food and the gym is through the ATD’s programming. Given the sensitive nature of exercise and eating patterns, a suggested best practice is for ATD to be well-versed in handling such situations and enlist the assistance of a counselor and/or sport psychologist. Working with appropriate counselors and health specialists, the program could provide training and education on what to do if an athlete encounters the aforementioned negative thoughts and feelings and who to potentially reach out to in the future if these issues arise (i.e., therapist, counselor, etc.). Similarly, the ATD, in conjunction with the athletics department’s nutritional or strength/conditioning teams, could offer eating plans, back-to-the-gym goals, recipes, and other resources. Informational support resources could be provided by the sport psychologist or counselor and shared both in-person and via social media (i.e., TikTok). For example, in-person events could be more hands-on with active participation from athletes such as going to their team’s gym and learning how to design a training program, while online options could be short clips of the in-person session or gym instructions for athletes who could save the ideas for later. Additionally, for athletes who want to remain more private with their physical and mental health concerns with the gym and/or food, sharing this information to social media is helpful. For example, athletes could be given the opportunity to tune into live streaming events or those wishing for more engagement could tune into online discussions with athletic administrators or other athletes transitioning. While social media privacy is afforded in the former scenario and may be welcomed by some athletes (Manago et al., 2012), the latter option further builds athletes’ communities, which previous scholarship posits is desired by athletes as a way to gain informational and, particularly, emotional support (Brougham, 2021; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). These offerings are pivotal in giving athletes opportunities to develop healthier physical and mental health coping mechanisms.

With athletes in this sample requesting more support, but also needing autonomy, giving the athletes this informational support for them to enact on their own could be helpful in cultivating healthier and positive psychosocial competence. Additionally, offering this information is transparent and indicates that the athletics department understands that such struggles can – and often do – happen upon transitioning (Buckley et al., 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Thus, being more up front with support to build athletes’ resilience through their individual characteristics is key to demonstrating care toward athletes, something athletic departments have been heavily critiqued on when it comes to athlete development (Hatteberg, 2018).

With this in mind, ATDs could consider ways to use social media – like TikTok – to create more communities for athletes to join pre-, during, and post-transition. Indeed, by engaging in proactive strategies that prepare athletes in the pre-transition stage, they are more likely to successfully manage and maneuver through the during and post-transition stages as they move out of sport. In this way, transitioning programming enhances institutional support, while also working to develop athletes’ positive physical and mental health states. Further, given the rise in athletes’ use of social media (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Leitner, 2023), such content may be more accessible and attractive to this population, making the information more likely to be used. Importantly, the ATD
would control the accounts to ensure the content is relevant and stop inappropriate behavior from users should issues arise.

With this in mind, a few athletes in this sample, when providing their own forms of informational support, made some suggestions that were relatively problematic. Some examples included telling others to engage in activities such as signing up for races that were like a “contract,” or going to CrossFit or OrangeTheory where “you are told what to do every day.” Such ideas are short-term fixes to chronic issues related to former athletes’ lack of autonomy from a college period of intense surveillance where they were consistently told what and how to do things, rather than provided opportunities to build self-reliance and motivation (Hatteberg, 2018). Thus, these ideas enable athletes’ reliance on others rather than promoting positive self-attitudes and behaviors that center an internal locus of control and self-responsibility (Schlossberg, 1981). Arguably, these ideas would lead athletes to be more psychosocially incompetent and work against positive self-attitudes, world attitudes, and behavioral attributes. Cultivating competence in these areas is significant, as this sample of former athletes expressed fairly negative psychosocial competence levels as they noted they were constantly controlled and told what to do by coaches and trainers, leading to confusion when they left college and had to figure out the gym and food choices on their own. Thus, continuing to engage in similar environments as they transition could actually do more long-term damage than growth as athletes move further away from sport participation but still struggle with having their own locus of control, expressing optimism, or failing to set goals or cope appropriately with adversity (Cummins & O’Boyle, 2015; Miller & Buttell, 2018).

Similarly, many of the suggestions by former athletes were economically exclusionary and assumed former athletes had the resources to enroll in expensive fitness classes as a coping outlet. Such a perspective is problematic as almost 60% of athletes graduate or leave college with debt (Gough, 2020). With the ATD’s control over the programming and related social media, similar ideas that might not actually be beneficial for athletes’ transitory development and those that are not inclusive could be mitigated via more appropriate and research-supported resources.

Still, a social media outlet like TikTok is significant as it helps athletes grow their network of peers experiencing similar transition anxieties, which further assists them in navigating leaving college sport more smoothly (Harry & Weight, 2021; Miller & Buttell, 2018; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). The ATD and their transition programming may also introduce athletes to administrators’ networks, which further help athletes as they transition into new activities and careers after sports. This network provides enhanced emotional support and potentially informational support and gives athletes an outlet that they do not have to search for – or stumble upon – unlike the athletes in this sample, many of which noted going years without learning of other athletes’ burdens with transitions. These connections are important for positive states of mental health, too (Park et al., 2023; Stokowski et al., 2019). Furthermore, support groups that meet outside the social media space, such as in-person or Zoom, could organically form or be established by the ATD based on social media engagement.

Ultimately, the comments from this sample of former college athletes support the addition of the ATD in athletics departments as an avenue to help athletes navigate the transition out of sport. The key components to the ATD’s programming stem from Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory and center the importance of maneuvering the transition environment and bolstering athletes’ individual characteristics. Similarly, former college athletes’ comments lend credibility to the use of social media platforms, like TikTok, to enhance those same components of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory. Social media outlets are here to stay and can be used in novel ways, such as in transition programming by ATDs to increase athletes’ chances of post-college success.

**Theoretical Implications**

While previous research has used Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory to examine athletes’ transition out of sport (Lally, 2007; Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Wylleman et al., 2004), this study builds upon and extends the usage of this framework in important ways. First, our findings emphasize the significance of the transition environment, perhaps even more so than previous studies (Harry & Weight, 2021; Lally, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019). In fact, collectively, 41% of former athletes’ comments pertained to one of the components
of the transition environment: emotional support, informational support, and/or institutional support. So, this support former athletes had or found, or lack of support, bolsters the significance of the transition environment and lends credibility to the use of transition theory in studying the phenomenon of athletes’ movement out of competition. Additionally, the lack of institutional support indicates a need for more school and/or athletic department involvement in athletes’ transitions – involvement that could be enhanced through the addition of an ATD.

Second, aligned with previous scholarship, our study notes the significance of athletes’ individual characteristics (Park et al., 2013). However, most of the previous scholarship highlights athletes’ loss of identity (Hansen et al., 2019; Harry & Weight, 2021; Lally, 2007; Rohr-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). While this loss of identity is noteworthy, this notion of identity loss was rarely mentioned in the TikTok comments. Athletes not explicitly mentioning identity could have occurred for two reasons: (1) the concept of identity was not salient while the former athletes perused TikTok, and (2) athletes were socialized during their time in college not to deeply explore or think about identity development (Hatteberg, 2018). Still, our findings encourage transition scholars to move past athletes’ identity loss and more deeply consider the role of other individual characteristics as athletes transition out of sport.

One individual characteristic our study extended is the differentiation between psychosocial competence and incompetence during one’s transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Former athletes’ TikTok commentary largely displayed more examples of psychosocial incompetence than competence. This transitional psychosocial incompetence bolsters the need for the ATD. Similarly, psychosocial competence could be strengthened through community building (Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018; Schlossberg, 1981), such as communities via social media and those created by the ATD. Indeed, communities may be particularly helpful in growing athletes’ positive self-attitudes, an area that was particularly troubling in the comments from this sample of former athletes.

The final area of theoretical implications also pertains to individual characteristics and is the importance of the individual’s mental state of health, not just physical state of health as described by Schlossberg (1981). Transition Theory was originally published in 1981, a time in which mental health was arguably a less popular topic of conversation and an under-examined area of research. However, the significance of mental health discussions and their role in transitions has grown in the decades since Schlossberg’s (1981) theory was published. Additionally, with current and former athletes becoming more vocal about mental health issues and addressing the rise in college athlete suicides (Hensley-Clancy, 2022; Rao et al., 2015), scholars studying transition must consider ways to center mental health more in this unique area of sport management literature.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There are a few limitations associated with this study and we suggest future scholars examine these limitations as they extend the sport management field’s knowledge on athlete transitions. First, we trusted the TikTok users were honest with their statements about being a former college athlete and followed Heather’s prompt or “call” to former college athletes. When users stated they were a current college athlete, a former “dancer,” “club athlete,” or “high school athlete,” we removed their comments from the analysis. Second, we do not know – and did not speculate – about the former athletes’ gender and racial identities, class, or sport (unless stated). However, previous research has noted these interesting identities are significant influences on athletes’ transition experiences and support received pre-, during, and post-transition (Fuller, 2014; Weight et al., 2020). Thus, future researchers could examine these identities and see if social media usage has a different effect on transition support based on these identities.

Similarly, previous research has focused on Schlossberg’s (1981) second component, perceptions of the transition, mainly athletes’ loss of athlete role/identity, when discussing former athletes’ exiting sport. However, such comments did not emerge from this sample of former athletes. We hypothesize that this occurred for a few reasons. First, athletes may not have been primed in their quick responses on TikTok to fully examine their perceptions of their transitions and reflect on the importance of identity. Second, some athletes may have been socialized to not even consider their various identities during college, and therefore, did not consider the concept
when commenting on the TikTok video. While this is a potential limitation of this work, we also believe this study extends the field’s understanding of other components of Schlossberg’s (1981) theory, particularly the transition environment and individual characteristics.

Finally, another consideration is the notion that social media usage, like TikTok, could be considered a more short-term or superficial fix, rather than long-term and more meaningful form of internal support. Thus, future scholars and practitioners should contemplate ways to ensure social media is a healthy and long-lasting engagement tool for athletes (Brougham, 2021; Browning & Sanderson, 2012). One avenue to ensure this could be through the ATD and their programming strategies.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory, this study examined former college athletes’ comments (n = 869) on a viral TikTok video to understand their process and emotions related to their transition out of sport. Athletes’ commentary focused on their transition environment – mainly support or lack thereof – and individual characteristics – especially negative states of physical and mental health and psychosocial incompetence. Our findings align with previous research noting both (1) athletes’ struggles with leaving college competition, and (2) the need and desire for more advanced and proactive transition programming for athletics departments. Through establishing an ATD position and filling it with someone adept at social media, we suggest athletic departments can mitigate athletes’ negative transition experiences by fostering healthier relationships with food and the gym and creating more supportive environments. In this way, athletes will know that they are “not alone.”

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