Female student-athlete swimmers:

Lived experiences in a South African context

by

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DECLARATION

I, **Andrijana Jeremic (11095840)**, declare that this mini-dissertation (***Female student-athlete swimmers: Lived experiences in a South African context***) is my own work except where I used or quoted another source, which has been acknowledged and referenced. I further declare that the work that I am submitting has not previously been submitted before for another degree or to any other university or tertiary institution for examination.

ANDRIJANA JEREMIC

11095840

ON THE **15** DAY OF **SEPTEMBER 2019**

ETHICS STATEMENT

I, **Andrijana Jeremic (11095840)**, have obtained the applicable research ethics approval for the research titled ***Female student-athlete swimmers: Lived experiences in a South African context*** on the 31 August 2017 (reference number: **GW20170828HS**) from Prof Maxi Schoeman, the Deputy Dean of Postgraduate Studies and Ethics, in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.[1]

[1] A copy of the original letter has been attached as an appendix, on page 223, for reference.

ABSTRACT

South African female swimmers have become a frequent feature in online media articles since zero female swimmers managed to qualify for the 2015 FINA World Championships and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. Despite this being a valuable area to focus on, majority of the online articles reviewed have neglected to provide South African female swimmers with the opportunity to share their experiences, perceptions and personal interpretations on being a female swimmer in South Africa. As such, this research study explored the lived experiences of South African female student-athlete swimmers who are in the process of competing at an elite level.

A qualitative research approach was utilised in this study, with interpretative phenomenological approach as its paradigmatic point of departure. One in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the eight South African female student-athlete swimmers from a swimming club located within a Tshwane-based university. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to interpret the transcripts. Six main themes surfaced; *the context, the body, the social and relational, the decision, career,* and *staying afloat.* Along with this, numerous corresponding subthemes and two integrated themes (*the emotional self* and *ways of thinking*) also emerged from analysis. These themes highlighted the complexity of these participants' lives as female student-athletes as well as South African female swimmers. These findings can assist coaches, parents, and other relevant role players to gain an enriched understanding of these participants' experiences and needs so that they may better support and lead this population group; in doing so, they may be better equipped to reach their full potential.

Keywords: Female athletes, female swimmers, adolescents, university students, student-athletes, learner-athletes, South Africa, Tshwane, phenomenology, experiences.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	1st Appearance	Description
SASCOC	Chapter 1	South African Sport Confederation and Olympic Committee
OPEX	Chapter 1	Operational Excellence Programme
FINA	Chapter 1	Federation Internationale De Natation Amateur (English: International Swimming Federation)
SSA	Chapter 1	Swimming South Africa
LTDP	Chapter 1	Long-Term Participant Development
EU	Chapter 1	The European Union
IPA	Chapter 1	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
ATDE	Chapter 1	Athletic Talent Development Environment
DPRM	Chapter 3	Duquesne Phenomenological Research Method
UP	Chapter 4	University of Pretoria

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Chapter overview

This chapter presents an introduction to my research study. It begins with a section on the background to my research topics and is then followed by a section that outlines the problem statement. Additionally, the aim and purpose of the study, as well as the research questions, methodology, and the necessity and value of the study, will be highlighted in this chapter. The final section presents a brief overview of the remaining chapters in this dissertation.

Background information

South African female swimmers

The number of medals a country wins at major international sports competitions is believed to reflect its competitiveness and success (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2007; Storm & Nielsen, 2010). In other words, the more medals team South Africa procures at events like the Olympic Games, the better they are perceived by other countries across the world. With this in mind, it is not that surprising that governments, sports federations, sports clubs, and sponsors put pressure on their athletes to qualify, participate, and excel in their respective sports at an international level (Tshube, 2014). Along with their coaches, athletes are expected to dedicate a significant amount of their time and effort towards the development of their athletic career; to move "one-step" closer to their dream of competing professionally in the Olympic Games. As such, this dedication and commitment often comes with social, academic, and financial sacrifices (Thomas, 2017). These sacrifices will be discussed further in chapter two; the literature review.

Like other countries around the world, South Africa relies on its elite athletes to bring medals "home" and simultaneously contribute to South Africa's international success. However, in 2008, South Africa had only managed to obtain one silver medal at the Beijing Olympic Games. This medal was awarded to Godfrey Khotso Mokoena for the men's long jump (i.e., athletics). This called for the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC) to restructure the three-tier approach to the Operational Excellence Programme (OPEX) in efforts to improve South Africa's future medal standing at the Olympic Games (Mothowagae, 2015).

This programme enhanced financial support to athletes who had been identified as "medal contenders" or potential finalists at mega-events such as the Olympics (Mothowagae, 2015). Despite the belief that additional financial support would increase team South Africa's medal standings at the Olympic Games, team South Africa continued to struggle to reach the governments required medal targets. For example, in 2012 (London Olympic Games) and 2016 (Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games), SASCOC targeted 12- and 16-medals respectively, however, team South Africa only managed to bring home six medals in 2012 and 10 medals in 2016 ("SASCOC sets Rio medal goal," 2013).

South Africa's medal history on the Official Website of the Olympic Movement (2018) suggests that a total of 86 Olympic medals (26 Gold, 31 Silver, and 29 Bronze) were awarded to team South Africa, from 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games until 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. Since South Africa's readmission into the Olympic Games, they achieved 35 medals (10 Gold, 16 Silver and 9 Bronze). Medals by sport suggest that South Africa achieves the most medals in athletics (29 medals), boxing (19 medals) and swimming (18 medals). Since swimming is one of the top three Olympic medal-achieving sport disciplines in South Africa, it is a sport that is worth being focused on, as is done in this present study. In addition to this, of the 18-medals won by swimmers, it appears that eight were awarded to female swimmers; the final medal being won in 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, by Penelope Heyns. Since the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games up until the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games, male swimmers achieved 10 medals, the majority of which were awarded to Chad le Clos, Cameron van der Burgh, and Roland Schoeman. These statistics show that there is only a two-medal difference between South African male and female swimmers and, that since the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, all Olympic medals won under the swimming discipline were achieved by male swimmers. The recent underperformance of female swimmers, despite the evidence of potential in the past, further reiterates that South African female swimming is a subject that requires further attention.

Until 2013, female swimmers frequently qualified and represented South Africa at mega-events like the Olympic Games. However, no South African female swimmer had swam the qualification times required of them to represent South Africa at the 2015 FINA World Championships nor the Rio 2016 Olympic Games (De Villiers, 2017). As a result, an abundance of online sports articles emerged, emphasising the underrepresentation of female swimmers at mega-events like the Olympic Games (e.g., De Villiers, 2017; Isaacson, 2013;

Mtimkulu, 2015; Race, 2015; Race, 2016; Sikes & Adom-Aboagye, 2017; Volk, 2016). Race (2016) referred to this underrepresentation as the "state of female swimming in South Africa" and "the gender imbalance in South African swimming" (para. 1). Coaches, male swimmers, and other perceived experts who were interviewed regarding this situation also indicated that female swimmers could be lacking; the readiness, the willingness to sacrifice for swimming, the necessary physical conditioning, the appropriate coaching as well as appropriate personal attitudes towards training ("Boost for women's swimming," 2013; "Cameron: Women waste talent," 2013; Race, 2015; "Swimming coach accepts blame," 2013). A journalist added to this by suggesting that there could also be a lack of opportunity or tough qualification standards impacting the number of female swimmers qualifying in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, especially since there were several female swimmers who missed the qualification time by less than half-a-second (Race, 2016). The online articles highlight several theories as to why South African female swimmers may not be qualifying for the Olympic Games. However, it seemed that while female swimmers were written about, their personal experiences, perspectives, and understandings on this subject did not seem to be fully explored and considered in these articles. This view was earlier expressed by the Centre for Gender Equality (2006) who did a study on sportswomen in media and found that "there are more reports simply telling about women than there are reports where women are allowed to express themselves in their own words" (p. 12). This research study does not intend to explore the intricacies surrounding gender equality in South African swimming. However, there is a need to explore the experiences of South African female swimmers and allow them the opportunity to express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings surrounding being a female swimmer in South Africa instead of being merely written about.

One exception to the above is an online sports article that did explore the underrepresentation of South African female swimmers from a female swimmer's perspective. In this article, the female swimmer briefly indicates that the comments individuals make in the articles about female swimming in South Africa fail to recognise the physical and mental strength that female swimmers in South Africa do have as well as fail to reflect on the impact that age and development has on their qualification (Race, 2016, para. 6). This particular swimmer reports on her experience leading up to the 2016 Rio Olympic trials and reflects on the impact that her back injury and burnout had on her performance in swimming. Another factor that this female swimmer comments on is the impact that a lack of funding and limited sponsorship opportunities had on her motivation for swimming in her later years of swimming in South

Africa (Race, 2016). These views are consistent with a peer-reviewed article that explored South African male and female swimmers' views on achieving swimming excellence in South Africa. Nortje, Coopoo, and Lazarus (2005) did a quantitative study on 45 South African swimmers and found that their participants indicated that a lack of financial assistance, poor administration from Swimming South Africa (SSA), unsuitable facilities, the athlete-coach relationship, and the lack of scientific and medical support has had a negative effect on their swimming performances at international sporting competitions. These two sources offer valuable perspectives on what could be also be hindering female swimmers' performances at an international level. However, there is still a dearth of literature focused on South African swimming and, specifically, from a female swimmer's perspective. Thus, examining the experiences of South African female swimmers who are considered potential candidates for future Olympic participation could prove pertinent to their future international performances.

Finally, the Long-Term Participant Development (LTPD) strategy for swimming was implemented by SSA to help grow elite swimmers in South Africa. A summary of the LTPD programme is provided in *Table 1*. Female swimmers who have reached the "training to compete" and "training to win" stages of the LTPD programme are believed to have the potential to perform at the highest level of swimming (e.g., the Olympics and FINA World Championships) (SSA, 2012), which is also the level where female swimmers are seemingly struggling to perform in. Thus, focusing on female swimmers who are aged 16 and above is both valuable and necessary as this is the age at which female swimmers in South Africa are expected to have reached the "training to compete" and "training to win" stages and are thus expected to qualify for mega-events like the Olympics in the near future. This specific age group also of particular interest seeing that a recent study conducted by Gatorade suggested that by the time girls are 14 years old, they discontinue sports one-and-a-half times the rate that boys do and by the time girls are 17, more than half of them have stopped playing sport all-together (Jedrzejczak, 2017). Female swimmers are expected to reach their peak performance at 18 to 22 years old (Bompa, 1999, as cited in Nortje, Coopoo, & Lazarus, 2005). This suggests that female swimmers may be at risk of dropping out of swimming or terminating their swimming career before they have reached their full potential in swimming. This is in accordance with Moesh, Mayer, and Elbe's (2012) findings which suggested that a third of their male and female athletic participants terminated their athletic career before they achieved their peak performance. It is with the above in mind that this study focused on the experiences of female swimmers who are aged 16 to 20; those female swimmers who are in the process of

competing at an elite level but are also at risk of dropping out of swimming before they can reach this level of performance.

Table 1

A summary of stages identified in the LTPD programme for swimming

Stage	Age ranges (females)	Stage objective
1. Active start	0 to 6	To learn fundamental movements and link them with play
2. Fundamentals	6 to 8	To obtain a basic understanding of various swimming skills
3. Learning to train	8 to 11	To build on competencies in all four swimming strokes learned in the fundamental stage
4. Training to train	11 to 15	To consolidate skills all swimming strokes and build on stamina, speed, and strength. Also, has to reach performance times required to compete at national age-group competitions
5. Training to compete	14 to 16+	To reach required times to transition from age group competitions to open competitions. Race tactics and strategies are essential and focus is on improving performance times.
6. Training to win	16+	Represents senior and open competition. These swimmers have the potential to perform at the highest level. The maintenance of physical attributes (e.g., speed, stamina, strength, skill, and suppleness) and further development of a swimmers' specific stroke(s) takes place.
7. Active for life	Any age	To continue with physical activity in swimming or another sport.

Note. Adapted from "Long-Term Participant Development. Stroke by stroke. The swimming LTPD programme of Swimming South Africa" By Swimming South Africa [SSA], 2012

(http://swimsa.org/education-and-training/long-term-participation-development/3-ltpd-for-swimming-nn-edit-changes-accepted.pdf)

The female student-athlete swimmer

According to Diersen (2005), a student-athlete is a person who pursues both an academic and athletic career simultaneously. Some researchers, like Tshube and Feltz (2015), refer to this as a "dual career". It is important to mention that a dual career is not only limited to an academic-athletic career but can also be a vocational-athletic one, too. This study focused on the former for two reasons. *First*, the majority of the athletes who are 18-and-under are required, by law, to receive a secondary education. Thus, to make the sample homogenous, female swimmers who were 18-and-over were also required to pursue a tertiary education while simultaneously swimming. *Secondly*, Ludvigson (2013) recommended and encouraged further research into the female student-athlete population as they were perceived to be more at risk of mental health difficulties and maladaptive coping behaviours. It is with this in mind that female swimmers' experiences of dual careers as student-athletes also became an area this study focused on.[2]

The dual career of student-athletes has been well explored in the field of sport psychology, as is evident from the systematic reviews conducted by Guidotti, Cortis, and Capranica (2015) and Stambulova and Wylleman (2019), which used 49 and 42 research papers respectively for their analysis. All of these were conducted amongst European student-athletes. According to the review conducted by Guidotti et al. (2015), athletes decide to pursue a dual career for the following reasons: to focus on other spheres of life, to be intellectually stimulated, to establish a sense of balance, to build a sense of security by having something to fall back on, and for the perceived better transition into a post-athletic career. Aquilina (2013) adds that athletes who may not receive adequate financial support for their participation in sport may also be more inclined to pursue a dual career. For Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner, and Lindahl (2015), a dual career is also valuable as it allows the athlete to nurture other areas of their lives which can assist with decreasing athletic dropout as well as athletic identity foreclosure. While there are many benefits of pursuing a dual career, there are also numerous challenges that

[2] I noticed that some researchers referred to under-18 participants who study while taking part in sport as "learner-athletes" and researchers who had 18-and-over participants doing this, as "student-athletes". In this present study, I refer to them both as "student-athletes" as they are both simultaneously studying and swimming, just at different educational levels.

athletes who pursue a dual career are faced with and that can affect their overall wellness (Janse van Rensburg, Surujlal, & Dhurup, 2011), life satisfaction (Surujlal, van Zyl, & Nolan, 2013), and mental health (Rice, Purcell, De Silva, Mawren, McGorry, & Parker, 2016).

According to Miller and Kerr (2002), a student-athletes' life revolves around three domains; the athletic, academic, and social, which are continuously competing with one another. Consequently, the student-athlete may find themselves being considerably stressed (Ward, Sandsteldt, Cox, & Beck, 2005; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005), uncertain (Romo, Davis, & Fea, 2015), and at risk for burnout (Sorkkilla, Aunola, Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen, & Ryba, 2018) due to the challenges, demands, and stressors student-athletes have to contend with on a daily basis within these three domains. Parham (1993, as cited in Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013) identified six main challenges that were unique to the student-athlete population. These included; learning to balance athletic and academic goals, adapting to possible isolation from social activities and/ events, managing athletic successes and failures, managing their physical wellness and possible athletic injuries, nourishing relationships with key role players (e.g., coach, parents, family, friends, and teammates), and coping with inevitable athletic career termination (Parham, 1993, as cited in Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Jolly (2007) adds that student-athletes also have to contend with the negative biases and perceptions that people may have of them as athletes within an academic setting.

Student-athletes face numerous challenges when pursuing a dual career and often find themselves having to negotiate and compromise between their athletic, academic and social domains in efforts to find a healthy balance between them (Miller & Kerr, 2002). When a healthy balance between these domains is established, a student-athlete may reap health-related benefits (e.g., reduced stress levels), developmental benefits (e.g., identity development, improved self-regulation abilities), social benefits (e.g., expanded social networks and support systems) as well as benefits in relation to post-athletic career adjustment (e.g., identity crisis is prevented) (European Union [EU] Expert Group, 2012). However, when a healthy balance cannot be established by the student-athlete, s/he may experience a decline in academic performance, an increase in stress and/ anxiety, increased desire for dropping out of sport, a lack of motivation, and a possible mental breakdown (Guidotti et al., 2015) or role strain, which has been associated with a decreased life satisfaction in sport, friendships, family, and the self (van Rens, Borkoles, Farrow, & Polman, 2018).

When looking at female student-athletes; and specifically female student-athlete swimmers, Tekavc, Wylleman, and Erpic (2015) found that female student-athlete swimmers were more likely to sacrifice the majority of their other interests and intimate relationships because of their dual career obligations than male and female student-athlete basketball players and male student-athlete swimmers. This does suggest that female student-athletes swimmers may find it more challenging to establish a balance that does not have to completely prioritise the one domain of their life for another. As a result, these female student-athlete swimmers also reported experiencing declined levels of psychological well-being and satisfaction (Tekavc et al., 2015). Research has also found that female student-athletes are believed to be more at risk than male student-athletes of suffering from depression (Capone, 2018), burnout (Han, Kwon, & You, 2015), as well as anxiety, alcohol consumption, and disordered eating (Ludvigson, 2013). In light of the above, female student-athletes do appear more at risk of having an unhealthy balance between their social, athletic, and academic domains which may negatively impact their performance in sport, their academic results, their personal life, their individual development, and ultimately their success, wellness, and overall life satisfaction. Thus, by exploring female swimmers' experiences as student-athletes who are pursuing a dual career, valuable insights on the special needs of female student-athletes in swimming can be identified and reported on.

Therefore, this study is valuable and necessary because it can enlighten coaches, parents, teachers/lecturers as well as other relevant parties (e.g., SSA) on possible underlying issues that can be affecting female swimmers' ability to perform optimally. By exploring and understanding the personal and environmental factors that shape female swimmers' experiences, it can further offer these role players pertinent recommendations for leading and supporting this population group so that their experiences, wellness, and performance in both academics and swimming may be enhanced in the future.

Problem statement

From the background information provided above, it is evident that there is an abundance of information about South African female swimmers on non-academic platforms (e.g., online news articles). However, the majority of these articles neglected to give female swimmers a chance to share their experiences, perceptions, and personal interpretations on being a female swimmer in South Africa. Also discernible from the discussion in the previous section is that even though there is concern regarding female student-athletes, from an academic perspective,

there has been no such research conducted on this study's participants specifically. It is in light of these research gaps that this study sought to explore the experiences and perspectives of South African female swimmers who are considered potential candidates for future Olympic participation; those who are also at risk of dropping out before they reach their peak performance in swimming and whom are presently pursuing a dual career in South Africa.

In the "necessity and value of the study" section, which follows the "methodological overview" section in this chapter, I elaborate on the methodological gap that exists in the field of sport psychology and how this study makes a slight contribution to minimising this gap.

Aim of the study and research questions

The study aimed to understand the lived experiences of South African female student-athlete swimmers. The objective was to utilise an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology to understand these participants' unique experiences as well as the underlying meanings associated with being a female student-athlete swimmer in South Africa. The purpose of this study is three-fold. *Firstly*, this study intended to provide South African female student-athlete swimmers with an opportunity to safely express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. *Secondly*, the study hoped to help enhance the coaches, parents, teachers/lecturers, and other key role players' knowledge, awareness, and understanding of the participants' needs and experiences so that these role players may offer support and guidance that is more specific and relevant to their personal needs, as South African female student-athlete swimmers. *Lastly*, the study endeavoured to advance current understandings on South African female student-athlete swimmers, from their perspective, which had not previously been focused on in South African research on swimming or female student-athletes.

The following research questions were formulated to guide the present research study:

"What do the experiences of female student-athlete swimmers reveal about being a female swimmer in South Africa?"

"How do female swimmers perceive being a student-athlete and taking part in a dual career in South Africa?"

Methodological overview

This study used a qualitative research method; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to explore the experiences of eight South African female student-athlete swimmers. Participants were purposively sampled; recruited from a swimming club located within a Tshwane-based university, in the Gauteng Province. Participants were between 16- and 20-years-old; four swimmers were under the age of 18 and the remaining four swimmers were 18-and-over. All the female swimmers simultaneously swam and studied (were doing a "dual career"). A single in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with each female swimmer, in English. This interview allowed the participants the freedom to voice their experiences in as much detail as they liked as well as to develop ideas, express concerns, and reflect on their experiences as South African female swimmers (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). These interviews were transcribed verbatim and then interpreted by employing the IPA stages. The themes identified were then discussed in detail, in Chapter 5; the findings and discussion chapter.

Necessity and value of the study

Based on the literature reviewed in chapter two, this study is justified from three perspectives:

The phenomenon refers specifically to the female student-athlete population and swimming. Ludvigson (2013) and Saxe (2015) encouraged further research into the female student-athlete population. In Ludvigson's (2013) study, depression, anxiety, and stress are identified as potential risks within the female student-athlete population and that this may precipitate the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms like alcohol use and disordered eating. Consequently, she states that it would be important to understand the particular needs, experiences, and systems associated with this population so that the female student-athletes' athletic and academic experience and well-being might be enhanced and nurtured (Ludvigson, 2013). Therefore, this study will contribute to existing knowledge on the female student-athlete population by informing on female student-athlete swimmers' experiences.

Previous studies focusing on the experiences of female student-athletes have considered; their transition in and out of sport (Saxe, 2015; Smith & Hardin, 2018), race (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Harmon, 2009), role conflict and perceived expectations (Read, 2017), athletic stressors and coping (Hayward, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016; Johnson, 2011), social support (Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2009), adversity and growth (Tamminen, Holt, & Neely,

2012), and eating disorders (Thompson, 2015; Van Zyl, Surujlal, & Dhurup, 2012; Voelker, Petrie, Neumann, & Anderson, 2016). While some of these studies do explore the experiences of female student-athletes from a swimming perspective (e.g., Hassell et al., 2009; Hayward et al., 2016), a substantial amount of the studies referenced above explored female student-athlete swimmers in relation to other sporting disciplines. Therefore, this study will complement and add value to existing knowledge of female student-athletes by exclusively exploring and understanding female student-athlete swimmers' experiences.

The methodology that has been dominant in the reviewed literature appears to be quantitative. Some researchers (e.g., Crust & Nesti, 2006; Hunger, Sparks, & Stelter, 2003; Munroe-Chandler, 2005) have noted similar observations when reviewing literature within the field of sport psychology. These researchers further suggest that there is an imbalance between the amount of scientific and subjective knowledge being produced within this field. With this in mind, they encourage researchers to focus on exploring athletes' experiences by adopting a qualitative methodology so that a holistic understanding of the phenomenon can be developed (Crust & Nesti, 2006). This research will supplement available scientific knowledge in the sport psychology discipline by adopting a qualitative approach, specifically IPA. Callary, Rathwell, and Young (2015) report that IPA is "rigorous and produces a plethora of rich data" (p. 73). They recommend IPA as a valuable qualitative method to use when working within the field of sport. They also encourage researchers to use IPA when the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Callary et al., 2015). Therefore, IPA was considered an appropriate research methodology to achieve the purpose of this study. Additionally, this study will add to subjective knowledge within the field of sport psychology, female student-athletes, and swimming.

The context refers to the previously discussed imbalance in South African swimming. This research will provide a better understanding of the experiences of South African female student-athlete swimmers who are considered future Olympic potentials. In addition to this, Tshube (2014) reports that athletes from African countries like Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are amongst the least studied in the field of sport psychology. Therefore, this study contributes to existing research by researching an under-studied population within a South African context.

Researchers, Tekavc et al. (2015) also recommended and encouraged researchers to explore the experiences of student-athletes from other cultures and nationalities so that further

understanding of dual careers can be developed. With this in mind, exploring female student-athlete swimmers' experiences from a South African perspective could also offer an alternative perspective on athletes who study and swim simultaneously.

Overview of remaining chapters

This study consists of six chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter two reviews a wide range of literature on the various components identified in the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) working model as they relate to South African female student-athlete swimmers. Chapters three and four are methodological chapters. Chapter three offers a theoretical explanation on the philosophical assumptions adopted by this study as well as its paradigmatic point of departure, while chapter four discusses the particularities related to the research participants (e.g., the sampling method and criteria), the research process used to conduct, gather, and analyse the female swimmers' experiences as well as the ethical considerations and quality of research. Chapter five presents the findings of the study (i.e., the main, general themes and subthemes) as well as a discussion on how these findings substantiate, differ from, and contribute to the literature reviewed in chapter two. I conclude the study in chapter six. In this chapter, I reflect on the research process, literature review, methodology, and the findings. Thereafter, I evaluate the strengths and limitations of the study, provide recommendations and a summary of the study.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an introduction to my research study on South African female student-athlete swimmers. The study was contextualised using background information and the problem statement. Other pertinent information regarding the study like its aim, purpose, research question, methodology used, and the necessity and value of the study were also addressed in this chapter. Lastly, an overview of the chapters that follow had also been laid out.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter overview

The primary objective of this dissertation was to advance current understanding of what it means to be a South African female swimmer between the ages of 16 and 20. With this in mind, I specifically focused my literature search and review on components identified within the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) working model.

This model was used to illustrate the reciprocal relationship between female swimmers' experiences and the impact that their environment could have on these experiences. It also assisted me in structuring this chapter with additional ease. I reviewed literature on the most relevant components that could have an influence on the female student-athlete swimmers in South Africa.

I begin the chapter by describing the ATDE working model, its purpose, and its components as indicated by Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler (2010). Thereafter, I consider the macro- and micro-environments in more detail by highlighting their corresponding components and then discuss the relevant literature and how this applies to the present study on female student-athlete swimmers in South Africa.

The athlete and the environment

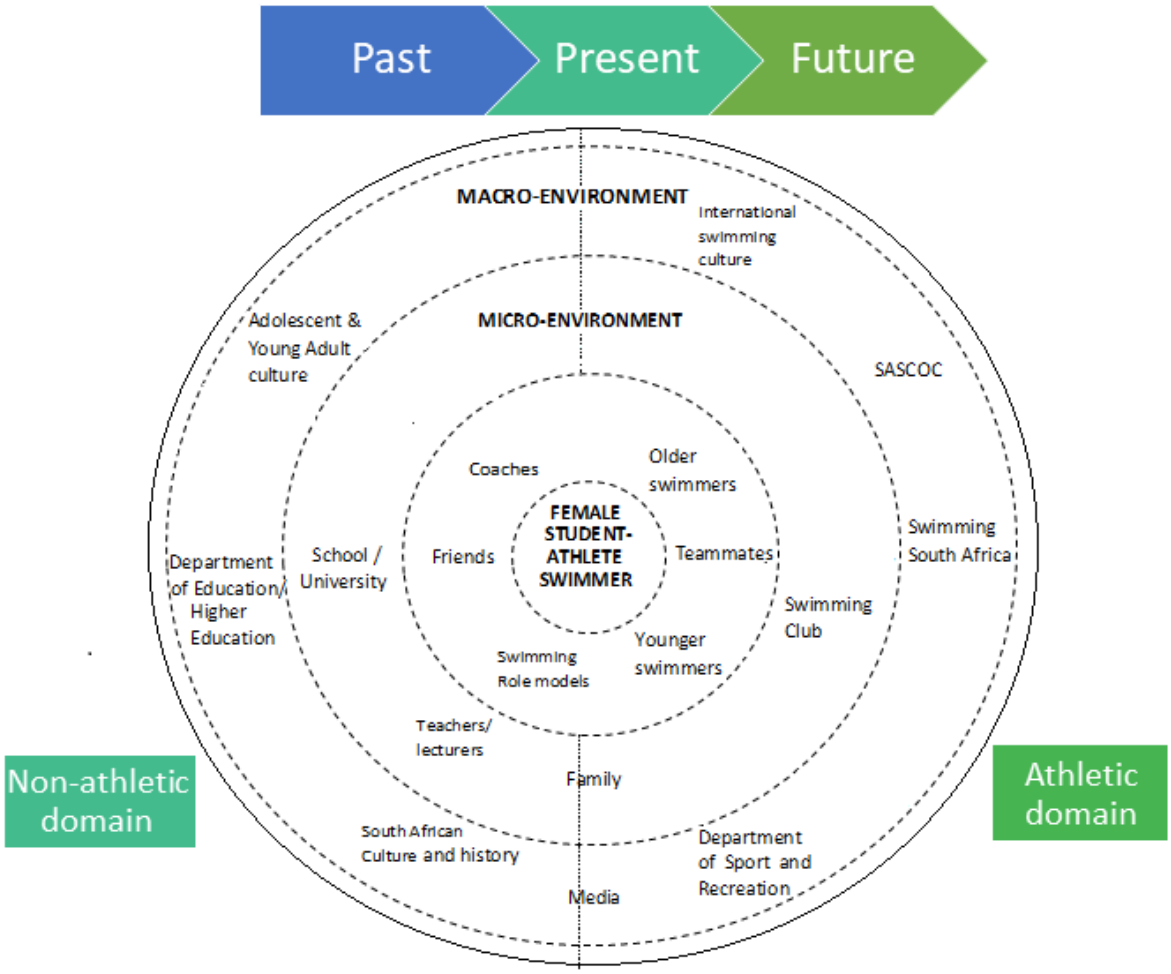


Figure 1: The Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) working model adapted and used to illustrate possible components in a South African female swimmer's environment. Adapted from: A holistic approach to athletic talent development environments: A successful sailing milieu in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (p. 213), Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler (2010).

The ATDE working model was introduced to assist sport psychology practitioners with understanding the interaction between an athlete and his or her environment as well as to enrich the practitioner's practice when developing athletic talent (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2011). More specifically, the aim was to clarify the roles and functions of different components found in the athlete's environment that would assist the young athletes' transition into senior elite athletes (Henriksen et al., 2011).

If we take a closer look at *figure 1*, we can see that the female student-athlete swimmer is positioned at the centre of the model. We can also see that the model is divided into two levels; the micro- and macro-environment, as well as two domains; the athletic and non-athletic domain (Henriksen et al., 2011). The athlete can directly interact and make contact with his or her micro-environment; which consists of both athletic and non-athletic domains like the athlete's family, peers, school, and club environment. For clarity, the club environment, if we refer to *figure 1*, is the area that surrounds the athlete at the centre of the model. This area is reserved for coaches, older or younger athletes or teammates, managers, role models and/ other experts (Henriksen et al., 2010). The macro-environment, on the other hand, indirectly influences the athlete and his or her micro-environment. According to Henriksen et al. (2010), the macro-environment comprises of specific cultural contexts and social settings; like the media, the education system, and the sports federation. As such, it would seem that even though the athlete belongs to this environment, he or she is indirectly influenced by the values, customs, rules, or cultures surrounding his or her country, sport, biological sex, and age-group (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen et al., 2011). Therefore, what can be said about the model thus far is that it emphasises that there is a reciprocal relationship between an athlete and his or her environment. This relationship can be either direct or indirect depending on the level of interaction the athlete has with specific aspects of the environment. Furthermore, this relationship and interaction has the potential to not only influence the athlete's athletic talent development but also their experiences.

The two domains that the ATDE working model refers to are the athletic and non-athletic domains. As the names suggest, the athletic domain refers specifically to the components that are related to the athlete and his or her sports environment, while the non-athletic domain includes the components that incorporate other areas of his or her everyday life (Henriksen et al., 2011). It is important to recognise that some components may transcend levels and domains while others do not, hence Henriksen et al. (2011) use the dotted circles to "illustrate the permeability and interdependence of the different components" (p. 214). This suggests that some components will fall into one level and one domain, while other components may form apart of more than one level or domain. For example, the athlete's family can transcend domains if the athlete's parent is also the athlete's coach. The element of time is another variable taken into consideration in the ATDE working model. It is my understanding that they consider both the athlete and the athletes' context to be ever-changing, dynamic, and reciprocal. Thus, referring to components as they occur in the past, present, and future. Therefore, using

this model to conceptualise the female swimmer will assist me with holistically understanding and outlining to the reader the components that influence female swimmers' experiences of swimming in South Africa.

In conclusion, this model is being used to provide context for the study in light of what other researchers have found on the relevant components mentioned above. Henceforth, I will be referring to specific components in more detail by making reference to literature that considers the impact that these components have on an athlete which will then later be referred back to in the discussion chapter. The hope is that by describing the athlete and the environment in more detail I will be able to provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of components that could influence female swimmers' sport experiences. I will begin with the components within the outermost circle, the macro-environment, and then work my way towards the female swimmer who is represented in the centre of *figure 1*.

The macro-environment

South African history and the athletic domain

The economic welfare, population size, geographic and climatic factors of a country is believed to have an impact on elite sport success (De Bosscher et al., 2007). With this in mind, it is important to consider these factors as they present themselves in South Africa, and also as a component of the macro-environment.

Geographically, South Africa is located at the bottom tip of the African continent. It also has a land area that allows it to be the largest country in Africa and the 25th largest in the world. Its coastline stretches along the South Atlantic and Indian oceans. South Africa has numerous neighbours, including Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Swaziland, and Lesotho. In 2017, South Africa was ranked 25th most populated nation in the world, with approximately 57-million people taking residence in its nine provinces. South Africa is considered multi-ethnic because of the range of origins, cultures, languages, and religions its population reflects (Tshube, 2014). Economically, South Africa has an upper-middle-income economy; ranking as the second-largest economy in Africa and the 34th-largest in the world. When compared to other African countries, South Africa has demonstrated economic growth. However, it still struggles to grow at a consistent and predictable rate. Contributing to such difficulties is South Africa's high unemployment rates, outdated infrastructure, and its political history. It was

estimated that by the year 2000, approximately 50% of South Africans were below the poverty line and presently, more than one-quarter of South Africans receive social grants ("South Africa facts: Economy," 2018). With this in mind, I direct your attention to two articles.

The first, a quantitative study conducted in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The study found that sport participant and achievement is hindered by inaccessible and limited facilities, equipment, qualified coaches, and role models (Kubayi, Nongogo, & Amusa, 2014). The second study was conducted in the same city as the present study; in Pretoria. Kubayo, Toriola, and Monyeki (2013) found that participation in sport declined in this area because of limited transportation to and from practice and competitions. These two studies reiterate that inadequate funding and a low socio-economic status can negatively impact South African athletes' continuation with sport. It can also indirectly hinder how an athlete experiences sport in South Africa.

South Africa became a democratic nation and abolished apartheid in 1994. The apartheid regime affected South Africa in many ways. One of the ways it affected South African sports was that athletes of colour were prevented from representing team South Africa at international sport competitions like the Olympic Games. This racial discrimination subsequently led to South Africa being suspended from the 1964 and 1968 Olympic Games and eventually being expelled from them all-together in 1970 (Mann, 2018; Nongogo, 2015). International boycotts played a key role in South Africa's racial transformation in 1994 and assisted with South Africa's reinstatement into the Olympic Movement in 1992 (Rajput, 2012). Considering the influence that sport had in transforming South Africa into a democratic nation, it makes sense that sport was perceived as a platform for reconciliation and a motivator for social, political, and cultural transformation (Maralack, 2010; Nongogo, 2015). However, in order for sports to motivate such transformation, it also had to be transformed.

The transformation of aquatic sport in South Africa was, and to some extent still is, a complicated matter. In 1999, Swimming South Africa (SSA), which is the association responsible for Aquatics and its subsequent disciplines in South Africa, introduced a "transformation policy" to redress the inequity created by Apartheid (Desai & Veriava, 2010). In implementing this policy, SSA aimed to represent South Africa's racial demographics more accurately at a club, provincial, and national level (Desai & Veriava, 2010). However, in 2005 the policy had to be revised because various provinces and clubs failed to adopt and integrate

it into their programmes (Desai & Veriava, 2010). The revised policy set racial targets for provinces and clubs to meet as well as associated incentives and punitive measures that would ensure provinces and clubs met these required targets (Desai & Veriava, 2010).

Transformation policies remain a controversial topic in South African sports, as observed in numerous online news articles (e.g., Botton, 2019; Du Preez, 2014; "IRR poll: 82% of black South Africans don't want quotas," 2019; "Kolisi: Madiba wouldn't have supported quota system," 2019; "SA's sporting racial quotas challenged in court," 2019). While there is an abundance of online news articles to review, there is a limited amount of peer-reviewed articles on the topic of transformation policies. The articles that were found primarily focused on what these policies are, how they came to be, and how they were being used in South African sports (e.g., cricket and rugby), and whether these quotas were ethical (e.g., Mwirigi, 2010; Penrose, 2017; Thomen, 2008). One article quantitatively explored cricket players and cricket officials' perceptions of the effectiveness and administration of quota policies in cricket (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2018). Findings suggested that participants felt quota policies were unnecessary and were responsible for South African players relocating (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2018). While this article does not focus on South African swimmers, it does suggest that transformation policies do hinder athletes' motivation to continue sport within South Africa.

Literature on the psychological and/emotional effects of transformation policies could not be found. However, a single online article did offer a sport psychologist's perspective on how these policies may influence an athlete and his/her performance negatively (Botton, 2018). According to the sport psychologist, quota systems can leave athletes of colour disempowered and uncertain of themselves and their athletic ability, which consequently affects their performance (Botton, 2018). On the other hand, white athletes may come to resent the system and feel aggrieved by selection constraints (Botton, 2018). While there were seemingly good intentions by implementing transformation policies, the sport psychologist emphasises that how they were implemented may condition white players to think that athletes of colour can only be selected as a quota player, rather than their talent and ability (Botton, 2018). From this perspective, transformation policies have a negative psychological effect on both white athletes and athletes of colour. As a mental health professional, the sport psychologist does offer some valuable insights into the potential psychological effects precipitated by transformation policies. However, there is no actual research corroborating her views and understandings. Thus, my study does not aim to explore how these transformation policies affect female swimmers.

However, while reviewing the selection criteria for the All Africa Games (2019), the 7th FINA Junior World Swimming Championships (2019), Junior Africa Swimming Championships (2019), Cana Zone IV Swimming Championships, and the 18th FINA World Championships (2019), I found that one of the selection criteria is that the national teams are selected in accordance with the SSA transformation policy. In light of this, and the information above, it is apparent that South African swimming, as well as its swimmers, are still burdened by South Africa's political history today.

Another way that South Africa tried to use sport as a motivator for social, political, and cultural transformation is by hosting, participating and achieving in mega-sport-events like the Rugby World Cup (1995), the Atlanta Olympic Games (1996), the African Football Cup of Nations (1996), Cricket World Cup (2003) and the FIFA World Cup (2010). In doing this, South Africa seemingly believed they could transcend old racial and socio-economic class divisions, challenge worldwide perceptions about South Africa as a third-world country, and globally demonstrate its athletic, economic, and political potential (Giesler, 2016; Knott, Fyall, & Jones, 2015; Maralack, 2010). However, this proved to be more difficult than initially anticipated, especially more recently with no female swimmers qualifying for mega-events like the 2015 FINA World Championships and 2016 Rio Olympic Games, as discussed in chapter one. In efforts to avoid repetition, I have decided to briefly summarise the main points emphasised in chapter one's *South African female swimmers'* section, below.

South Africa relies on its athletes to achieve at international events and improve its brand around the world. However, since South Africa returned to the Olympic Games slow progress has been made with regards to achieving at these events. South Africa relies significantly on three sporting codes to excel at the Olympic Games. One of which is swimming. In approximately the last 20-years however female swimmers have been out-performed by their male counterparts in terms of excelling at an international level. Female swimmers have been increasingly scrutinised for their performance-related difficulties in online media articles. Online media articles have suggested a wide range of theories on why female swimmers have been struggling to translate their success in South Africa onto the international stage. However, only one online media article was found that explored a female swimmers' perspective on the situation. Therefore, this present study hopes to give South African female swimmers a platform to share their perspectives, experiences, and challenges. In the next section, the adolescent and young adulthood culture will be discussed in detail.

Adolescence and young adulthood culture

Many articles reviewed explored the physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes which occur throughout adolescence and the effects thereof on the athlete's sport involvement, participation and performance (e.g., Brown, Patel, & Darmawan, 2017; Dormehl, Robertson, & Williams, 2016; Erlandson, Sherar, Mirwald, Maffulli, & Baxter-Jones, 2008; Zingg, Wolfrum, Rust, Rosemann, Lepers, & Knechtle, 2014). Several of the articles above also explore these changes amongst male and female swimmers quantitatively. This study does not aim to explore the physical, cognitive, psychosocial and environmental changes during adolescence and young adulthood directly. However, based on the participants' ages, it is important to review the literature on how such factors influence female athletes and specifically female swimmers. This will provide perspective on the swimmer as an adolescent or as a young adult and as an athlete who is expected to go through similar developmental stages as non-athletes.

Dormehl et al. (2016) explored an adolescent female swimming population, specifically looking to determine the expected progression of their performances in varying swimming strokes by utilising a longitudinal approach. Their findings suggest female swimmers peak earlier in longer distance events and that the highest rate of improvement occurred between 12 and 16.8 years old (Dormehl et al., 2016). Zingg et al. (2014) did a similar study; focusing on freestyle and butterfly events, and found that there were varying ages for peak performances but that peak swimming speed for female swimmers was reached at the age of 20 to 21 years for all distances of freestyle and butterfly. Both articles hypothesised that due to the physical changes that are experienced during puberty; which according to Brown et al. (2017) includes an increase in weight and height, changes in their body composition, flexibility, muscle growth and strength, bone mass and menstrual considerations, female swimmers who are in the post-pubertal phase have greater buoyancy and are able to apply their energy more efficiently which allows them to perform more consistently during this time (Dormehl et al., 2016; Zingg et al., 2014). Additionally found, female athletes were expected to reach a plateau in their performance when their physical changes stabilised (Dormehl et al., 2016; Erlandson et al., 2008). Brown et al. (2017) explained that around the age of 16 to 20, adolescent female athletes' strength, speed, aerobic capacity and muscular strength still increases but at a slower rate than it did in early adolescence. Therefore, it appears that during this time athletes are required to put more effort into their training and performances which could be emotionally, physically

and psychologically taxing especially since they would be seeing the results of their effort at a slower pace. This could explain why there could be a decreased interest in and commitment to training as well as an increased termination in sport participation when female swimmer's reach physical maturity, as indicated by both Dormehl et al. (2016) and Erlandson et al. (2008). This has important implications for this present study seeing that the participants who are between the ages of 16 and 20 are expected; based on literature above, to be reaching physical maturity. This could also suggest that they may be more at risk of dropping out of swimming.

A recent article by Kantanista et al. (2018) found that younger elite athletes in Poland had a more negative body image than older, more experienced athletes, due to the physical changes in their body as a result of pubertal changes. Brown et al. (2017, p. 154) supports this statement and notes that "adolescents may [also] encounter pressure to increase muscle bulk, strength, and endurance to improve performance, depending on the specific sport in which they are participating" which could account for female adolescents engaging in excessive weight-control measures that would assist them in maintaining an ideal physique. The pressure surrounding weight, eating, body size and appearance has been increasingly explored in recent years; especially amongst the adolescent and young-adult female athlete population (e.g., Carrigan, Petrie, & Anderson, 2015; Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter, & Reel, 2009; Lunde & Gattario, 2017; McMahon & Penney, 2013; Thompson, 2015; van Zyl, Surujlal, & Dhurup, 2012; Voelker, Petrie, Neumann, & Anderson, 2016). The literature mentioned above focuses on body pedagogies, eating disorders, weight control behaviours and body-image concerns amongst a female student-athlete population from varying countries around the world; including South Africa, Australia, United States of America, and Canada. It is important to also mention that a substantial amount of the literature referenced above this statement explores female swimmers in relation to females within other sporting disciplines; such as gymnastics or diving. Despite swimming being explored in conjunction with other sports, swimming is frequently represented in studies exploring body-image and eating disorders in sport, thus suggesting that it may be a part of the wider swimming culture.

According to McMahon and Penney (2013), body pedagogies in Australian competitive swimming included weight, shape, body fat and performance. These discourses were found to have a long-lasting influence on the participants' thoughts and feelings about themselves and their bodies and would eventually result in them policing their body (McMahon & Penney, 2013). Thompson (2015) reports that such expectations placed on a female athlete has the

potential to increase a female athlete's risk of developing an eating disorder or engage in weight control behaviours (i.e., regulating what they eat, when they eat, and how much they eat). A similar pressure or expectation was found amongst South African female student-athletes from the Gauteng Province (van Zyl et al., 2012). This quantitative study aimed to explore the understanding and awareness that female student-athletes, from a variety of sport disciplines, had about eating disorders. Its findings suggested that there were only a few participants actively experiencing eating disorders. However, a number of the participants scored high on the questionnaire, thus suggesting that they may have issues with food or body image (van Zyl et al., 2012). The studies reviewed above indicate that there is pressure from the coach, friends, family, and teammates to have a specific body type for the sport that they are in and this may precipitate body-image difficulties amongst adolescent and young-adult female athletes. However, van Zyl et al. (2012) found that healthy relationships with the coach and other social support figures could also assist in reducing the risk for eating disorders. Achieving an aesthetic and lean physique while maintaining and improving one's performance is a significant part of the sports culture, and more specifically the swimming culture.

Lunde and Gattario (2017) qualitatively examined adolescent female athletes' experiences and thoughts on sport, their bodies, and social appearance norms. They found that female athletes, including female swimmers, felt that they could not comply with both the culture within their sport and the culture outside their sport which emphasised physical performance and physical appearance, respectively (Lunde & Gattario, 2017). The participants in this study felt that there was an internal conflict between enhancing physical features that would help them perform (i.e., enhancing their speed, strength, and agility) and meeting the cultural standards of beauty (e.g., being thin and having slim thighs). This conflict is believed to contribute to adolescent female athletes increasingly dropping out of their sport (Lunde & Gattario, 2017). The above suggests that weight, body image, and physical appearance is prevalent in the swimming culture and that this does have some influence on a female swimmer's experience of swimming. Majority of the articles reviewed on this topic are quantitative and therefore provide a limited view of the physical demands and pressures placed on female athletes. With this being said, understanding the physical demands placed on female swimmers from a qualitative approach would provide an additional, in-depth perspective in this regard and add to existing qualitative and quantitative knowledge.

In addition to concerns regarding disordered eating amongst the elite adolescent and young-adult athlete population, Sabato, Walch, and Caine (2016) review the risks associated with physical and psychological injuries. Some of the risks include; 1) life events such as adjusting to a new school or the death of a loved one, 2) training- or competition-based stressors such as underperforming, losing a race, or the financial aspects surrounding training and travel, 3) athletic identity which refers to the degree to which the person identifies with their athletic role, 4) psychological disorders which includes depression, anxiety, and burnout, and lastly, 5) parent, teammate, and coaches influences (Sabato et al., 2016). These are all believed to place the elite athlete at risk for developing an injury; whether it be physical or psychological.

Risk number three considers the degree to which the person identifies with their athletic identity. According to Erikson's (1968, as cited in Rageliene, 2016) psychosocial stages of development, people develop their personalities by experiencing and resolving specific psychosocial crises. Essentially every individual is faced with resolving the conflict between their own needs and the needs of society. Thus, during adolescence, the individual is tasked with resolving the identity versus role confusion stage (Erikson, 1968, as cited in Rageliene, 2016). Towards the end of adolescence and the beginning of young-adulthood, the person is also faced with resolving the intimacy versus isolation stage. Therefore, a person begins by asking themselves; who am I, what do I want to be, and where do I fit in? Then, when one can confidently answer these questions, the person can build meaningful relationships with others while maintaining their sense of individuality and autonomy (Erikson, 1968, as cited in Rageliene, 2016). According to Dumas, Lawford, Tieu, and Pratt (2009) and Sandhu, Singh, Tung, and Kundra (2012) a stable personal identity is also associated with better mental health, psychological well-being, emotional adjustment and stability, as well as strengthening a person's ability to perform their different roles and commitments more effectively. However, when a person begins to neglect other identities there is the risk of premature identity foreclosure which could make it harder for them to form meaningful relationships with others, cope effectively and efficiently with adversity or feel as though they belong (Sandhu et al., 2012). Therefore, female swimmers may be influenced by the psychosocial stages that correspond to their present age. When interpreting the participants' experiences in this study, it is important to take note of the crises that they are currently trying to resolve and the impact that other components may have on their ability to resolve these crises.

From the above, it can also be said that a female swimmers' relationships with peers, coaches, teammates, and parents are focal in the adolescent's ability to adapt to his or her environment healthily. According to Louw and Louw (2007), adolescents frequently compare themselves to their peers and are frequently preoccupied with worries about their perceived physical differences. Brown et al. (2017) suggest that such comparisons may also cause athletes at this age to be more sensitive to criticism and negative evaluation from others which could influence experiences with their coach, teammates, peers, and/ parents. In spite of this, female athletes within this age-range rely on social support to provide them with a sense of understanding and love, and that others; family, teammates, peers, and coaches, will be there to support them when a problem arises (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). There has been an abundance of research dedicated to the importance of social support in an athlete's life (e.g., Hayward, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2017; Lu et al., 2016; Ludvigson, 2013; Sabato et al., 2016; Tshube, 2014). This will be explored in more detail in the micro-environment section of this literature review. While female swimmers are at the specialisation stage of their athletic development, they are also largely influenced by wide-ranging developmental changes whereby they are also in the process of developing a sense of their own identity in and amongst their athletic and non-athletic domains.

In conclusion to this section, the macro-environment could play a significant role in influencing female swimmers' experiences of swimming in South Africa. While the macro-environment may not directly interact with the athlete, the female swimmer is still indirectly affected by changes within it. This has important contextual implications for when interpreting and analysing the transcribed interviews. The main themes that were highlighted in this section include; South Africa's geographic, political and socio-economic influences on the athletic domain and the influence that female swimmers' physical, psychological and psychosocial development may have on their experiences and their participation as South African female swimmer. This section also looked at the wider swimming culture, specifically discourses about weight, body image, and physical appearance. The next section will look at the micro-environment components that have a direct influence on the female swimmers. Because the female swimmers form part of this environment they also have reciprocal interaction with the components.

The micro-environment

This section will focus on components in both the athletic and non-athletic domain but from a micro-environmental level. As such, literature that will be discussed will concentrate on dual careers, family, peers, coaches, and other supportive figures like role models and educators (teachers and lecturers).

Dual careers

Aquilina (2013) noted that only a small percentage of athletes are able to make a long-term living from their sports accomplishments. Tshube and Feltz (2015) added that a professional sports career is also relatively short. As such, there is value in an athlete simultaneously participating in sport and either studying (at university or high school) or working (i.e., pursuing a dual career) (EU Expert Group, 2012). The main benefits associated with pursuing a dual career have already been discussed in the introduction chapter, however, the gist of it is that a dual career helps athletes prepare for a post-athletic career as well as creating balance in the athletes' lives and preventing them from being consumed solely by their athletic pursuits.

It is also important to note that the athlete is not the only one who seemingly benefits from pursuing a dual career—academic institutions benefit from it too. According to Singh and Surujlal (2006), having athletes participate in sport at a national and international level while pursuing and excelling at university increases the university's revenue, prestige and reputation which subsequently translates into additional student applications, enrolment and sponsorship opportunities. Therefore, South African student-athletes pursuing a dual career are also under pressure to perform athletically and academically for the university.

Dual careers are a well-explored avenue in sport psychology (Guidotti et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). The reason being is that student-athletes, unlike their non-athletic peers, are expected to meet both their athletic and academic demands simultaneously while adjusting to psychological, psychosocial, and financial developments in their lives (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) add that student-athletes also have to contend with personal and external factors that interfere with their ability to adjust to or cope with a dual career. These include; a lack of flexibility and financial support, negative biases against athletes in higher education, organisational stressors, insufficient time for social needs and recovery, and fatigue burnout and injuries (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

Student-athletes are believed to experience more stress than their non-athlete peers (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). This was similarly observed by Burnett, Peters, and Ngwenya (2010) who focused on South African student-athletes. Results indicated that student-athletes not only felt stressed because of the time demands placed on them by their athletic and academic responsibilities but also, because they could not earn a living from being an athlete, they had to take on part-time work (Burnett et al., 2010). This subsequently hindered their athletic and academic performances and placed them at risk of losing their scholarships and bursaries. Student-athletes voiced that support from the university in the form of additional tutorial slots, flexible assignment deadlines, and comprehensive scholarships would be invaluable to them coping with their dual career more effectively (Burnett et al., 2010). According to Romo et al. (2015), student-athletes also tend to experience personal (e.g., injury), social (e.g., friends), and future (e.g., career) related uncertainties because of their dual roles as an athlete and student.

Steiner (2010) quantitatively explored the degree to which student-athletes found their dual career demands stressful. Steiner's (2010) study focused on a variety of sports; including swimming and used an internet survey for data collection. Of 250 male and female student-athletes who consented to participate in the study, only 35 out of 59 swimmers participated with 17 being male swimmers and 18 being female swimmers. The main stressors mentioned here are to gain perspective on the type of stressors that student-athlete swimmers are faced with and the degree to which this causes them stress. The main stressors identified include: not meeting own expectations (94.3%), being nervous for competition (91.4%), academic results (85.7%), balancing academic and sport demands (77.1%), missing classes as a result of travelling for sport (71.4%), and social life (51.4%). Not meeting one's expectations was considered extremely stressful for 57% of the swimming participants who took part in this survey and grades, balancing sport and academic demands, and being nervous for the competition was considered moderately stressful to this population group (Steiner, 2010). The main coping strategies used by swimmers in this study included spending time with friends (85.7%), taking a break (65.7%), exercise (57.1%), asking friends and family for advice (51.4%), relaxation techniques (48.6%) and to focus efforts on a solution (45.7%).

Whitaker (2015), who also considered swimmers' experiences qualitatively, found that student-athlete swimmers are faced with an extremely busy schedule which limits their time to partake or explore alternative interests and activities outside of swimming which causes them to feel significantly isolated, burnt-out, and makes them at risk to injury. I found that

Ludvigson's (2013) study indirectly contributes to Whitaker's (2015) findings by quantitatively exploring the health risks amongst American female student-athletes who compete in individual and team sports. She found that feelings of isolation were also associated with the athlete's high athletic identity and their unconditional commitment to their sport (Ludvigson, 2013). In addition to this, alcohol consumption and disordered eating were found to be the main two health risk behaviours used by female student-athletes who may be experiencing depression and/or anxiety. Putukian's (2015) study also suggests that such stressors can precipitate mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, disordered eating, suicide ideation, and substance use/abuse. Therefore, female student-athlete swimmers are faced with a considerable amount of pressure relating to their dual careers which may impact their performance in sport, their academic results, their personal life and their individual development and ultimately, their success.

Trying to marry sports and academics into a dual career appears to be a complex task to achieve. With this in mind, it is understandable the European Union published guidelines and recommendations to assist key role players with supporting student-athlete more effectively (EU Expert Group, 2012). This document also encouraged academic institutions and sporting bodies to open a dialogue with one another so that a flexible academic structure can be designed and implemented for student-athletes (EU Expert Group, 2012).

Overall, there is a paucity of research on dual careers within the South African context, and more specifically from a female perspective. This would be valuable to explore further because Lee and Sten (2017) found that female student-athletes were more academically motivated than their male counterparts due to higher introjected extrinsic motivation (i.e., having certain behaviours be regulated by self-imposed pressure or feelings of guilt). This would mean that a female student-athlete is likely to experience a greater sense of guilt over not maintaining her academic performance than males (Lee & Sten, 2017). We could thus argue that female student-athletes may experience higher levels of anxiety when pursuing a dual career due to the demands on time that may make simultaneously fulfilling both difficult. This could result in female swimmers sacrificing the majority of their other interests and intimate relationships because of their dual career obligations (Tekavc et al., 2015). These arguments could provide useful when interpreting the results of this present study which is focusing on female student-athlete swimmers from a South African perspective.

Athletic identity. The EU Expert Group (2012), emphasises the importance of creating a system that will allow for student-athletes to adapt more successfully to the demands that come with competing at a high international level while engaging with school or work. Due to the student-athlete being considered as being more at risk of dropping out of sports, finding an appropriate balance is believed to be associated with a decreased athletic dropout rate and a decrease in athletic identity foreclosure (Stambulova et al., 2015). This would allow student-athletes the opportunity to explore and succeed in other areas of their lives that may have been neglected or sacrificed as a result of elite sport participation, and could provide them with a well-balanced identity and opportunity for success (Stambulova et al., 2015). While reviewing literature on student-athletes, I found that "athletic identity" was a concept that many sport psychology articles were focusing on (e.g., Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Despres, Brady, & McGowan, 2008; Grove, Fish, & Eklund, 2004; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Jolly, 2008; Ludvigson, 2013; Watt & Moore, 2001; Yopyk & Pretence, 2005). An athletic identity refers to the extent to which an athlete identifies with his or her athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993). Watt and Moore (2001) report that a person's sense of identity is influenced by their surroundings and the feedback that they receive from it. If the student-athletes environment reinforces an athletic identity to the point where it overwhelms his or her student identity then the student-athlete may experience premature identity foreclosure and form a high athletic identity and begin neglecting other roles and responsibilities (Watt & Moore, 2001).

During adolescence, a person begins to explore and construct their identity in efforts to resolve the identity versus role confusion stage of development. Let us consider student-athletes for a moment. Like non-athletes, student-athletes are required to go to attend their classes every day, do their assignments, write their examinations, and engage with teachers or lecturers and non-athlete peers who may not fully understand the responsibilities that they as athletes are also committed to doing weekly. These commitments can include attending practices which can at times be longer than 10 hours per week, competing in their sport during the week or weekends, travelling for competitions, or attending to their injuries or recovery sessions (Burnett et al., 2010). Many times, student-athletes find themselves increasingly missing classes and re-scheduling examinations and assignments in efforts to prioritise their travelling for training and competitions (Burnett et al., 2010). Finch's (2007) study gives insights into why student-athletes may find themselves increasingly ignoring or delaying their attention to their "student" role. According to Finch (2007), the "student" and "athlete" roles interact in a complex manner, thus each commitment that a student-athlete made for their sport (whether it be related to

practice, training, travel or competition) often coincided with a decision to postpone their attention to the "student" role (Finch, 2007). Therefore, even though the term "student-athletes" places "student" first; there are mixed findings in terms of which role a student-athlete will prioritise. Some studies have found that student-athletes still prioritise their athletic career above their academic career (e.g., Pukas & Perenyi, 2015), while other studies (e.g., Mendez, 2016) found that student-athletes prioritised their academic role more than their athletic role.

According to Jolly (2008) and Watt and Moore (2001), challenges arise when student-athletes continuously prioritise their sport and neglect their other roles and responsibilities. For example, student-athletes can become increasingly isolated and excluded from the general student population which may cause them to identify more with their athletic identity; finding themselves gravitating more towards the student-athlete population (Jolly, 2008; McFarlane, 2014; Thomas, 2017; Watt & Moore, 2001). McFarlane (2014) and Thomas (2017) both found that the majority of their participants' social circles were within high-performance sport because they did not have time available to form relationships outside of their teammates and other student-athletes. Social opportunities were expected to be missed or sacrificed in order to be better prepared for their sport. This means that student-athletes become more inclined to study, train, befriend and live with other athlete's which decreases their student identity as well as their ability to relate to others, other than those who participate in sport.

Jolly (2008) also highlights that student-athletes may feel discriminated against because of their athletic identities and the stereotypes that coincide with being a student-athlete (i.e., being unintelligent and underqualified for academic performance). A study done by Yopyk and Prentice (2005) also explored the impact that such assumptions had on student-athletes academic performances. They found that academic performance does decrease when an individual is overtly or covertly made aware of their racial, sport, or gender identity due to stereotype threat (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). With this in mind, student-athletes are considered a minority group at university or high school and can contribute to them identifying more with their athletic identity than their academic identity. This can have a negative impact on their academic performance which could affect their transition into a post-athletic career. Heird and Steinfeldt (2013) also indicate "the importance of a given role begins to define people's core identity through which they interpret most, if not all, situations" (p. 144). Therefore, the effects of a high athletic identity is important for this present study because female swimmers who are

participating in this study are student-athletes and their experience could be influenced based on their athletic- or academic identity or both.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that balancing academic and sports commitments, responsibilities and roles are essential to bettering the emotional, physical and behavioural adjustment of a student-athlete. However, this remains difficult to achieve. Student-athletes are encouraged by their stakeholders to commit to their sport while they can because an athletic career is short-lived, in spite of their academic commitments during this time. This places a lot of pressure on a student-athlete to excel in dual careers which leaves them at risk for a variety of mental and physical health issues. Furthermore, having one's surroundings and interactions continuously emphasise one's athletic performances, commitments, and achievements may result in a high athletic identity which may cause student-athletes to be consumed by their athletic identity, thus sacrificing their other roles and identities as a student, daughter, friend, or residence member. This may contribute to health risk behaviours amongst female student-athletes, as researched by Ludvigson (2013). This topic was important to review because it forms part of the female swimmers' micro-environment which could influence their experiences as well as assist in interpreting the experiences more holistically.

The next few sections that will be focused on are about the athlete's family, coach, peers, educators, and role models.

Family

Parents. Bean, Fortier, Post, and Chima (2014) reviewed 185 articles on the negative effects of youth sport participation on the athlete, their parents, and their siblings. It is evident from this review that parents have to make substantial time and financial investments for the student-athletes dreams (Bean et al., 2014). Such investments were associated with decreased parental mental health. Bean et al. (2014) found that parents of high performing athletes were likely to experience high levels of stress and burnout as well as feelings of anger, frustration, guilt, and resentment towards the child, themselves and the sport context. Being a parent of a student-athlete also comes with many personal sacrifices including; having to alter eating habits, their own athletic and leisure pursuits, and time for each other as a couple (Bean et al., 2014). Despite, the substantial quantity of articles Bean et al. (2014) reviewed, there was no mention of literature focused on how the student-athlete feels about the sacrifices his/her parents have to make for their sport. Do they notice the sacrifices made for their athletic dreams? Does the

sacrifices parents make add pressure on them to succeed athletically? Do they notice their parents' anger, frustration, guilt, and resentment directed at themselves and the sport context? Does this influence how the athlete experiences sport?

The parent-child relationship and parental involvement has been widely researched (e.g., Danioni, Barni, & Rasnati, 2017; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010; Hayward et al., 2017; Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010; Rodis, 2013; Stroebel, 2006). Of these articles reviewed only five of them explore the parent-child relationships with swimmers (e.g., Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Hassell et al., 2010; Hayward et al., 2017; Rodis, 2013; Stroebel, 2006). Four out of five of these articles adopted a qualitative research approach and one of them offers a South African perspective.

Hassell et al. (2010) and Park and Kim (2014) found that parents offer athletes a wide range of support, including: tangible, informational, emotional, network, and esteem support. Female swimmers in the study conducted by Hassell et al. (2010) reported that their parents' unconditional emotional support made them feel comforted, accepted, and loved which indirectly encouraged them to be more vigorous in their athletic pursuits as well as enhanced their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Furthermore, Hassell et al. (2010) reported that swimmers felt prouder of their athletic accomplishments when their parents would compare their results with others, brag to others about their achievements or show excitement over their performances (i.e., esteem support). The above two types of support were seemingly perceived as being effective or positive forms of parental support, parents' tangible support, however, did precipitate feelings of worry and guilt at the financial and time sacrifices their parents had to make for their athletic dreams (Hassell et al., 2010). Despite these drawbacks, having their parents invest in their athletic dreams was also believed to enhance their motivation and their perceived competence (Hassell et al., 2010). Contrasting the benefits of the above support types is informational support which, according to Hassell et al. (2010) was deemed less effective by swimmers because they believed their parents did not have the necessary technical or tactical knowledge about swimming to correct errors or make comparisons between the athlete's and other athletes' performances. Consequently, athletes reported feeling frustrated by their parents' attempts at offering informational support about their swimming. The above highlights that adolescent athletes are aware of the type of parenting they find helpful or not and are more susceptible to internalising negative or critical comments. When parental support is not consistent with the needs of the athlete, it can be considered ineffective and become a source

of stress and pressure rather than a source of support (Park & Kim, 2014). This reiterates the importance of having an open channel of communication between parents and the athlete so that the parent can gain insight into their child's specific needs and how to meet these needs.

According to Rodis (2013), the more directive parents' behaviour appeared, the more pressure a swimmer experienced. Perceived parental pressure has also been associated with increased pre-competitive anxiety in adolescent athletes (Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009). Rodis (2013) also found that adolescent swimmers preferred when their parents were moderately involved in their swimming, rather than overly involved or under-involved. This is understandable since Lee and MacLean (1997) found that the more intensely parents were involved in the swimmers' sport, the more pressure they felt. Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) found that swimmers who had stopped participating in sport typically had parents who were overly involved in their swimming, placed pressure on them to excel in their performances and showed little empathy, understanding, and concern when the swimmer expressed thoughts about withdrawing from swimming. In contrast, swimmers who continued swimming reported having their parents communicate openly with them, acknowledge their efforts, and offer useful options and empathy when stressors did arise (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Parents who showed this type of care and concern towards their child during times of stress seemed to enhance the athletes' motivation to swim as well as their help-seeking behaviour. Therefore, parental involvement can have either a positive or negative effect on an athlete's motivation to swim, thoughts about dropout, and their experiences of swimming.

In summary, the level of involvement and support received from parents is appreciated by swimmers and ultimately contributes to their sense of self, their commitment to and performance in swimming. Parents' support can be viewed as overwhelming at times and could predispose the swimmer to drop out of swimming prematurely. How the participants in this study perceive their parents' involvement in their swimming will likely influence their experience of swimming in South Africa; at least, according to the above-reviewed articles.

Siblings. Articles reviewed concentrated on the influence the sibling-athlete relationship had on sport expertise (Hopwood et al., 2015), sports participation (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Nelson & Strachan, 2017), and talent development (Taylor, Collins, & Carson, 2017). Another article focused on the psychological factors associated with competing against a sibling as opposed to an unrelated opponent (Davis & Meyer, 2008). These articles seemed to highlight,

in their respective ways, the paradoxical nature of a sibling-athlete relationship. In other words, the relationship highlighted aspects like rivalry, competition, tension, and also support, closeness, empathy and co-operation (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2017). Other studies added to this by reporting that sibling rivalry sometimes enhanced the athletes' motivation and resilience and other times it left the athlete feeling angry, disappointed, annoyed, and anxious (Davis & Meyer, 2008; Taylor et al., 2017). Siblings, on the other hand, experienced emotions like bitterness, hurt, jealousy because of the inequitable division of resources (i.e., more time and money was dedicated to the student-athlete) (Bean et al., 2014).

The above articles suggest that the sibling-athlete relationship influences an athletes' experience of sport participation and development either positively or negatively.

Educators

In the review conducted by Guidotti et al. (2015), it was found that academic institutions that accommodate athletes' athletic responsibilities had a positive impact on their academic performance as well as their perceived satisfaction in this setting. To elaborate on this, I refer the reader's attention to Diakun (2015) and Pukas and Perenyi's (2015) studies below.

Pukas and Perenyi (2015) qualitatively explored the role of peers, lecturers, parents, and coaches on a student-athletes ability to cope with the demands of a dual career. Participants included male and female student-athletes at a university in Hungary. They noted that having flexible and understanding lecturers was helpful. However, in their experience, they felt that there were few cases where lecturers at the university were acquainted with them as student-athletes and therefore had limited knowledge about the difficulties of simultaneously competing as an elite athlete while pursuing a degree at a tertiary institution (Pukas & Perenyi, 2015). Those lecturers who did, however, show an understanding towards the demands of dual careers and were more tolerant of the student-athletes' heavy schedule were mostly those lecturers who either knew about the student's athletic participation or had been student-athletes themselves. Accommodations did seemingly make it easier for student-athletes to complete assignments and tests as well as meet the requirements of the course (Pukas & Perenyi, 2015).

Similar findings were found by Diakun (2015) who also used a qualitative approach to explore how teachers and their respective adolescent student-athletes felt about the roles that teachers had in the student's sport and academic achievement. Teachers and student-athletes in this

study emphasised the importance of flexibility, relationships and support when coping with the demands and pressures of a dual career (Diakun, 2015). Student-athletes felt that when teachers were more flexible with regards to assignments, class attendance, and deadlines they were able to manage their athletic and academic workload more consistently (Diakun, 2015). Furthermore, when teachers showed interest in their sport and communicated openly with them they were able to express their concerns and seek guidance from their teachers which helped motivate them to work harder on balancing their academic goals with that of their athletic goals (Diakun, 2015).

What can be understood from the above two articles is that having teachers/lecturers that understand the demands and pressures of a dual career helps a student-athlete cope more efficiently with their academic and athletic responsibilities. However, when teachers/lecturers are not fully understanding towards and accepting of a student-athletes athletic and academic demands it can hinder the student-athletes motivation as well as their motivation towards their academic career. While there does appear to be limited research on the role that teachers and lecturers play in elite athletes' sport and academic career, these two articles provide some insight into the important role that teachers and lecturers have in a student-athletes' ability to cope with and adapt and commit to the demands of a dual career.

Coach

According to Hassell et al. (2010), adolescent female swimmers rely on their coach for almost every aspect of social support, including emotional, esteem, and informational support. As such, coaches are believed to be highly valued by adolescent female swimmers. Although Holl and Burnett (2014) do not focus on swimmers, their findings do emphasise that the coach-athlete relationship does becoming increasingly important to the athlete when the athlete reaches late adolescence. As such, it reiterated the significance of the coach-athlete relationship for athletes who are between 16- and 20-years-old.

Jowett (2017) noted that the strength of the coach-athlete relationship can either improve the athletes' skills, performance, levels of satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing, or it can hinder these. How this can happen will be highlighted in successive paragraphs.

The athlete and coach need one another to develop, grow, achieve and succeed in sport (Jowett, 2017). The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is determined by closeness (feelings of

respect, trust, appreciation, and liking for one another), commitment (maintaining close relationship overtime despite challenges that arise), complementarity (co-operating with one another), and co-orientation (paralleled understanding related to the quality of their relationship; Jowett and Shanmugan, 2016 as cited in Jowett, 2017). According to Isoard-Gautheur, Trouilloud, and Gustafsson (2016) and Lu et al. (2016) a strong coach-athlete relationship has mutual effects on a coach and athletes' performance, satisfaction and self-efficacy. Furthermore, athletes may experience a reduction in burnout and enhance their resilience in adverse situations (Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2016). Driska, Kamphoff, and Armntrout (2012) refer to this as "mental toughness". They found that coaches emphasised "coachability" (which included the athletes' ability to receive positive and negative feedback, communicate effectively and develop a collaborative relationship with the coach) as a component needed for mental toughness to be cultivated within the athlete (Driska et al., 2012). It is also notable to mention that the swimming coaches believed it was important to challenge, demand, and place high expectations on athletes but also to communicate such expectations transparently so a mutual understanding can be established (Driska et al., 2012). This also, in my understanding, can provide a corrective experience for the athlete who may not have previously been able to communicate openly to his or her coach and by having the coach communicate in this manner it may suggest to the athlete that the coach is also open to listening and thus establishing a sense of trust and respect for one another. Therefore, a collaborative relationship appears fundamental for building an alliance between the coach and athlete which allows them to mutually pursue their goals (better performances). This can then foster a positive sports experience for the swimmer.

Philippe and Seiler (2006) qualitatively explored the quality of the coach-athlete relationship by utilising closeness, co-orientation, and complementarity as constructs. The male swimmers in Philippe and Seiler's (2006) study, considered the coaches' interpersonal communication skills as indispensable for establishing a strong coach-athlete relationship. Male swimmers added that a coaches' social competence (e.g., being "capable of listening to his swimmers, or understanding them, of recognising the needs of each one, and being able to guide, support, and instruct them effectively") was to some extent more instrumental for the development of their athletic performance than the coaches' technical and tactical skills (Philippe & Seiler, 2006, p. 164). Becker (2009), Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008), and Norman (2015) have also emphasised the importance of supportive and caring coaches who have strong interpersonal communication skills. In the study conducted by Norman (2015), female athletes (even those

taking part in individual sports) reported needing consistent and frequent communication with their coaches to feel integrated and a part of the team. Additionally, having coaches offer praise and encouragement when their effort, ability, and performance warranted it, enhanced their motivation, self-confidence, as well as the coach-athlete relationship (Norman, 2015). As such, Norman (2015) found that an athletes' gendered identity does influence the athletes' preferred style of communication. This is important to note, seeing that this study is focusing solely on female swimmers in a sport that is predominantly coached by males. Thus, how a coach communicates could impact the swimmers' experience either positively or negatively.

Male swimmers reiterated that a coach-athlete relationship needs to be positive for it to be worthwhile, and should it be perceived otherwise then the athlete is likely to look for a new coach (Philippe and Seiler, 2006). With this in mind, I will now focus on research that explored the psychological effects of poor coaching (Gearity & Murray, 2011), the experiences of emotional abuse amongst female swimmers (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2008b), the abused athletes' perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship (Stirling & Kerr, 2009), and the effects of coaches controlling behaviours on the athletes' intrinsic motivation (Matosic, Cox, & Amorose, 2014). This will provide an overview of how poor or ineffective coaching experiences can impact athletes' experiences.

Gearity and Murray (2011) qualitatively sought to describe the psychological effects that university-based student-athletes associated with their experiences with poor or ineffective coaching. The findings suggested that coaches who taught poorly, who had an uncaring and unfair approach to their coaching, and inhibited the athlete's mental skills significantly contributed to a poor athletic experience for the athlete and hindered their intrinsic motivation (Gearity & Murray, 2011). The athletes who participated in this study reported that the coach's erroneous and limited instructions during competitions, repetitive criticism, and discouraging attitude decreased their motivation, their focus as well as instilled a sense of self-doubt within them which subsequently caused a negative effect on their performance (Gearity & Murray, 2011). From this study, I understand that ineffective coaching instils a sense of mistrust in the coach-athlete relationship which then affects the athlete's performance and also their confidence in their abilities as well as their motivation and enjoyment in the sport. Matosic et al. (2014) adds to Gearity and Murray's (2011) findings by quantitatively exploring the role that a coach's controlling behaviour has on male and female university swimmers' autonomy, competence and intrinsic motivation. They found that coaches who do exhibit controlling

behaviours undermine the athletes' autonomy, competence and their intrinsic motivation (Matosic et al., 2014). Therefore, the coach's behaviour has the potential to negatively influence a swimmer's experience of their sport, the coach-athlete relationship, and themselves; especially if the coach's behaviours are perceived by the athlete as ineffective or poor.

The sport culture seems to reinforce the coach's power over the athlete by emphasising the notion that what the coach says should be followed rather than questioned (i.e., following an autocratic and authoritarian coaching style) (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Due to the coach being viewed in a respected position in the athletic society; because of his or her expertise, knowledge, and coaching ability, this has the potential to also place the athlete at risk to abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). In this regard, researchers have specifically explored elite female swimmers' experiences of emotional abuse across different stages of their career (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). The participants indicated that their distress was triggered by their coach's abusive behaviour which came in the form of physical behaviours (hitting or throwing objects after inadequate performance), verbal behaviours (being yelled at, criticised, or called names), and denial of attention and support (silent treatment, excluded from training) (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2008b). Such behaviours were highlighted at all levels of the female swimmers' careers; early, mid, and late-career (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). What stood out to me in these articles was that the emotional abuse appeared to be normalised and accepted by the swimmers because they believed it would transform into a better performance as they were withstanding more physical and psychological adversity while training which would thus prepare them for competition (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). In some ways, I thought that the female swimmers may have been rationalising the abuse in efforts to become more tolerant of it (over time). The long-term effects of the coach's abusive behaviours are significant in that it can positively or negatively influence the swimmers' performance, their experience of swimming, and their perceptions of themselves (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a, 2008b). More so than that, it can harm the swimmers emotional wellbeing and contribute to anxiety, depression, and overall discontent with swimming (Stirling & Kerr, 2008b). Therefore, the power that the coach has in the coach-athlete relationship has the potential to be abused by coaches in the name of "improving athletic performance" or "obtaining athletic success". These abusive behaviours also have the potential to negatively affect the athlete and the athletes' experience of swimming, if poor coaching or emotional abuse was experienced by them.

In conclusion to this section, it is evident that the strength of the coach-athlete relationship can either enhance or hinder the athletes' experience of sport. It can also either positively or negatively influence the athlete emotionally, cognitively, and physically. As athletes get older, they seem to rely more on their coach for a variety of support functions in their athletic context. A coaches' interpersonal communication skills appear paramount to the development of a strong, healthy coach-athlete relationship as well as the development of the athlete. Poor communication skills seemingly hinder it and the athletes' experience of sport.

Peers

Holl and Burnett (2014) found that athletes tended to seek out and build friendships with others who had similar experiences, challenges, and goals as they did. The reason was that these individuals were perceived as being most understanding, supportive, and accommodating of the athletes' athletic lifestyle (Holl & Burnett, 2014). Hassell et al. (2010) focused on the dimensions of social support among elite female adolescent swimmers. They found that teammates contributed significantly to female swimmers network support and esteem support. Female swimmers reportedly felt accepted, cared for, and at ease with themselves around peers who sported similar challenges and lifestyle habits and increasingly isolated, disconnected, and uncomfortable around those who did not (e.g., school peers; Hassell et al., 2010). This is consistent with other research (Jolly, 2007), that noted that athletes generally isolated from the general student population because they are unable to engage at the same level with the general student population as they do with the athletic population. Having peers who can appreciate and recognise the swimmers' effort, ability and successes also increased the athlete's motivation to swim and her perceived physical competence (Hassell et al., 2010). Therefore, athletes appear to form friendships more frequently with their fellow athletes then they do with their non-athletic peers. Additionally, an athletes' choice of friends is also largely influenced by the other person's knowledge about and understanding of high-performance sport.

Even though swimming is an individual sport, research on individual sports teams (Evans, Eys, & Wolf, 2013) has found that athletes can be influenced emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally by interactions with their teammates. As such, their experiences of sport were also influenced by group interactions. For instance, Evans et al. (2013) found that the friendships formed within individual sports groups made participating in sport worthwhile, thus serving as an incentive to continue their athletic participation. Similarly to Evans et al. (2013),

Jiang (2016) also adds, from a swimming perspective, that the presence of teammates can also positively influence a swimmers performance at mega-events. Contributing to this is; having a teammate present that can assist in positioning oneself in the competition (Jiang, 2016). Also, having emotional support and encouragement available during times of high stress and adversity can help the swimmer achieve a greater performance (Evans et al., 2013; Jiang, 2016). Another substantial finding by Evans et al. (2013) was that teammates can also enhance athletes' confidence perceptions, keep them accountable for inadequate performances in training, and assist with self-regulation. Therefore, having an individual sport team can influence an individual athlete positively. However, it can also at times hinder their potential, especially if there is poor team cohesion (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002).

According to Carron et al. (2002), cohesion in individual sports is associated with performance. This was also found to be more significant in individual female sports teams than male ones (Carron et al., 2002). Intra-team competitiveness and group composition can hinder team cohesion, especially if competitiveness is experienced as negative (e.g., presence of jealousy) and if preferences for group involvement were unequal (e.g., some members were more involved in the team than others; Evans et al., 2013). Sport peer conflict can also negatively impact team cohesion in sport teams, as observed by Holt, Knight, and Zukiwski (2012) and Patridge and Knapp (2016).

According to Holt et al. (2012), conflict relating to performance and relationships are common among female athletes working in teams. More recently, Patridge and Knapp (2016) explored adolescent female athletes and peer conflict in sport. Although their study did not solely focus on swimmers (only three out of fifteen participants were swimmers), it still offers clarity on how females experience peer conflict in both individual and group sports. Their research specifically focused on what caused the peer conflict, how peer conflict manifested, what the outcome was of having peer conflict in sport, and what attempts were made to reduce it. Their findings suggested that peer conflict primarily emerged when jealousy arose (in and out of the sport setting), or because of athletes' personal characteristics (e.g., their attitude, gender, and/ personality) (Patridge & Knapp, 2016). Their findings also highlighted three manifestations of peer conflict amongst female adolescent athletes, including: general indirect victimisation which is when the athlete would respond to conflict in an indirect, yet deliberate manner (e.g., starting rumours, teasing, dirty looks, and socially isolating members), sport-specific victimisation which aimed to either isolate the targeted person from participating in sport or

highlight the targeted persons' weaknesses (Patridge & Knapp, 2016). The final form of peer conflict was direct victimisation which included aggressive behaviour towards a specific target (e.g., directly expressing dislike for a teammate or physically hurting a teammate) (Patridge & Knapp, 2016). As one can imagine, this can make for an uncomfortable atmosphere to train in. In addition to this, conflict can have a negative effect on the athletes' emotional state (e.g., enhanced anxiety, frustration, and sadness), their performance, and team cohesion.

To conclude, athletes do tend to build relationships with other athletes more frequently than they do with non-athlete peers because co-athletes share similar experiences, challenges, and goals as they do. It seems essential for the athlete to share such experiences because if they do not, it may leave them feeling isolated, disconnected, and unsupported. Teammates can have a positive or negative effect on an athletes' experience of sport, even if the athlete takes part in an individual sport, like swimming. Finally, negative team dynamics can reduce cohesion and ultimately result in underperformance; especially among female athletes.

Role models

Role models are defined by Yancey (1998) as a person who others strive to be like or seek to imitate because they are perceived as being worthy and exemplary. Adolescent and young adult females are believed to benefit from having female role models when they begin to explore and develop their identity (Vescio, Wilde, & Crosswhite, 2005). With this in mind, it is concerning that there is a lack of female sport role models available in society (Meier, 2015). Meier (2015) noted several benefits and functions of female sport role models. She attests that female sport role models can; increase physical activity among girls and women, promote specific messages on sensitive issues on and off the sports field, challenge gender stereotypes in sport and in doing so transform existing perceptions on what girls and women are capable of, they can also provide a visible demonstration of what is possible for women and girls to achieve, and lastly, female sport role models can help guide and inspire females to remain positive as well as protect and care for themselves (Meier, 2015). With an insufficient amount of female sport role models, there is a risk that girls and women may be deprived of important emotional and symbolic support that they would need to enhance their intrinsic motivation to participate in sport (Meier, 2015). As such, female athletes (in this case, swimmers) may struggle to find someone to look up; someone who has gone through what they are currently going through and

succeeding. This may precipitate doubts regarding these athletes' own ability to succeed in the athletic domain.

Conclusion

The micro-environment does play a significant role in influencing the experiences of athletes. This is likely because the components within the micro-environment have a direct influence on the athlete at the centre of it. The main components considered in this section were the dual career (i.e., influences of the school and university setting), family, peers, coaches, and other supportive figures like educators (e.g., teachers and lecturers) and role models. Highlighted in this section were the challenges, stressors, and demands associated with pursuing a dual career and how this has a direct influence on the athletes' academic and athletic sports performance as well as the athletes' emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing. Also observed in the reviewed literature was the influence the people around them (e.g., family, coach, peers, educators, and role models) had on the athletes' development and ability to cope with the demands placed on them. All of these figures can support athletes or contribute to their stress. This can have either a positive or negative influence on the athletes' performance, commitment to and effort in sport and academics, as well as their psychological, physical, and personal growth and development.

This chapter focused on the athletic and non-athletic components identified within the athletes' micro- and macro-environment. These were identified from the ATDE working model. By doing this, the hope was to provide a holistic and comprehensive review of existing literature on these components. This will later be used to compare and contrast findings in those studies with the findings in this study. The next chapter will be focused on the methodology—specifically, the theoretical position.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY - THEORETICAL POSITION

Chapter overview

This chapter is theoretical in nature. It explains my study's research position as well as the philosophical assumptions it allows and supports. The chapter begins with a section on the two main approaches to research. Here, I also briefly explain why a qualitative approach is best suited for my study. The next section focuses on phenomenology as a philosophical underpinning and elaborates on its two main approaches; descriptive and interpretative phenomenology. I proceed by explaining IPA as a research strategy and conclude the chapter with a summary of what has been discussed in chapter 3.

Research approach

Research in the social sciences can be described as being either quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative researchers try to describe and explain the relationships that exist between variables systematically and objectively (Leppink, 2017). They do this by administering tests and/or experiments and deducing (e.g., by using statistical analysis) whether their hypothesis should be accepted or rejected (Leppink, 2017). Quantitative research is also most suitable when the researcher is trying to measure "people's attitudes, their emotional and behavioural states as well as their way of thinking" (Shields & Twycross, 2003, p. 24). In contrast, qualitative researchers are concerned with exploring, describing and interpreting "how people make sense of the world [they are in] and how they experience events [around them]" (Willig, 2013, p. 8). They are interested in engaging not only with the context the participants are in but also with the quality and meaning of the participants' interpretations, understandings and experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The researcher uses languaged data to generate theories and "hypotheses" rather than validate or reject them; as one would do with numerical data in quantitative research (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Willig, 2013). In light of the above, it can be said that these two approaches differ in the kind of knowledge they produce and the questions they seek the answers to. They, also, offer unique ways of exploring and understanding a phenomenon. Despite such differences, neither approach is considered "better" than the other because they both offer value in their own ways.

While it does appear that qualitative research is increasingly being used within the field of sport psychology, it is still predominantly quantitative. Some researchers (e.g., Crust & Nesti, 2006;

Hunger, Sparkes, & Stelter, 2003; Munroe-Chandler, 2005) believe that this may be limiting because quantitative research only offers an objective, detached perspective of the participants' subjective experiences. Participants' subjective experiences are believed to provide insight into and understanding of phenomena that numerical data cannot. These researchers believe that it is vital for researchers within the sport psychology field to adopt more qualitative research approaches. The belief is that by employing additional qualitative research approaches, it will establish a better balance between scientific and subjective knowledge. Another researcher who advocates for the qualitative approach to sport psychology research is Brustad (2009). He emphasizes the domains of personal experiences and sociocultural situated nature of sport. It is within these domains and from the perspective of the individual sports participant, that he sees qualitative research playing an essential role in enhancing understanding. He explains that:

> Without this contribution, we will never have a good understanding for why completing a marathon could transform a person's life, or how burnout is experienced by adolescent or elite athletes… we need to better understand the lived meaning of the experience and qualitative/ interpretive forms of research provide us with important tools for achieving this goal. (Brustad, 2009, p. 112)

To decide on an appropriate research approach, Harper (2012) recommends the researcher considers his or her research question, personal interest and preferences as well as the relevance and popularity of the approach. My primary research question: "What do the experiences of female student-athlete swimmers reveal about being a female swimmer in South Africa?" seeks to shed light on the world that female swimmers live in and how they perceive, create and interpret events around them by exploring and understanding their subjective experiences. My decision to utilise a qualitative approach was further justified because of the call for diverse approaches to be used in the field of sport psychology, as well as Brustad's (2009) beliefs about the contributions of a qualitative research approach to research in sport. Thus, a qualitative approach was likely to assist me to explore both the subtleties and complexities surrounding South African female swimmers and their experiences as well as add to existing quantitative knowledge in sport psychology, female athletes and swimming.

Qualitative research has many different methodologies that a researcher can adopt. These include but are not limited to the following; descriptive and interpretative phenomenology, narrative psychology, discourse analysis, ethnography, and case study. In the following section, the phenomenological approach and its main two divisions will be explored in terms of their

philosophical assumptions. This discussion thus clarifies the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions upon which my study is based.

Philosophical underpinnings

This study utilised the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology and adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach as its paradigmatic point of departure.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach used to study people's experiences. It was said to have emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century; founded by Edmund Husserl and inspired by Franz Brentano's exploration on the human consciousness and intentionality (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Jones, Brown, & Holloway, 2013). Phenomenology is believed to be valuable to psychological research because it provides ideas on how to explore, examine, and comprehend the perceptions and experiences that people have about the world they live in as well as the personal meanings (interpretations) that are elicited from these experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). There are two main approaches within the phenomenology; descriptive phenomenology and interpretative phenomenology.

Each phenomenological approach follows specific philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of reality (i.e., the ontology), what knowledge is (i.e., the epistemology), the inclusion or exclusion of the researcher's values (i.e., the axiology), and the manner in which the research is done (i.e., the methodology) (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). The following section will discuss the assumptions made by each of these approaches in more detail. This discussion thus clarifies the two main approaches of phenomenology and elucidates why this study is situated within interpretative phenomenology.

Origin of descriptive phenomenology

As already mentioned, Husserl is considered the founder of phenomenology. He believed that people are inseparable from their experiences of the world (Davidsen, 2013). Consequently, the researcher could gain a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied by carefully examining a person's experience, with depth and rigour. The researcher could also enhance his or her understanding of human consciousness and participants' experiences by ensuring the essences, or "essential structures", were identified and described in an unbiased manner (Dowling, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). According to Willig (2013), the aim was to "[return] to things themselves, as they appear to us as perceivers" (p. 83).

Because Husserl's approach to phenomenology was philosophical, researchers found it difficult to apply it within scientific and psychological settings (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Thus, Amedeo Giorgi, who remained inspired by Husserlian ideas about phenomenology, introduced descriptive phenomenology. He maintained that detailed descriptions, not interpretations, would be enough to provide insight into the essential structures of social phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). However, the researcher would first be required to reduce his or her previous knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs about the phenomenon by means of bracketing (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2013; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Origin of interpretative phenomenology

Martin Heidegger, who was a student of Husserl, was interested in people, relationships, languages and things that provide a person's world with meaning and significance (Davidsen, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). He was the first to introduce interpretative phenomenology. Interpretative phenomenology hoped to understand people's experiences by utilising interpretation rather than description (Smith et al., 2009). It was concerned with understanding the participants' subjective realities, their interpretations of their experiences and the meanings associated with such experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Willig, 2013). Since Heidegger, Jonathan Smith has made use of interpretative phenomenology through IPA. It offers researchers a phenomenological method of analysis and continues to emphasise that for the researcher to understand the social phenomenon being studied, the researcher must interpret participants' experiences by incorporating his or her views, assumptions and knowledge about the phenomenon.

Ontology of descriptive and interpretative phenomenology

Descriptive and interpretative phenomenology appear to hold the same ontological assumptions. By adopting a relativist ontological position, they assume that multiple truths exist and, as a result, that people are capable of experiencing the same event in multiple ways and attach meanings similarly (Willig, 2013). With this in mind, they concern themselves with people's subjective experiences. These experiences provide insight on the nature of the person's world and also what it means to them in a specific historical, cultural or socially influenced context (Dowling, 2007; Jones et al., 2013). Therefore, descriptive and interpretative phenomenological assumptions about the nature of reality appear to be the same.

Epistemological position of descriptive and interpretative phenomenology

Descriptive phenomenology adopts an objective epistemological position known as a post-positivist epistemology while interpretative phenomenology adopts a subjective epistemological position.

An objective epistemological position tries to capture and describe participants' experiences by excluding the researcher's interpretations of such experiences (Dowling, 2007; Willig, 2013). This is achieved by having the researcher bracket his or her assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge about the phenomenon being explored. Bracketing is an example of a reduction method. Reduction methods are used to help the researcher identify the essential structures within a participants' experience and to remain objective when describing (Guest et al., 2013; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Therefore, the descriptive phenomenologists acknowledge that each person has a subjective experience but they aim to be as objective as possible by bracketing in order to get to the essence of an experience of a phenomenon.

The interpretive phenomenologists also believe that there are subjectivities involved in understanding, but contrary to the descriptive phenomenologists they hold the belief that one cannot successfully jettison these (Willig, 2013). Instead, they incorporate it into their notion of interpretation by holding the assumption that understanding happens when subjectivities meet. Thus, it is the intersubjective or co-constructionist space where knowledge and understandings are constructed (i.e., it is not purely subjective in that it happens inside of the researcher only and it cannot be objective; Willig, 2013). For this reason, interpretative phenomenology subscribes to an intersubjective epistemology.

Axiological position of descriptive and interpretative phenomenology

Descriptive phenomenology aims for researchers to be unbiased and value-free to maintain an objective epistemological position. This is achieved by making use of reduction strategies, like bracketing. Reduction strategies are said to neutralise the researcher's values and personal biases and thus allow them to explore and describe essences without restriction (Christensen, Welch, & Barr, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

In interpretative work, the researcher cannot jettison his or her own beliefs, knowledge and preconceptions about the world. Rather, the researcher's beliefs are considered necessary, a precondition for understanding by means of interpretation. It is from these beliefs (i.e., subjective position) that the researcher understands the participant's experiences (i.e.,

subjectivities) (Davidsen, 2013; Willig, 2013). This is referred to as double hermeneutics. Thus, interpretative work cannot be value-free or unbiased. For the interpretative researcher, it is important to know his or her values, biases, and subjective opinions when interpreting participants' experiences. This is so because although the research is by the researcher, it is not about the researcher.

Descriptive phenomenology's methodology

In efforts to generate a universal description of a phenomenon, the researcher has to utilise the gathered experiences as objectively as possible (Dowling, 2007; Jones et al., 2013). To remain objective, value-free, and unbiased, the researcher is also encouraged not to do a literature review so that his or her knowledge and pre-understandings about the phenomenon is further reduced (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Gathered experiences are referred to as life-world descriptions and researchers typically make use interviews or written accounts to gather them (Willig, 2013). Both gathering methods are unstructured and open-ended so that it provides the participant with the freedom to describe their experiences as they had experienced them and not be formally guided or restricted by the researcher (Jones et al., 2013).

An analysis method that is frequently used in descriptive phenomenology is called the Duquesne Phenomenological Research Method (DPRM) (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Using this method, the researcher will extract the essential structures that describe the phenomenon from the real-world descriptions, without making interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Thereafter, the researcher will generate a universal description of the phenomenon (Jones et al., 2013). The end-goal is for the universal description to be rigorous, unbiased and durable.

Interpretative phenomenology's methodology

Interpretative phenomenologists interpret the participants' experiences and attempt to understand how the participant understands the phenomenon in his or her context (Charlick, Pincombe, McKellar, & Fielder, 2016). Conducting a literature review prior to conducting an interpretative study is both valuable and necessary because it will widen the researcher's knowledge about the phenomenon, assist in focusing the study, guide the researcher when he or she is developing the interview guide, and contribute meaningful interpretations during data analysis (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

When gathering data, interpretative researchers will primarily use semi-structured interviews, diaries (audio, video, or written), or reflective diaries (for researchers) to elicit the experiences,

thoughts, and feelings related to the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2013). When conducting a semi-structured interview, it is recommended that questions are open-ended (expansive) and explore the participants' experiences and understandings about the phenomenon being explored (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This will help the researcher gather rich, detailed and contextualised data.

To analyse the gathered data, the researcher engages in a process called double hermeneutics. This process requires the researcher to make interpretations about the participants' experiences. When interpreting, the researcher tries to understand the meaning that the participant attached to the world he or she lives in and the things that are within it (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The most frequently used method of analysis in interpretative phenomenology is IPA. It tries to assist researchers with the interpretation of the data by employing "steps", "stages", or "phases" of analysis. This approach is considered iterative and inductive (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This means that even though there are certain "steps" in the analysis, the researcher can freely move back and forth so that the themes and understandings are discovered in the data rather than imposed on it. The end goal is to understand the phenomenon beyond just its description (Smith et al., 2009).

Integrating the similarities and differences

From the discussion on the similarities and differences between interpretative and descriptive phenomenology, it is clear that both are concerned with the subjective experience and making use of these subjective experiences to gain access into the phenomenon being explored. However, the main difference appears to be related to the knowledge they aim to generate and the assumptions they have about objectivity. From a descriptive phenomenological perspective, the knowledge it produces is objective. It generates descriptions about the phenomenon without the researcher making any interpretations about the participant's experiences. The descriptive researcher must and can remain an uninvolved observer; only describing the essence of what he or she observes. On the other hand, interpretative phenomenology produces knowledge that is dependent upon the researcher's interpretation of the participant's interpretation of the phenomenon being studied within a particular context. Both of these phenomenological approaches provide different understandings of people's subjective experiences and thus produce different knowledge about the phenomenon being studied.

This study utilised the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology; more specifically, it adopted an interpretative phenomenological position. This means that the knowledge it aimed

to produce emphasised the quality and texture of the participants' subjective experiences and the meaning of such in specific contexts. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a phenomenological inquiry that stems from the IP approach. Therefore, IPA was the most suitable choice based on the purpose of my research, which was explained earlier in chapter 1. I will discuss IPA in the next section as this study's research strategy.

Research Strategy

Drawing theoretically on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and honouring the ideographic nature of research, IPA aims to explore how people interpret or reflect on the events, objects, and people in their lives (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Thus, IPA hopes to examine the manner in which people understand their personal experiences. To achieve this, Larkin and Thompson (2012) emphasise that the researcher has to be able to "engage with the personal accounts of other people who are 'always-already' immersed in a linguistic, relational, cultural and physical world" (p. 75). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is also described as being ideographic because it draws attention to contextual detail and particularities relating to the phenomenon under scrutiny.

To understand how a participant makes sense of his or her subjective experiences, the researcher interprets the experiences through a process called double hermeneutics, which involves two "steps". In the first step, the participant has to reflect on the significance of his or her experience at a specific moment in time (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Then, the researcher interprets these reflections to understand their meaning (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This means that the findings of my study were based on interpretations of interpretations. Hermeneutics is about interpretative understanding, which means that researchers are interested in both what there is to understand as well as how we came to understand it in that way (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This requires one to be reflective and acknowledge one's own beliefs and assumptions about the phenomenon in order to identify them and then to consider how they may assist or hinder one's understanding of the participant's experiences and their meaning. As a researcher, I wanted to engage with the female swimmers' reflections by exploring their expert insights on their experiences. In doing so, I attempted to deepen our understanding of what it means to be a South African female swimmer.

I was interested to see whether IPA has previously been used in the sport psychology discipline. I found that Smith (2011) evaluated IPA's contribution to research by reviewing three major

databases; web of science, medline and psychinfo, from years 1996 to 2008. Between these dates, he identified 293 published papers that adopted IPA as their research methodology. These studies were mainly adopted in the healthy psychology discipline, with emphasis on patient's illness experiences and psychological distress (Smith, 2011). The use of IPA in sport and exercise psychology was also present, however, only seven related studies were identified. Therefore, these findings can suggest two things: firstly, that IPA is increasingly being used as a qualitative research method and secondly, that IPA can be successfully adopted in the sport and exercise psychology discipline.

Allen-Collinson (2009), like Smith (2011), noted that there is little use of phenomenological approaches within sport and exercise psychology. While she advocates for an existential-phenomenological approach inspired by Maurice Merleu-Ponty to sport-related research, Callary, Rathwell, and Young (2015a) report that, when investigating the lived experiences of a specific sport population, IPA is rigorous and produced rich and detailed data. Additionally, Callary, Rathwell, and Young (2015b), explore the master's swimmers' experiences with coaches through IPA and yielded rich results on what the swimmers get, what they want and what they need from their coaches. In light of the opinions above it seems that IPA is an appropriate research strategy to achieve the purpose of my study. Furthermore, using IPA as a qualitative strategy can contribute to the "methodological diversity" that Krane and Baird (2005) advocate for.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the two main approaches to research and allowed for an exploration of phenomenology as well as the two main schools that developed from it; DP and IP. Thereafter, IPA was discussed as a research strategy. This discussion highlighted the value of a qualitative enquiry in sport psychology, with emphasis on IP and IPA in sports research. I concluded the chapter by personally reflecting on the use of IP as a research position. The following chapter, Chapter 4, presents the research inquiry that was guided by an IP position, by means of an IPA research strategy.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY - RESEARCH INQUIRY

Chapter overview

I will begin this chapter by discussing the particularities related to the research participants. These particularities include the sampling method and the sampling criteria. Thereafter, I will state the research process used to conduct and analyse the gathered data as well as the ethical considerations for the study. I will also indicate the principles I adhered to in order to improve the quality of my research study. To conclude the chapter I will provide a personal reflection on what was learnt and personally gained from conducting the research.

Research participants

Sampling method

I used the sampling method recommended by most IPA researchers which is purposive sampling (Willig, 2013). As the name suggests, participants were selected because they would be able to provide a good personal account of the phenomenon being explored (Jones et al., 2013). By means of purposive sampling, I was able to make sure that the research problem was relevant and significant to the participants in efforts to yield a better understanding of South African female swimmers' experiences. The swimming club manager assisted me in selecting the participants as he was familiar with the swimming population at the Tshwane-based University's swimming club as well as had an understanding of what this research study aimed to understand.

Sampling criteria

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommend that a smaller sample size; from one to eight participants, is used in an IPA study. That way, the researcher can gather rich and in-depth experiences from their participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). A smaller amount of participants would also allow the researcher to interpret experiences in more detail without being overwhelmed by the quantity of data gathered (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). With this in mind, this study had eight elite female swimmers voluntarily participate in it. To ensure confidentiality, the participants' specific ages are not disclosed and pseudonyms are used in any reference to these participants. Pseudonyms included, in no specific order: *Katie, Angie, Shelley, Pearl, Darla, Dory, Lola,* and *Cordelia*.

The following is the specific selection criteria that assisted with purposive sampling:

1. All participants were members of the swimming club at the Tshwane-based University. This ensured the participant's experiences were understood within this specific context;
2. All participants were required to have been in professional training, at the Tshwane-based University's swimming club, for a minimum of one year. This allowed for all the participants to be a part of the third and fourth level of swimming performance; performance development phase and senior phase, respectively;
3. All participants were between the ages of 16 to 20;
4. All participants who are over the age of 18 were required to be registered for an undergraduate degree. This ensured that the under-18-year-olds and the over-18-year-olds shared experiences of being swimmers and students simultaneously;
5. Lastly, all participants were female, as it was female swimmers who had difficulties qualifying for the 2016 Olympic Games as well as the lack of research in this area.

The selection criteria were formulated with the research aim and the phenomenological underpinnings of the study as guiding principles. The selection criteria assisted in making the sample as homogenous as possible so that the research could say something about a group of people who share the experience of a similar phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). In this instance, being a female swimmer in South Africa. Even though they may all share experiences around a specific phenomenon, the swimmers' experiences remain idiosyncratic because they are unique and subjective; offering different experiences around the same phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

Selection of participants

The swimming club manager invited eight elite female swimmers (four over-18 and four under-18 years old) who met the inclusion criteria to an information session. The manager selected these eight female swimmers from two existing squads at the swimming club; one of these was coached by a female and the other was coached by a male. This was not intentionally done. The parents of the female swimmers who were under the age of 18 as well as my supervisor, Adri Prinsloo, and me, Andrijana Jeremic were all present at this information session. The swimming club's manager informed the female swimmers, and the respective parents, that the information session was related to research being conducted about female swimmers in a South African context and their experiences. The information session was thirty minutes in duration

and it was held at a venue within the Tshwane-based University on a Friday afternoon; after their afternoon training session, for convenience.

The information session had five goals;

The *first* was to introduce myself as the primary researcher and Adri Prinsloo as my supervisor and the support for the study. My contact details, as well as those of my supervisor, were provided to all the participants and their respective parents in order for them to contact us if they wished to remain informed about the study and the subsequent results (Appendix A).

The *second* was to inform the female swimmers and the necessary parents or guardians about the nature and purpose of the study. To ensure that all information regarding the study was effectively communicated, I handed out information sheets; which were attached to the invitation to the study as well as the consent form. To make sure that I discussed all relevant information regarding the nature, purpose, process and consequences of the research, I went through this information sheet with the female swimmers and their parents/ guardians. These information sheets, consent forms and invitation letters were scanned and emailed to the parents/guardians as well as the female swimmers so that they can refer back to them, if necessary.

Third, it aimed to give the swimmers and the parent's time to ask questions and to clarify any concerns that they may have regarding their participation. After going through the information sheet, there was time to discuss any questions or uncertainties that they may have had. However, there were no questions asked and everyone confirmed that they understood the information provided clearly.

The *fourth* goal was to make sure that the swimmers and their parents knew any potential risks that may result from the study as well as the support that would be offered if such a case was to happen. Adri Prinsloo, who is also a clinical psychologist, discussed her role as support in the case of any emotional discomforts that resulted from the interview. Her contact details were provided on the consent form.

The *fifth* aim was to have the female swimmers voluntarily consent, or assent, to participate in my study by signing the consent or assent form. This was done at the end of the information session when all information regarding the study has been provided to them and questions had been answered. It was emphasised that even though they may have agreed to the study, they could withdraw at any stage without adverse consequences.

When the information session was complete and the consent or assent to participate in the study was obtained, I thanked everyone for their time and their willingness to volunteer in my study. Four female swimmers were interviewed that evening, after the information session. These swimmers were interviewed at the venue we had the information session in. The following day, the remaining four female swimmers were interviewed at an office at the swimming club. This was done in such a way due to convenience to both the female swimmers, their parents, and the researcher.

Research Process

In this section, I will highlight the research process that was used to conduct the study as well as the approach and steps taken to analyse the gathered data. The research process consisted of six stages. This includes the permission stage which was obtained before the onset of the study and the information session. Additionally; the interview, transcription, analysis and ethical consideration stages will be discussed.

Permission

I obtained the necessary research ethics approval for this research study on the 31st of August 2017 from Prof Maxi Schoeman, the Deputy Dean of Postgraduate Studies and Ethics, in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (Appendix B).

In addition to this, on the 26th of May 2017, the Deputy Director of Sport, at the specific Tshwane-based University where I hoped to conduct my research, also granted me written permission to approach that University's swimming club. This permission was paramount as it allowed me to recruit female swimmers within this swimming club. These swimmers ultimately became the participants in this study. In efforts for the University and swimming club to remain confidential, and thus to protect the participants' true identities, I have not added this permission letter as an appendix.

The Deputy Director of Sport also introduced me to the relevant swimming club manager, who was the gatekeeper as well as the cultural broker within the study. Obtaining verbal consent from the swimming club manager to conduct the research study meant that the female swimmers felt considerably more comfortable participating in the study as it was endorsed by someone they trusted.

Having obtained permission to conduct the study, from the people above, I was able to approach and recruit participants from the swimming club and to continue with the next stage of the research process.

An information session

The next stage of the research process was to ensure that the potential research participants, and the parents of the under-18-year-old female swimmers, were informed about the research study and its subsequent research process. I obtained written consent from the parents of the under-18-year-old female swimmers as well as written consent from the 18-and-above female swimmers. The consent form, research information sheet, as well as time for clarification provided sufficient information regarding the nature and purpose of the study by highlighting any anticipated risks, potential benefits, and requirements to participation (Guest et al., 2013). This was done to ensure that the parents and the female swimmers were able to make an informed decision about their participation, or their child's participation, in the current study. Written assent from all the under-18 female swimmers was also obtained. It stated that they were willing to participate in the research study and understood the nature of the study, the potential risks of participating in the study, as well as what was expected of them as participants in the study.

Upon receiving the required consent or assent from relevant parents and female swimmers, I proceeded to the interview stage of the research process.

Interview

I used semi-structured interviews as a data-gathering method. By using a semi-structured interview, I hoped to elicit detailed stories, thoughts, and feelings about being a female swimmer within South Africa, from South African female swimmers themselves (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews are preferred in IPA because they allow the researcher to be flexible in his or her exploration with the participant of their experiences while still ensuring that the participant and researcher remained focused on the aim of the study (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). In this specific study, the semi-structured interview was valuable because it allowed the participant the opportunity to voice her experiences freely and comprehensively, develop ideas and express her concerns, thus providing an experiential perspective on being a South African female swimmer (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

As mentioned already, I interviewed eight elite South African female swimmers; four were under-18 and four were over-18 years old. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 45- and 65-minutes. All eight of the interviews were conducted over two days at venues that were familiar to and convenient for the female swimmers. In order to enhance my transcription accuracy, I audio-recorded the interviews (Smith et al., 2009). After the second day of interviews, my supervisor interviewed me about my experience of the interview process. This 45-minute interview was audio-recorded and served as a reflection on the interviewing process.

The interview guide was developed with the study's research question as a focus (Appendix C). Furthermore, the reviewed literature also served as a backdrop and motivation for the interview guide. The questions and prompts formulated in the guide were congruent with the interpretative phenomenological intent of the study.

I used the interview guide as a supportive tool while conducting the interviews rather than a dictating tool; which would have to be followed precisely with little flexibility (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This meant that the order of the questions in the guide were not necessarily followed; rather I used the dialogue to guide and formulate the questions I asked so that it would extend and enrich the responses given by the participant (Smith et al., 2009). Probing questions like "how was that for you?", "tell me more about that", and "what did that make you think or feel?" were frequently used along with reflections to clarify my understanding of what was being said. For example, I would reflect by stating "it sounds to me as though … is this what you meant?" At the same time, the interview guide also helped me re-focus the interview when necessary.

Transcription

Qualitative research works with languaged data which takes form through written text (Polkinghorne, 2005). If the data is gathered orally, then transcription is necessary to transform it into written text (Polkinghorne, 2005). Audio-recordings are used to ensure that the researcher can transcribe the interviews verbatim, thus enhancing transcription detail and accuracy (Smith et al., 2009). According to Jones et al. (2013), transcriptions should be done by the researcher because it allows the researcher to familiarise themselves with and appreciate the participants' experiences more. Therefore, shortly after the interviews were conducted, I transcribed all of the audio-recorded interviews myself so that I could familiarise myself with each person's account and enhance my knowledge of the data. As per Smith et al. (2009),

notable non-verbal utterances, significant pauses and hesitations were also included to ensure that I effectively captured most of the relevant aspects of the participant's experience and the meaning of the content used in the participant's account.

Interpretation

I used IPA as a data analysis method for the study. This data analysis method aims to explore the participant's experience from his or her perspective as well as capture the quality and texture of such subjective experiences by analysing all eight interview transcripts according to the following stages identified by Smith and Osborn (2008):

The *first stage* required me to familiarise myself with the original data as well as enter the female swimmers' worlds. I did this by reading and re-reading each transcript 3 to 4 times. While doing this, I jotted down my initial thoughts, observations and ideas about what was said, how it was said, and what this told me about the swimmer's experience. Each time I read the transcripts I would elaborate or add to my previous thoughts, observations, explanations, or ideas. I also added a reflection on where these thoughts, observations, or understandings came from.

The *second stage* of analysis is when I developed the initial notes into emergent themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). After making the initial notes I decided to make a table that included the following headings: quotes, initial notes, reflection, and emergent theme(s). This allowed me to have more structure and helped save time when I entered into stage three and four, where I would connect the emergent themes and produce a table of themes for that specific interview. In order to turn my initial notes into emergent themes I went back to the beginning of the transcript. I began to identify themes that emerged from the detailed and comprehensive annotations I made in *stage one* rather than the transcript itself, as was suggested by Noon (2018). I began to transform the initial notes I made into concise phrases that reflected the complexity, connections, interrelationships and patterns initially highlighted in the transcript (Smith et al., 2009). These emergent themes were both a reflection of the participant's original words and thoughts as well as my interpretations of their words and thoughts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Therefore, this entailed a double hermeneutic process: each theme that was formed represented my understanding of the participant's interpretation of their experience.

In *stage three* I sought to connect the emergent themes by finding the conceptual similarities they shared and I colour-coded those (Smith & Osborn, 2008). When most the emergent themes

were clustered together (i.e., made into sub-themes) I decided to refer back to the transcripts and compare the theme with the raw data in efforts to confirm they were consistent with one another. According to Noon (2018), this is a valuable step to ensure whether the essence of what the participant said was still true even if you as the researcher drifted from the participants' exact words because of interpretation.

In *stage four*, I took the sub-themes from the previous stage and compiled them into superordinate themes which were then placed into a table (Noon, 2018, Smith & Osborn, 2008). Sub-themes were situated underneath their respective superordinate theme and paired with a relevant quote from the transcripts; including its line number(s).

In *stage five*, I moved onto the next transcript and repeated stages one to four. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), I did my best to approach each case "on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality" (p. 100). Even though I did my best to approach each account on its own, I did find it difficult not to bring observations made in previous transcripts. So, in efforts to address this, I jotted down what it reminded me of in previous interviews and then I found it easier to proceed with my interpretation of the next case with more ease. These jotted down notes also helped me when I was searching for recurring themes in each of the participants' transcripts.

Once all the transcripts were interpreted I proceeded to *stage six* (i.e., the final stage). I drew up a final table of superordinate themes and respective sub-themes. In this stage, I went back to the table of themes I made for each participant and reviewed it. This stage also required me to identify which themes should be prioritised, discarded, or combined (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Write-up

An illustration was used to communicate the themes visually to the reader and also to orient the reader to the chapter (i.e., what order the themes will be discussed in; Chapter 5). The write-up was considered an expansive process; one that was concerned with explaining, discussing and illustrating the main themes and subthemes identified during the interpretation stage. Each theme was accompanied by supportive quotations, which were taken verbatim out of their transcriptions. I concluded the chapter with a summary of the chapter.

Ethical considerations

To ensure the ethical treatment of each participant, the following ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research process. In this section, I hope to elaborate on informed consent and assent, confidentiality and anonymity, efforts to avoid harm and offering support, as well as the storage of the study's data.

Informed consent and assent

Before engaging in research, researchers are required to obtain written informed consent from all of the potential participants. According to Kuther and Posada (2004), informed consent can be defined as "the authorization given by a research participant to a researcher. It is an intentional authorization [which means that] it must be given knowingly, rationally, with volition and without coercion" (p. 162). If children or adolescents are involved in the research study, as was the case with this research study, then the researcher is required to obtain written informed consent from the minor's parent or guardian as well as the minor's written assent. "Assent" implies that the minor is willing to participate in the research study and that he/she has an understanding of what the research is about, the study's potential risks and benefits, as well as what will be expected of them in their role as a participant in the particular study (Kuther & Posada, 2004).

In light of the above, informed consent was obtained from the parents of the participants who were under the age of 18, alongside these minor participants' assent. Informed consent was also obtained by all of the 18-and-over participants. It was reiterated to the participants and relevant parents that even though they had consented/ assented to participate in the study, the participants would be able to withdraw at any time if they were so inclined, without any repercussions resulting from their decision to withdraw.

Confidentiality and anonymity

All recordings, transcriptions, and information obtained from the interviews remained confidential. This meant that no personal information was reported. Pseudonyms were used during supervision, in the study, in the transcripts as well as my research journal (Guest et al., 2013). In addition to this, I also stripped other identifiable details from the study. This includes the female swimmers' specific ages and the institution that they swim at. Furthermore, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews myself and used encryption tools to secure the

electronic data on my personal computer (Guest et al., 2013). Therefore, ensuring the information that could identify the participant is kept confidential.

Anonymity is concerned with the participant remaining unknown to the researcher (Jones et al., 2013). However, due to the nature of IPA and the data gathering method used, I could not offer them the right to anonymity within this present study. I informed them of this during the information session.

Avoiding harm and offering support

In the case that specific questions asked during the interview prompted emotional discomfort while the participant was reflecting, sharing, or recalling a particular experience, the participant was notified that they may stop the interview, take a break, not answer, or skip to the next question (Thompson & Chambers, 2013). Additionally, any participants who required emotional support, as a result of the interview conducted, were able to receive psychological support from the psychologist supervising the present study, free of charge. These particularities regarding avoiding harm and offering support were discussed with the swimmers and their respective parents during the information session.

Storage of research material

The transcriptions of interviews and all documents that are related to the study will be safely stored in the UP's psychology department for a minimum of fifteen years. The data will be stored for archiving and potential re-use. In line with the UP research requirements, this has been addressed in the letter of informed consent. This also ensures limited access to the documentation related to the current study (Guest et al., 2013; Thompson & Chambers, 2012).

Improving the quality of research

According to Shenton (2004), Guba and Lincoln's four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative data have been increasingly favoured and accepted. With this in mind and in efforts to formulate good quality research, I made use of Guba and Lincoln's four criteria which include; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 cited in Shenton, 2004).

The confidence with which the research accurately records the phenomenon being explored is known as *credibility* (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 cited in Shenton, 2004). To address this criterion I first consulted with the sport deputy director at the Tshwane-based University. This allowed

me to familiarise myself with the sport and swimming culture at this university as well as establish a relationship of trust with the sports deputy director who then was able to introduce me to the swimming club manager who could be regarded as the gatekeeper that would allow me to directly access the female swimmers. To foster a collaborative relationship I also suggested that all parties involved; the researcher, my supervisor, the swimming club manager, and the sports deputy director, meet and discuss my study's aims and objectives. This allowed me to gain further insights into the swimming culture in South Africa as well as elite female swimmers in this context before I gathered any data. Therefore, I was able to ensure credibility in this instance by familiarising myself with the stakeholders in the female swimmers' micro-environment as well as the indirect influences of the macro-environment and ensure that the participants were selected on the basis that their experiences were relevant to what the study's research question was. Another way I aimed to address the credibility criterion was to help ensure the participants were honest in their interviews (Shenton, 2004). To assist with this I gave the female swimmers the opportunity to withdraw at any time without explanation or adverse consequences. I also made it explicit to the participants that pseudonyms and identifying information would be kept confidential. Furthermore, each participant was encouraged to speak openly and honestly about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Frequent debriefing sessions between me and my supervisor drew my attention to and helped me reflect on my experiences, perceptions and understandings (Shenton, 2004). This is believed to assist in establishing the credibility of the study. An example of one of these debriefing sessions was after I had conducted the interviews and upon discussing my experience in this capacity my supervisor helped me recognise my own biases, preferences, and understandings. My research was also frequently reviewed by my supervisor which provided a fresh perspective on the study, especially since her perspective is not as connected as mine is, because of my own experiences as a female student-athlete (Shenton, 2004). Thus offering a different perspective on the project and allowing me to successfully build and learn from her comments and observations. In addition to this, credibility was also addressed by frequent reflection on the research techniques used (transcribing, interviewing, analysing, researching, arguing) and interpretations made which allows the project to be conducted again (Shenton, 2004).

The extent to which research findings of the study can be applied to other situations is referred to as *transferability*; the second criterion to ensuring trustworthiness in a qualitative research

study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 cited in Shenton, 2004). In efforts to address this criterion, it is recommended that a full description of the contextual factors is given so that the reader is able to better understand the context in which the research was conducted and so that they can assess whether findings can be applied to people in other settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 cited in Shenton, 2004). With this in mind, I included the area that the research was based, the selection criteria, number of participants, data gathering method used, number and length of interviews, and the period over which the data was gathered (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 cited in Shenton, 2004). Providing these details is believed to assist with transferability; for instance to other female swimmers in different geographical areas or perhaps even female athletes participating in sports other than swimming.

Dependability refers to the extent to which another study can yield the same results if the same methods, participants, and context were used (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 cited in Shenton, 2004). To address this criterion, I provided a thorough and transparent description of the methodology and method used in the present study so that future researchers can repeat the work at a different time (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 cited in Shenton, 2004). Additionally, I employed the code-recode procedure identified by Krefting (1991) to enhance the dependability of the study.

Confirmability is the final criterion. According to Shenton (2004), confirmability is associated with research objectivity. More specifically, Shenton (2004) explains that it is the extent to which the researcher can ensure that the research findings are a result of the experiences of the participants and not influenced by the researcher's preferences, characteristics or experiences. In hermeneutic inquiry (or interpretative phenomenology), Moules (2002) explains that the role of the researcher is "not that the writing is by *me*, but it is not *about me*" (p. 12). What is meant by this is that in interpretative phenomenology, the researcher cannot remove his or her subjectivities from their research. However, the researcher can recognise these subjectivities exist and be cognisant of how these subjectivities emerge in the research process (e.g., when listening to the participant, what researcher hears, what stands out to the researcher, how this is then interpreted by the researcher) (Moules, 2002). With Moules' suggestion, I tried to be mindful of my experiences, preferences, characteristics, and biases and tried to be more cognisant of how they influenced my interaction with the participants during their interviews as well as my interpretation of their transcripts. Having a reflexive journal helped me in this process.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is concerned with acknowledging the role of the researcher and how the researcher's values and assumptions guide the presenting research (Spencer & Ritchie, 2012; Willig, 2013). Reflexivity is pivotal to hermeneutic (i.e., interpretative phenomenological) research because a researcher needs to have clarity not only of what interpretations are made but also how they developed. Therefore, reflexivity is of particular importance in my study because I was a female student-athlete. The difference between the participants and me are that I competed in athletics, not in swimming. However, we both competed in an individual sport discipline while also studying. With this being said, these aspects did influence my insights and understandings of the experiences of female swimmers. Therefore, it became important to be aware of and reflect on my experiences and feelings about the research topic as well as my encounters with the participants and their accounts (Spencer & Ritchie, 2012).

As a female student-athlete, I initially felt that I could to some extent imagine how they would respond to my interview questions. These thoughts were also largely influenced by the amount of literature I reviewed as well as my past experiences in working with female student-athletes in my capacity as a Student Psychologist in 2017. I found myself having to be mindful of my role as a researcher and not engage with my participants as a therapist. Initially, it was challenging for me to separate my personal experiences; especially because the interviews were conducted in such a short period of time and offered me limited time to reflect fully on what that being interpreted and why. Despite this, I was able to reflect on my own experiences and perceptions from those of my participants by means of supervision after the interviews. Later on, when I began transcribing and analysing the transcripts I began my reflexive journal which allowed me to maintain a degree of transparency throughout this research process. The journal was used as a space for me to describe how and why decisions were made at different stages of the research process; acknowledge, express and examine my thoughts and feelings relating to the research process, my reactions to the findings that either challenge or support my own assumptions, and explore the impact the research had on the participants in my study (Spencer & Ritchie, 2012).

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the research participants. This included an exploration of the sampling method used (purposive sampling) and the sampling criteria. Thereafter, I explained the six-stage research process that I used to conduct the present research study. I also

highlighted how the data gathered was analysed by means of IPA. Ethical considerations were stated for the present study as well as the principles I followed to ensure the quality of the research. I concluded with a reflection about what this research process has taught me as a researcher. The following chapters will describe the research findings.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Chapter overview

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of eight South African female student-athlete swimmers by means of interpretative phenomenological analysis. The main focus of this chapter will be to present and discuss the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the transcripts.[3] The chapter begins with a brief section on the participants' demographic characteristics. Then, the main themes and their respective subthemes will be addressed. The main themes are: the context, the body, the social and relational, the decision, career, and staying afloat. Additionally, integrated themes (emotional self and ways of thinking) will also be addressed. During this time, I will also highlight how the findings of this research either substantiate, contribute to, or are in accordance with other literature reviewed in chapter two. This chapter will then conclude by summarising what was discussed in the chapter.

The participants

All eight pre-elite and elite female student-athlete swimmers were recruited from a swimming club based at a university in Tshwane, South Africa. With assistance from the swimming club's manager, I was able to ensure that these participants met the required selection criteria and thus were as homogenous as possible.

Four of the participants were under the age of 18 and four were over the age of 18. I specify exactly which participant is over- or under-18 but do not specify specific ages to maintain confidentiality. The ages ranged from 16 to 20. All participants were female and only one participant was an athlete of colour; the others were Caucasian. All eight participants were enrolled in either secondary or tertiary education.

[3] In accordance with the philosophical assumptions of this study, the themes and subthemes that will be discussed are based on my interpretations of the participants' interpretations of specific events and the world around them. Subsequently, these themes and subthemes are not an "only" or "absolute" truth and had another researcher interpreted the same transcripts, alternative themes and subthemes could have surfaced.

Two of four the participants currently in secondary school were attending the same "sports" school. A sports school is specifically designed to assist student-athletes with the demands of a dual career. The other two participants under the age of 18 were attending different schools, but both schools were more oriented towards academics than sports. All four of the participants currently enrolled in tertiary education (i.e., the 18-and-overs) are attending the same university, which is located in Tshwane. Two of these four participants are enrolled for sport-related degrees and two for non-sport related degrees.

It is also important to mention that half of the participants were currently being coached by a female coach and the other half by a male coach.

For reference, the pseudonyms used in this specific study are: *Katie* (under-18), *Angie* (over-18), *Shelley* (over-18), *Pearl* (over-18), *Darla* (under-18), *Dory* (under-18), *Lola* (over-18), and *Cordelia* (under-18).[4]

My personal reflection

Since I began this research study, I felt this strong sense of responsibility to keep my participants' identities as confidential as I can. What contributed to this was having a couple of the participants frequently seek reassurance from me that what they said would remain "anonymous". I got the sense that they were fearful of expressing their thoughts and feelings openly because they might be punished or criticised for it. In addition to this, there are so few South African female swimmers competing at this level that even sharing information like their specific age and the events in which they each compete in could risk them being recognised by someone who is knowledgeable about female swimmers in South Africa. It was this realisation that sometimes left me feeling stuck; especially, when deciding what information to share about the participants. I felt conflicted between what needed to be shared (so the reader could better understand the factors affecting the participant's experiences) and what information would be too risky to share. Also, I wondered how this may affect the findings of my study.

[4] This list is not the order in which the interviews were conducted.

Themes and discussion

This section will analyse and discuss six main themes that emerged from the study as well as those subthemes associated with the main themes. The main themes reflect experiences that all or nearly all of the participants had. In contrast, the subthemes were not mentioned by all of the participants but they were significant because of how frequently they were mentioned in the respective participants' transcripts. Together these themes describe the experiences of South African female student-athlete swimmers who compete at a pre-elite to elite level, at a swimming club located within a Tshwane-based university in Gauteng, South Africa.

Figure 2 represents a summary of the main and subthemes. It will also dictate the order they will be discussed in. The main themes are: the context, the body, the social and relational, the decision, career, and staying afloat. Subthemes located within the white boxes have arrows linking them to the title of the main theme they belong to. Two integrated themes are located in the yellow box. Integrated themes are themes that reappear in all of the main themes (except for staying afloat), hence their arrows point to the yellow permeable lines that border the circles of main themes. Integrated themes include: the emotional self and ways of thinking. They will be discussed before the staying afloat theme.

Applicable extracts have been taken verbatim from the participants' transcriptions and are used as substantiation for the themes.[5]

[5] For confidentiality reasons, when I speak about Grades, Degrees, or other specific information (e.g., who swam at Olympic trials), I only refer to the participants as "participant" and not by their pseudonym.

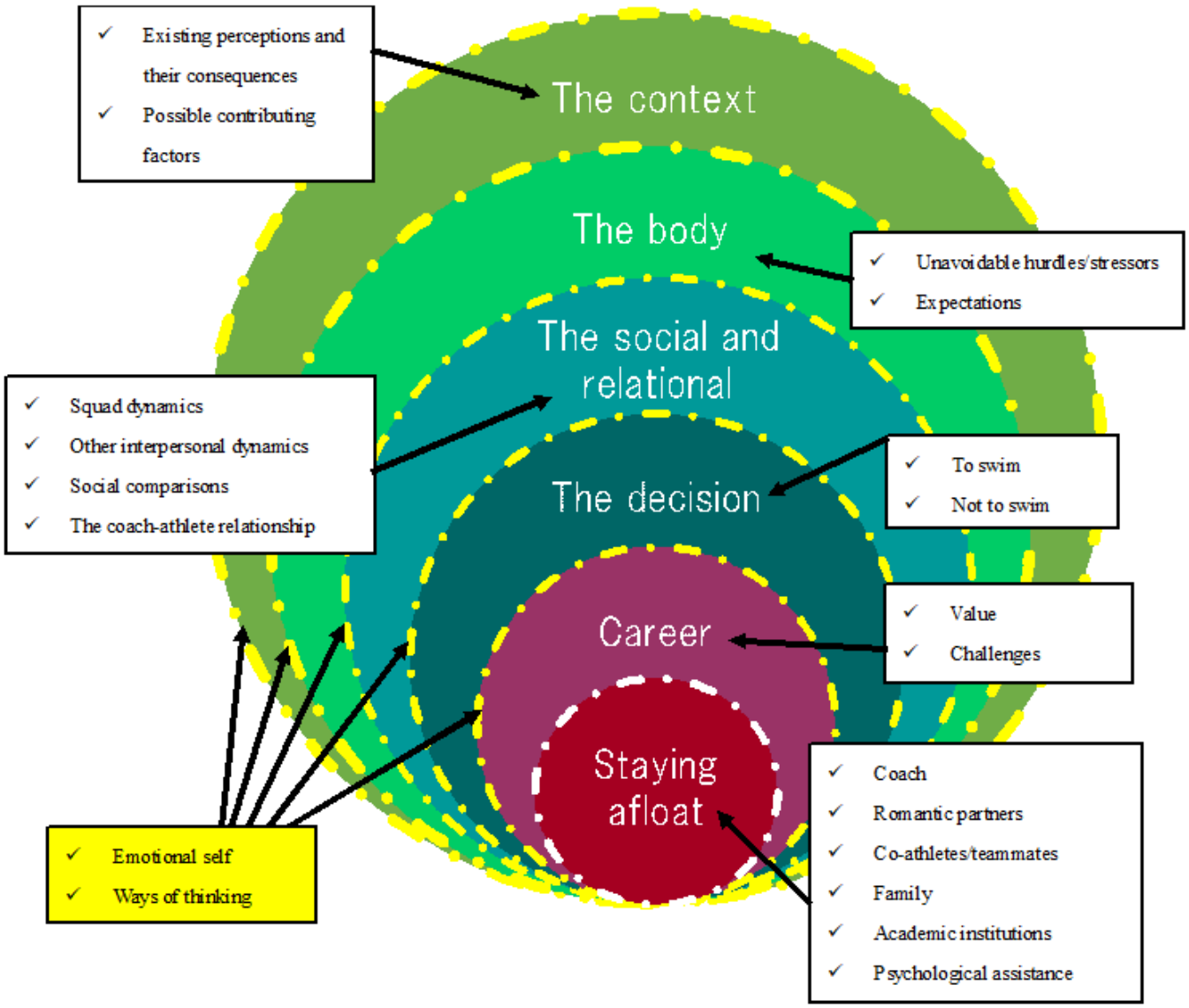


Figure 2: A summary of the six main themes, their corresponding subthemes and integrated themes that emerged from the analysis.

The context[6]

The themes, and subthemes emerged when participants were asked two questions. The *first* was related to their experiences of being a female swimmer in South Africa and the *second*

[6] The term "context" is used because the theme exclusively focuses on factors associated with "swimming in the South African context". This theme largely includes the participants' experiences, perceptions, and personal interpretations about the issues of gender discrepancy among high-level swimmers in South Africa. The particularities surrounding this have been previously discussed in Chapter one.

focused on how competing in South Africa compared to swimming internationally. I anticipated that asking these questions might also highlight the current perceptions of female swimmers in South Africa and how these perceptions have impacted their experience of swimming in South Africa. The significance of this theme is that nearly all of the participants believed that female swimmers were perceived negatively in South Africa. Although the participants did not agree with how female swimmers were being represented by the media, these representations still had a negative effect on how the participants saw and felt about themselves and their swimming. An additional finding was that all the participants had their perceptions on what could be contributing to the gender discrepancy in South Africa swimming.

Related to the context, the following subthemes emerged; *existing perceptions and their consequences* (e.g., not feeling good enough, feeling unrecognised and unsupported), and *possible contributing factors* (e.g., having a lack of female sporting role models, coaching issues, limited competition available in South Africa, puberty, the senior-junior gap, training programme, and a lack of opportunities for international exposure).

Existing perceptions about female swimmers and their consequences

When participants were asked about their experiences as a South African female swimmer, several of them referred to existing perceptions about female swimmers. The participants' perceptions seemed to be based on news-related media (e.g., articles in print and digital news media). While most of the participants did not seem to agree with the way news-related media represented them, they were all still negatively, emotionally affected by the existence of such media articles (e.g., feeling inadequate, unrecognised, and unsupported).

Existing perceptions about South African female swimmers seemed to be primarily based on media articles that focused on the lack of female swimmers that represented Team South Africa at the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games in 2016. Zero female swimmers qualified, while 11 male swimmers qualified. As such, in nearly all of the participants' accounts, the current perceptions about female swimmers in South Africa referred specifically to their apparent performance-related difficulties. For example, Katie said:

> *…apparently <u>we</u> (female swimmers) struggle in comparison to like the international [female] swimmers…Not necessarily in terms of what I see but more statistically; seeing the numbers. Because we didn't have any Olympic swimmers in 2016 for*

instance where like [the] USA or most other international teams had like so many. Like the closest we had was Tatjana and like just seeing the amount that they had and the amount that we have; which is just nothing, kind of [makes me wonder]; why is it this way?

Shelley, Pearl, and Lola also seemed to agree with Katie. Some of them also added other existing perceptions surrounding South African female swimmers. These are bolded below.

*...it seems like everybody has lost hope with the females because no female qualified for the Olympics this last time (2016). So, it's like '**yoh, these girls**— **what are they doing?*** – Shelley

*...people saying that **female swimmers don't perform** or that **we aren't at par with the guys.*** – Pearl

*I think a big thing that is known is that **female swimmers don't make it internationally.** It's a big thing that we're on top here in South Africa and then you go internationally and you're not placing, you're not competing well with them… I mean like last Olympics we had no female swimmers and that was a big shock to SA because I mean why don't we have any female swimmers?* – Lola

Darla added that because South Africa was not being represented by female swimmers at the Olympic Games, South African female swimmers were also being perceived as "slow" and "not good enough" in comparison to other female swimmers around the world. She said:

*Ya, I saw in the 2016 Olympics, 11 male swimmers went and 0 female swimmers. So, it was just bad, um, like SA just wasn't representing female swimmers. And everyone is just like 'oh, maybe **they don't have fast female swimmers**'… It feels like 'why couldn't they [take] more female swimmers?' … like now it tells the world that **female swimmers in SA are slow** because they can't even qualify—they don't even have one person (female swimmer) to qualify for Olympics but then they have so [many] male swimmers that actually qualified. So it feels like, 'okay **we're not good enough'** because we can't even get to [the] Olympics.*

A final participant believed that South African female swimmers were perceived as having been overprotected by their coaches. She said:

> *They say that <u>we're</u> too molly-coddled, <u>we're</u> too babied; the coaches are too soft on us compared to international coaches.*

I have underlined the words "we" and "we're" in the above accounts because it seemed significant in that they were followed with words like "not good enough", "not on par", "too molly-coddled", "babied" and "are struggling". This implied that these perceptions, which may not have necessarily been about the participants per se, may have been internalised by the participants because they are female swimmers. Thus, they might identify and view themselves similarly to how the online media articles portray South African female swimmers. Thus, what is said about South African female swimmers in online media articles does seemingly impact how female swimmers view themselves and their ability to swim, negatively. Consequently, the media plays a role in shaping the athletic experience of female swimmers in South Africa. These findings are consistent with other literature on female athletes and performance-related stereotypes observed in media, like Oattes (2015) and Rayburn, Chen, and Phillips (2015).

The consequences that accompany the above perceptions were seemingly unpleasant for the participants of this study. By this I mean, these perceptions affected them and their experience of swimming negatively. Dory and another participant were the most vocal about the negative impact online media articles had on them, emotionally. According to Rayburn et al. (2015), performance-related stereotypes like "females are not on par with the guys", "as good or as strong", "as tough or as competitive", were found to be the most detrimental to a female athletes' self-worth (p. 32). The participants in my study had similar experiences.

For Dory, these online media articles had made her feel negatively and unfairly judged and criticised. Subsequently, she felt worthless and inadequate. While speaking, it was also evident that she was hurt, discouraged and angry by how the online media articles portrayed female swimmers in South Africa. She said:

> *It's horrible because you're being criticised on everything you do. Every media article—everything is about the fact that female swimmers aren't performing and that "this" needs to change and "that's" not right and they criticise. … It's breaking down and once again you feel like you're not worth it or just— you're not good enough for them.*

The other participant pointed out: "*I think like a lot of the things that makes female swimming [in South Africa] hard is because of all of the negativity that we get from the outside; especially like social media".* When she was asked to elaborate on this statement, she said:

> *...after none of the girls qualified; like, we were basically crucified online ... as a female swimmer you only get recognised once you do something— as in you perform or you get into the squad or if you really do something phenomenal for there to be good publicity about female swimming. Whereas after 2016, if you went and looked at the world rankings, [XX] and I were both in the top 50 in the world. [And] although we didn't qualify, I mean our rankings were better than some of the guys who did qualify and* ***that was just completely forgotten about****. Like, that's never been brought up. ...there never was really a drought [in female swimming],* ***they just stopped focusing on female swimmers*** *in the sense that because our performance was not on par, um, I wouldn't say not on par but there were less of us doing what the guys were doing that the* ***girls went unnoticed****.*

She continued:

> *There is nothing that we (female swimmers) did differently to what the guys did. But to just go and say 'what [are] female swimmers doing in SA [swimming]?' it's not what we're doing – we did everything perfectly. We literally did everything we could, so there was no fault with what we were doing. ...it was immediately what did the female swimmer do wrong? What did* ***she*** *do wrong? Was her preparation wrong? Was her mind not right? Was her head not in it?* ***And it's always like there is something wrong with me****. Whereas, I know that I could not have swam this race more perfectly than I did, I could not have done more; I mean, I gave up school; gave up everything and still people come back and say 'but you know you could've done this or you could've done that'... I think sometimes the articles that are written and about how harsh they are – I mean it's like that in all sports but um, those are just like,* ***I hate them****. Like I don't even read them because it's just like you know super insulting...*

While speaking, it was evident that the participant was angry, hurt, and resentful of online media articles portraying female swimmers negatively. This participant highlights how difficult it is to be a South African swimmer because her efforts and achievements are rarely

acknowledged, appreciated or recognised, while her perceived failures, shortcomings, and developmental areas are regularly pointed out. In highlighting these aspects, this participant felt like there was something *wrong* with her, despite having done her best. As Withycombe (2011) observed, it is not uncommon for female athletes to become disempowered by how media portrays them, or in this case what the media chooses to emphasise.

The above quotation is also poignant because it is evident that female athletes sometimes feel like they are living in the male swimmers' shadows, thus feeling like their efforts do not matter, are not good enough, or as important as the male swimmers' achievements were.

Another participant, Darla, felt increasingly pressured to qualify for and perform at events like the Olympics so that she can prove critics wrong about how they perceive female swimmers in South Africa. She said:

> *Ya, I think sometimes it feels like that. Because no one else qualified for 2016 Olympics so it's more like okay now there's just a little bit more pressure on me to tell them 'okay, I am going… 2020 Olympics I want to go represent SA as a female swimmer'. But ya, it's a little bit more pressure because it feels like 'okay, now* ***I'm not just going to Olympics for myself anymore; I have to go for South African female swimmers.*** *…you have to show that females— we're also people. We can also do good and swim very well actually; not just the male swimmers. We can actually do just as well as they can.*

In conclusion, media articles seemingly portray female swimmers negatively. The manner in which media articles portray South African female swimmers have a negative emotional and psychological effect on female swimmers who are exposed to them. The main consequences of these media articles is that female swimmers feel worthless and inadequate because their efforts and achievements go overlooked, unrecognised, unappreciated and undervalued while their failures, shortcomings, and developmental areas are emphasised. In addition to this, the perceptions about female swimmers place additional pressure on female swimmers to perform, so that they can prove critics wrong. As such, they feel hurt, angry, and resentful towards these articles and their male counterparts, whom they are continuously compared with and whom their performances seemingly do not measure up to.

Possible contributing factors

This subtheme emerged because each participant had her own theory on what could be contributing to the performance difficulties amongst South African female swimmers. The significance of this subtheme is that it provides a female swimmer's perspective on what could be affecting their ability to qualify for or perform at international events and could thus offer insights into areas that need to be given further attention.

The most frequently mentioned factors were ***limited local competition available*** and ***a lack of opportunities for international exposure***. These were mentioned consistently by six of the participants. Then, ***coaching issues*** was followed by five participants. The other factors that were highlighted by only one participant each, included: ***a lack of female sport role models, puberty, the junior-senior gap,*** and ***the training programme*** (e.g., creating specialised programmes for male and female swimmers and additional dryland training)**.** I have decided to focus on the most frequently mentioned factors, as these seem significant to the majority of the participants in the study.

Limited local competition available: All of the participants perform at a pre-elite to elite level in South Africa. From the participants' transcripts, it became evident that they felt there was a paucity of local competition available. This can be observed in Katie and Cordelia's accounts below.

> *...now like in my main event no matter where I race I can make finals at these big events [in SA]. So like, your competition is kind of becoming scarce, so, like, [you're] not being challenged by the other swimmers in competition anymore.* – Katie

> *...you definitely feel that there is not much competition here for you and there's only 1 or 2 people that you can actually race against.* – Cordelia

Cordelia highlighted that this was problematic for two reasons. The first; a swimmer develops their speed by being challenged by swimmers who are faster. Thus, by not having swimmers who are faster than she is to compete against (in South Africa), she believed she was likely to struggle to improve her own time.

> *In SA they're not so many swimmers that are at a world standard that can swim internationally. There's only about 10 or so that have gone overseas to swim [at]*

international galas. And I think it's definitely a struggle [because] as a swimmer you need competition to better yourself and to swim faster. – Cordelia

And the second; winning comfortably in South Africa did not prepare her for the level of competitiveness she was exposed to when she competed internationally.

...you get used to winning all your races here and you get used to winning all the time and I think when I went overseas, I just— I didn't make semis or finals. So, you're not even top 10 so, I think it's— it's good for you because you know where you need to get to but I also think it's difficult because you need to realise yourself that you still need to go faster and you can't just keep winning comfortably here. – Cordelia

Lola agreed with Cordelia on reason number two by adding that it can increase the chances of a female swimmer "choking" in an international competition (i.e., experience a dramatic drop in her performance due to the pressure she is under when competing internationally) (Hill, Hanton, Matthews, & Fleming, 2010). Lola also highlights the importance of being exposed to more international competitions. She said:

...international experience in competing is completely different to competing in SA. So, you can come here in SA and be the top 100m free[style] swimmer and you can go internationally and you'll be in heat 1 out of 10 heats. So that means you're not actually the fastest. And you choke ... you choke because you're built up so much here in SA and everyone goes 'wow! You're the best swimmer. You're swimming the best times in SA' but not internationally. And because we don't have that exposure of going to compete internationally over and over again, we as females are so content with being the best here that when we're not the best there and we're actually heat 1 of heat 10 then we kind of like choke and we get nervous and we tense up and we crumble under the pressure and we don't end up doing well.

In conclusion to the ***limited competition available*** factor, it seems that the participants feel that there is a paucity of competition available to them in South Africa. Consequently, they do not feel challenged by the existing pool of female swimmers. They believe that this makes it difficult to improve their speed. Additionally, they believe that because they are comfortably winning in South Africa, it makes it more challenging to compete overseas because there they are competing against female swimmers who are mostly swimming at a world standard. Thus,

South African female swimmers who compete internationally may find themselves underperforming, or "choking".

Lack of opportunities for international exposure is the other factor that the majority of the participants felt might be contributing to the current challenges amongst South African female swimmers.

Lola was most vocal about this specific factor. Lola felt that by not being given an opportunity to compete internationally, female swimmers would be at a disadvantage when they do eventually compete there because they have not accumulated enough experience competing internationally. She said:

> *...okay, a big thing personally is, and it upsets me as a female swimmer because why aren't we getting as much (international) exposure? Because if we look at international teams, they will send A and B qualifying timed swimmers. If you look at Olympics, yes the first few heats aren't the fastest but at least their country is trying to expose to them, and give them that exposure. Whereas I think SA is too, they just want to do well, they're not going to just send someone to be in heat 1 of the Olympic Games, not even to just get the exposure and I feel like because we don't have that exposure when we [do] have to compete* ***we choke cause we don't have that exposure*** *as females.*

She advocated further by saying:

> *I do think that Swim SA needs to expose female swimmers of every age a lot more internationally and not just when they're 18, 19, 20, 21 and then having to go there and compete as a career for the first time. They should be there, not necessarily when they're younger, but when they're 16, 17, sending the B-qualifying times; sending relay teams, [and] saying that 'yes, we may not necessarily medal in the final' but are we exposing these girls to that environment so that when they eventually reach their peak they now know what it is and how to compete and how it works and how the social media works and then they're not there and just feel[ing] the pressure and then obviously don't perform.*

Lola believes that creating opportunities for female swimmers to compete internationally is essential to their development as well as their ability to succeed, should they compete at mega-

events like the Olympic Games. Additional exposure would seemingly enhance their confidence when competing at this level rather than hinder it. To Lola, her understanding of why female swimmers may be struggling to translate their success in South Africa to international competitions is because they have not accumulated the relevant and necessary experience to cope with the pressure surrounding competing at an international event. She also places the responsibility for this at the door of Swimming South Africa.

Cordelia agrees with Lola. She said:

> *In SA it's nice to race with people that you can relate to and that know you but I think you do need international exposure to differentiate between the different levels that you need to get to and the levels that we are swimming here in SA.*

Angie added that international exposure also helps challenge her in contrast to South African competitions where she frequently finds herself leading the race. She said:

> *…that's the nice thing about going overseas because everyone there is like faster than you so it helps you to like swim knowing that this person next to you is going to be in front of you instead of 'I'm always used to being in front'.*

Therefore, ***a lack of opportunities for international exposure*** is believed to put South African female swimmers at a disadvantage when competing internationally and may result in a female swimmer underperforming or "choking" at such events. As such, majority of the participants in the study felt that having Swimming South Africa create additional opportunities (e.g., taking relay teams or by taking female swimmers who only managed to achieve B-qualifying times) is essential to helping female swimmers gain confidence when competing at this level and with assisting them in performing optimally at such events in future.

Coaching issues was another factor that emerged from the participants' transcripts as possibly contributing to South African female swimmers' performance-related difficulties. This factor can be divided into two parts. The first; female swimmers being molly-coddled by their coaches and the second; pressure to perform.

As mentioned earlier, in the section on the ***existing perceptions***, there is the perception that female swimmers are being overprotected ("molly-coddled") by their coaches and that this is

what is affecting their ability to perform or qualify for mega-events like the Olympic Games. When Lola was asked to elaborate what she meant by this, she said:

> *If we're having a bad day; we get an easier set. Like, for example, if we have a period then it's 'aw, don't worry, don't come to training' or if we're emotional it's 'don't worry'. Whereas, here, we have international teams and you see their coaches with their female swimmers and it's 'I don't care, get in and go! You're here for a reason!' [My coach] said to me – I'll admit to it because having had female coaches I was very molly-coddled – it was just, if I honestly was just being an emotional girl, I would get the set easier, whereas, [here] you've got to push through that; you've got to push beyond [that]. Whereas with female coaches are a little bit more lenient and a little bit more— like you would send a message to the female coach like 'I'm not feeling well' and [she'd be like] 'okay cool see you tomorrow or I'll see you the next day' whereas you say to a male coach 'I'm not feeling too well' he goes 'well, get your ass into the pool! Why aren't you at training?!'*

The impression that I got from the above account is that Lola believes that female swimmers in South Africa are perceived as fragile and thus need to be handled with care—meaning, that they should not be challenged or confronted by their coaches. In contrast, Lola recalls having observed how international coaches speak to their female swimmers. Her recollections seemed to suggest that international coaches were less tolerant of their female swimmers. Instead, they challenged, demanded, and expect their female swimmers to push through their pain to achieve their goals. Lola's current coach seemingly has a similar approach towards his female swimmers.

She continued:

> *… they [coaches] need to become hard on us. Like* ***we do need to be pushed to those limit[s]. We can't just back down when it gets hard.*** *When training gets hard we can't just say 'agh but I don't want to train today or I don't want to be here' like we do need to be pushed how the international coaches push their female swimmers and say 'well, listen you have to be at training, you have to push yourself, you have to be there 110% of the time'.*

Lola admits that female swimmers may not enjoy being challenged by their coach but believes that it is necessary if they are to reach their swimming potential.

Another coaching issue that was believed to negatively impact a female swimmers' performance was pressure from their coach to perform. Three participants mentioned this factor.

One participant reflected on how pressure affected her ability to focus at the 2016 Olympic trials. She said:

> *I'm standing there and I have the national coach say to me 'you're our only chance'. I mean that is pressure that I didn't even need, like I have so much already but it's like piled on where I don't think that they – in some sense some people would think that that would motivate a person, and for some people I'm sure it does; it motivates them to swim faster but for me, I mean it's just extra stuff that I need to consider and worry about. …*

Another participant agreed:

> *So, when someone is saying to me 'you have to beat this person' – I don't like the pre-- I don't know how to put it (pause) the (pause) saying to someone 'you've got to beat this person, you've got to beat this person' and then you're standing there at the blocks next to this person and I'm like so intimidated by the person next to me that I actually can't even focus on my own race. So that that kind of situation I don't actually like. Competitiveness to the extent that it makes me feel uncomfortable. Umm ya, so I think if I'm put in that situation I freak out. I really do (laughs).*

From the above two accounts, it is evident that pressure diminished their sense of confidence as well as their focus. This seemed to affect their performance negatively.

In conclusion to this theme, participants were negatively affected by what was being said about South African female swimmers in news-related media (e.g., articles in print and digital news media). Many of the participant's internalised criticisms made about female swimmers and believed that this is how they as a female swimmer are too. The content that the media reports on, especially about female swimmers, is to a large extent focused on their failures, shortcomings, and developmental areas. Thus, participants felt that their achievements and efforts were not good enough to be acknowledged or paid attention to. Subsequently leaving

them discouraged, angry and resentful. Majority of the participants had theories on what factors could be contributing to these perceived performance-related difficulties. The most frequently mentioned were: ***limited competition available locally***, the ***lack of opportunities for international exposure***, and ***coaching issues***.

The body

This theme represents the physical hurdles and stressors associated with swimming, as observed in the participants' narratives. These included puberty, injuries, fatigue, and stiffness. These are ***unavoidable*** factors and factors that all female athletes experience at one point or another in their career. The other hurdles and stressors the female swimmers in this study identified were related to the ***expectations*** placed on their bodies (e.g., being expected to train through the pain and being expected to be of a certain weight and physical appearance as a swimmer).

The unavoidable hurdles and stressors

Puberty is a stage in physical development that every adolescent goes through. All four of the 18-and-over participants spoke about puberty as being a physical hurdle they were faced with in swimming. However, no under-18 participants spoke about puberty or the physical or emotional effects it has had on them, even though they are in the developmental age of puberty. Literature on puberty and female athletes predominantly focused on puberty and its effects on their sport participation (Brown, Patel, & Darmawan, 2017) or how the physical changes that occur during puberty affect athletic performance and vice versa (Hirschberg, 2014; Klentrou, 2006). There were no articles found that explored how female athletes experienced puberty from a qualitative perspective.

To some extent, all the 18-and-over participants noted the unpleasant physical and emotional effects puberty had on their swimming. For Shelley and Angie, the physical changes associated with puberty not only made training more strenuous on their bodies but had also affected how efficiently their bodies were able to recover after training. As such, both participants noted that this had a profound negative effect on their swimming performances. Both participants also noted that the physical changes they underwent during puberty also made improvement in swimming scarce. Subsequently, the process was considered slow, tedious, and frustrating. Shelley's account emphasized the additional effort, energy, and time that needed to be put into

her training to perform at the same level as she did before she reached puberty. The above is evident in the excerpts below.

> *So, we like have to work through that and it's so hard to come out of that like puberty stage so—yoh, it's very hard to come out of that stage. And then we have to like work twice as hard just to get back to our normal times again and then from our normal times, once we're out of that stage, to try and work to move forward.* – Shelley

> *Oh, my word, you're like stiff all the time; you're tired – they can sprint everything [right now], in every single session. But I get into the pool after a hard session the previous day and I'm so tired and drained and here they are sprinting next to you and I'm like 'how do you guys have so much energy?' … they basically still haven't hit puberty yet so they're still on a level where every gala they go to they improve in. Like even if they were to like swim a gala tomorrow they would improve their times. And it's like 'how are you doing this?' And then this sometimes makes me nervous cause then you like see that you're not improving and then you're thinking 'what's wrong with my training?' but we're doing the same training and then you're thinking 'should I be doing more?'* – Angie

From the above accounts, it is also evident that puberty is a frustrating time for female swimmers. For Angie, frustration and nervousness were precipitated by comparing herself to the junior swimmers' seemingly effortless and frequent improvements. For Shelley, on the other hand, the frustration came with being tired, having to put in significantly more effort into her swimming but then only observing a small improvement in her performance.

Lola was another participant to mention puberty, however, for her, the emphasis was on menstruation. Lola noted how menstruation can have an unpredictable effect on her energy levels which then negatively impacted her training. She said:

> *…having to train through that [period] is not always easy. That's a huge repercussion on the body cause as a sports woman it either takes a lot out of you or it gives you energy. Like for me, it's different each month. So, it either drains me completely and I cannot train or I'm energetic… people (female swimmers) use their period as an excuse, whereas you don't have an excuse [as a female swimmer], it is what it is, you*

do have a period and you've got to work through it, you can't just say 'oh well I can't come to training for like four days because I've got my period'.

Lola's quotation above also directly speaks to the expectations that athletes and coaches place on the female athletes' body; expecting them to push through the pain. This will be discussed further in the ***expectations*** section.

Pearl was the final 18-and-over participant to note the challenges and stressors associated with puberty. She experienced similar challenges to participants above. However, the weight gain that accompanied puberty appeared to be most significant to her. From Pearl's account below it is evident that weight gain was not something that could be easily altered during puberty; the weight loss process was slow. In the ***expectations*** section, it emerged that South African coaches emphasise a lean physique in female swimming. Therefore, weight gain during puberty is not ideal because it defies the expectations of a female swimmers' physical appearance. From Pearl's extract, weight gain during puberty can result in criticism and eventually in premature dropout because the swimmer is unable to meet the coaches' expectations regarding her weight. She said:

...girls are brilliant pre-puberty and then it's two years of like a really shit time of your life because you don't get anywhere; you put on weight, everything is different, your body changes, the way you respond to training changes, everything like that – you have to literally start all over again and learn and get to know yourself again from a different perspective because everything is different. And in that two year period a lot of girls give up because of the weight; 'you're overweight' and I mean it's not easy to lose weight, well, in that stage it's not easy to lose weight no matter how much you train and um, a lot of the girls get dropped then. Um, if you get a senior nationals where you swim an incredible time and you don't do that the next year they just look at the next girl.

From the above extracts, puberty is a difficult and unsettling period in a girl's life. As such, additional support during this stage of development could be invaluable for female swimmers; it could normalise their experiences and help them adjust their expectations so they are less discouraged by plateaued or under performances. Furthermore, coaches need to be more understanding of weight gain and the challenges in losing weight during puberty as, without

appropriate understanding and support from them, female swimmers may prematurely drop out of swimming.

Injuries are another unavoidable hurdle and stressor. However, only three participants spoke about the injuries that they have experienced or are presently experiencing. According to Epple (2015), athletes are ingrained in a sports culture where pain and injury are normalised and playing through the pain is expected of them. This was also evident among the female swimmers in this study who were observed to minimize or downplay their injuries in efforts to make the injuries appear less significant than they seemingly were.

One participant reported that she was still struggling with an overuse injury (Bursitis). While speaking the participant reported what injury she had, its name and what is "basically is", in a matter-of-fact kind of way. Additionally, I experienced her as distant while speaking. This implied that speaking about injuries can be a sensitive topic for athletes and is sometimes best handled as information.

Another participant had recently developed a back injury. While speaking, this participant appeared stressed, frustrated, and somewhat discouraged by her injury. This participant also perceived her injury as a setback and as having eradicated all the hard work that she had put in. She said:

> *I mean it's really not nice because you're kind of on a roll with your training and everything is running so smooth and then that one injury feels like you're going 10 steps back. Like this morning for example, in warm up we had to do like sprints and I felt so crap (sounding discouraged) and I know like on Thursday I felt so good; we had such a hard set but I managed to like push through and I was holding such good times and stuff and then this morning we just had to do like 4x25's and those simple 4x25's and I felt so bad. I was like 'oh! I can't do this!' so it definitely like affects me mentally sometimes [too] … this injury is kind of like a setback. Like something that I didn't expect that was going to happen so I just want to get back into it so that I can have the full amount of training and then you know to see how it goes from there.*

The above quotation also highlights how an athletes' body can also impact the athlete mentally and emotionally. This is particularly important seeing that the majority of the participants noted that they did not have adequate time to rest and recover. As such, if an injured body can trigger

a negative mind-set then presumably a "run-down" body from inadequate rest could do the same and inevitably result in underperformance.

Another aspect of this quotation that appears significant is the pressure the participant is under to return to training and avoid falling behind with the progress she has made. Her injury is thus perceived as an inconvenience to her progress, rather than an opportunity to assess the root cause of the injury. The emphasis is on returning to training as timeously as possible. This can have implications for re-injury as the focus will be on catching up the sessions missed rather than easing oneself into the training programme post-injury.

The final participant who spoke about injuries had experienced three shoulder injuries within a 5 years and had recently acquired a groin injury. In contrast to the participant above, this participant reported that sometimes injuries were welcomed because it gave her much needed time off of swimming.

> *I know the first time was around four (months). [The] first month is like smiles [be]cause you don't have to train; you have so much time (Giggles).*

When I asked the participant how it was for her to have all that time on her hands she responded:

> *It's nice until a point and then you get tired of it and then you just wanna do – especially if you like see everyone else swimming – um, I would say, like if I see all my friends swimming and then especially going to like a gala and I'm like 'agh, I wish I can go with'. Like, I just wanna go support. Then I would go and watch the gala like and that's also fun for me. … but then while they're swimming then you're like 'agh… I wonder what my time would've been?' or 'I wonder how I would have done?'*

Even though this participant appreciated the time off from swimming, it was short-lived. Furthermore, this participant's account highlighted the social challenges that are associated with injuries; specifically, not being able to do what her teammates were doing. Observing her teammates at competitions was difficult for this participant and was accompanied by frustration because she was unable to participate in the competition herself (e.g., her use of "agh…" while speaking, inferred her frustration with the situation). Feeling socially disconnected from one's teammates during injury is not unusual as evident from Shepherd's (2018) study. Shepherd (2018) found that even though teammates were an important source of motivation when an

athlete is injured, seeing teammates practice and compete may trigger unpleasant emotions like frustration and feeling socially disconnected.

Therefore, injuries are a sensitive topic for some athletes. As such, athletes may minimize or downplay the seriousness of their injury and its effects on them (emotionally, mentally, or socially). Injuries did affect these participants negatively; leaving them frustrated and at times socially disconnected. For one participant, injuries were perceived as a massive setback and an inconvenience, while for another, injuries were a temporary welcomed break.

The final two unavoidable physical hurdles and stressors that emerged from all of the participants' narratives were; physical tiredness and stiff muscles. With the quantity of training the participants do, these two factors were seemingly unavoidable, as evident from the following participants' extracts:

> *… I can definitely feel it in my arms and the way that my body is reacting to everything.* – Shelley

> *…I'm swimming 6km's, sometimes 10km's a day and there's just no break so I feel like I'm overtrained and like I need to rest but there's no time for it… Sometimes [training] is a lot and um, especially now my shoulders are so sore and it just builds up sometimes, especially in my shoulders cause also we don't get a lot of rest actually.* – Darla

> *I train twice a day every day, except Sunday's and sometimes Saturday. It's a heavy load;* ***by like Saturday you're completely dead –*** Dory

Expectations

This subtheme refers to the expectations placed on the participants' bodies. The main expectations in this regard were; being expected to train through the pain and being expected to be of a certain weight and physical appearance as a swimmer. All of the participants mentioned having to "push through the pain". However, only three participants discussed expectations related to weight and physical appearance. These three participants mentioned weight and physical appearance throughout their transcripts and is thus evidently a significant part of their experience as a South African female swimmer. These will each be discussed next, in the same order listed above.

Several participants believed they had no choice but to "push through it" or "suck it up" when they were faced with injury, fatigue, or pain. Similarly to Epple (2015), participants in this study accepted that pain and injury were a part of their sport and that pushing through the pain would be necessary to appear strong and capable, instead of weak and vulnerable. This can be observed in some of the accounts below.

> *There are days that you don't want to come to training and that you're gatvol and just want to sleep and you have so much work at school but those are the days that* ***you just have to suck it up and just do it.*** – Dory

> *…after gym I am so sore. Like I am tired. I'm like dead (smiling tiredly) and I just want to sleep (laughs). And then we get to training and my arms are sore, my legs can't kick. It's just like everything is just going wrong! (laughs). But like you know when you just have to put the pieces together, I guess and ya.* ***I just have to push through and try foam roll****.* – Shelley

> *I think your body takes a lot of beatings and that um (pause) like if [you] do a lot of distance, you're so tired by the end and* ***the next morning you have to get up and train again.*** – Cordelia

Male athletes, more so than female athletes, are expected to play through the pain for fear they may appear weak to their teammates and coaches (Spencer, 2012, as cited in Epple, 2015). However, this study observed that female athletes are similarly under pressure to appear tough and capable. This is consistent with Weinberg, Vernau, and Horn (2013) who found that male and female athletes had similar attitudes and behaviours towards playing through pain and injury. These researchers believed that this could be because females are socialised into sport similarly to their male counterparts and as a result adopt similar attitudes regarding playing with pain and injury (Weinberg et al., 2013). This could be plausible in this study too, seeing that all of the female swimmers in the study have trained with male swimmers since they were younger.

A few of the participants seemed to rationalise their attitude and behaviour (i.e., pushing through the pain). For Angie, pushing through her tiredness and lack of motivation was believed to boost her confidence when she competed. She said:

> *When you're tired you don't want to be there (at training) or it's like 'ugh, I hate this' (laughs) 'this is so hard' but then afterwards I feel really good and then it gives me like the confidence in my race, knowing that I did work hard. Cause if I have to think back and look at the past three weeks, I can already say that the sets that we did were much harder than I did previously so, then, I know that I can only do better. If that makes sense? I feel like standing behind the block I can tell myself that I can expect a PB (Personal Best) because I did train harder…*

Shelley, on the other hand, believed that pushing through the pain would eventually pay off when she succeeded in her swimming. She said:

> *…your body is tired but you just have to push through [be]cause you know the pain will be worth it, almost.*

Shelley's quotation does however also imply some scepticism. She uses "almost" at the end of her sentence which suggested to me that it may, in fact, not be one-hundred percent worth it to push through the pain.

Darla, in contrast to Angie and Shelley, believed that taking time off would have worse consequences on her swimming than pushing through her fatigue would. She explained:

> *Like at the moment I feel a little bit overtrained like I have to rest but I can't necessarily rest now… … It feels like sometimes I just really need a break but then I just need to think about my break later. I need to leave it for later because now is not the right time; 3 weeks before SA's, to take time off because it isn't necessarily going to help.*

Therefore, the sports culture of pushing through the pain consistently emerged in nearly all of the participants' narratives. For many of the participants, this behaviour and attitude was normalised and reinforced by the belief that it was what was best for their swimming. This is consistent with previous literature mentioned above (Epple, 2015; Weinberg et al., 2013).

The other expectation by participants was related to their weight and physical appearance. This expectation was placed on the participants predominantly by coaches, as observed in Dory and Pearl's accounts below.

> *The coaches aren't so obsessed with the girls' weight overseas, definitely.* ***Here we get watched. We get told if we pick up weight and we get told if we eat one bad thing*** *… Like I see why it's there but it's also bad because I feel like we should be enjoying our lives* – Dory
>
> *I think coaches have made it (body weight and appearance) such a big thing. Like, every single coach. And I understand it to a certain extent but I think that they've handled it in a completely wrong way.* - Pearl

Although participants cognitively understood how monitoring their weight could be beneficial to their swimming, the manner and intensity with which their weight was monitored and emphasised by the coaches contributed to an unpleasant swimming experience for the participants. Pearl added:

> *…weight was a big issue for him (coach); as in how much you weigh— to the point where he would weigh me once a week like and I mean like that would be horrible for me to like walk onto pool deck and for him to say like I've picked up weight or I'm overweight in front of the whole squad.*

Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Bowers, Martin, Miller, Wolfe, & Speed, 2013; McMahon & Penney, 2013; Thompson, 2015; van Zyl, Surujlal, & Dhurup, 2012), coaches do significantly contribute to body image pressures among South African female swimmers.

Both participants also noted that expectations about weight are not the same for male swimmers as they are for female swimmers, as observed below.

> *Weight is a big thing in terms of even going to the gym we have the body-fat percentage tests and all of that where I mean for guys that isn't an issue.* – Pearl
>
> *…if we look at the boys; the boys can eat whatever they want [and] the girls can't. So, like where does that equal out? They get to enjoy their lives but what about us?* – Dory

From Dory's account, it is evident that there is resentment towards male swimmers because expectations are not the same.

McMahon and Penney (2013) found that discourses on weight, body image and physical appearance do have long-lasting effects on female swimmers' thoughts and feelings about

themselves and their body and this eventually resulted in them policing their bodies (e.g., monitoring how much they eat, what they eat, how frequently they eat, and how much they weigh). According to Thompson (2015), this may place female athletes at higher risk of developing an eating disorder or engaging in weight control behaviours. These findings are consistent with Dory and Pearl's accounts below.

> *We can't eat what we want. We can't get home and eat like two Easter eggs or a slab of chocolate cause then we immediately feel like we're going to pick up weight. … …I watch my diet but I don't watch it in the sense that I can't eat this, and this, and this. So, I eat what I want but I also watch what I eat.* - Dory

> *I think it (body weight pressures) has a super negative effect on me and I think on other females as well. I mean I've seen countless girls that would like have great bodies and would be like 'I will not wear a bikini' because – or like stupid stuff like that where I'm just like 'oh my soul'. And I've been through this and I've done the whole loop. I'm [over-18] now, and I've been doing this at this level since I was [XX] years old so I've been around; like I've seen it all – but for me, how hectic it's become for like 14 and 15 year old's in that sense. Like that pressure that they have on them – I don't see them making it through puberty because pre-puberty they are obsessive about it already, I feel so sorry for them and like (Laughs) I wish [they] knew what was coming because there is no understanding for it. I mean I think the only coach; that I know, who understands is [XX] and she's a female but also to a certain extent. I mean I lost – I was weighing 62 in August last year and I've lost 4kg's since then and now she's like 'yas, you're looking good' and you know then she will sometimes hint 'are you eating well?' – Always! There is always that thing.* – Pearl

From the above quotation, it is evident that coaches' emphasis on weight and appearance has had a negative effect on how female swimmers, across all ages, felt about themselves and their body. Such emphasis and intensity around the swimmers' bodies also triggered body-related insecurities and resulted in them monitoring what they eat, even if they believe they "eat what they want". Weight loss is encouraged and praised by coaches; even female coaches. While speaking, Pearl spoke very quickly and loudly, frequently motioning with her hands for emphasis. This suggested to me her frustration as well as how sensitive this topic is for her. A similar reaction observed when Dory spoke.

One participant reflected on her experience at the Youth Olympics. Through her reflection below, it became evident that weight does not necessarily determine skill, speed, or ability. Despite this, weight and appearance remain emphasised by South African coaches.

> *…when I went to [the] Youth Olympics … there was a girl – she was the same height as me – I weighed 52kg's and she weighed 80kg's and she wasn't muscular – she was bulky but she went faster than the Olympic qualifying time and I didn't, but there's no one going at her because of how she looks because she is strong and swims fast so people have become so obsessed with what you're supposed to look like to be a fast swimmer but they haven't really looked at what people really look like who are fast swimmers…looking at how strong those girls are; not skinny, I'm not saying that at all, but how strong they are and you like get there and you're like 'okaaay… let me try' (uncertain tone in voice). When you get there, that's always the worst for me, because the coaches would say 'do you see what she looks like?' and I'm like 'ya, I do' and then I'm like 'well, shit, what do you want from me? You want me to be skinny – you don't want me to strong cause then I don't look the part so then where am I going with this?*

In this quotation, the participant also seemed to fall into the trap of thinking that physical appearance reflected ability and speed (similarly to her coaches). Furthermore, it was apparent that the coaches' offered her conflicting and inconsistent information regarding their expectations on physical appearance. As such, the participant found herself feeling confused and frustrated because the coach's demands on her body were seemingly impossible to meet.

In conclusion, achieving an aesthetic and lean physique is a significant part of the swimming culture in South Africa. Female swimmers are however unhappy and frustrated by the intensity with which these demands and pressures are being placed on them. Furthermore, some female swimmers in this study are policing their bodies which, according to Thompson (2015) can put them at risk of eating disorders. However, van Zyl et al. (2012) reports that healthy relationships with the coach and other social support figures could reduce the risk of eating disorders. This underlies the important influence of the coach in matters of the body as well as a female athlete cultivating a healthy relationship with food and body image.

The social and relational

For this study, the social and relational experiences were the largest theme in that all the participants contributed to it and it had the most supporting quotations. Four subthemes were formulated from all eight of the participants' narratives. These are; *squad dynamics*, *other interpersonal dynamics*, *social comparisons*, and *the coach-athlete relationship*. This theme reiterates how female swimmers are influenced by those around them and how the choices and interactions of the participants reciprocally influence their relationships. The significance of this theme is that it highlights the complex social experiences in these participants' lives and considers the participants' perceptions of the social dynamics they form part of and contribute to. What is also noteworthy about these findings is that for the majority of the participants these social and relational dynamics were perceived as a stressor.

Squad dynamics

Even though swimming is an individual sport, the majority of participants made frequent reference to their interactions within their "squads" or with their "teammates". This suggested to me that they still considered themselves a part of a collective; a team, even if they competed alone and their perceived teammates were also their competition. Similarly to other research on individual sport team environments (e.g., Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002; Evans, Eys, & Bruner, 2012; Evans, Eys, & Wolf, 2013), this study found that athletes who compete in individual sports are influenced emotionally, mentally, and physically by the interpersonal dynamics within their training groups. These findings are significant not only because they add to existing knowledge on group dynamic research involving individual sport teams (which is an area of research that remains scarce) (Evans et al., 2013), but also because cohesion within an individual sport team environment can influence performance, especially among female teams (Carron et al., 2002). The relevant subthemes include dynamics; *between male and female swimmers*, *between junior and senior female swimmers*, *between female swimmers* (age not being a factor, here), and *between white swimmers and swimmers of colour*.

All of the participants' train in groups that are mixed with male and female swimmers. As such, several participants referenced the interpersonal dynamics that exist ***between male and female swimmers*** in their squads. During training, the majority of participants enjoyed engaging in friendly competition with the male swimmers. For many, "competing" with their male

teammates motivated them to work harder and push themselves physically and mentally in training. Shelley enthusiastically explained:

> *…what girl doesn't want to be able to beat the boy next to her? So, you know you, like, push yourself and you just keep going [even] though you wanna die. Like sometimes it's like 'I can't die in front of this guy' (laughs) you know? That kind of a thing! But, um, ya, it has its positives, I must say. It's really nice. And we know that no guy wants to be beaten by a girl so it makes you like swim extra hard because you want to prove that guy wrong! (laughs) You want to show him that you can do it!*

"Losing" to a male teammate did not seem to affect the participants' mood or confidence, like losing to a female teammate did. Instead, being able to "beat" a male teammate or managing to keep up with him during training boosted both; mood and confidence. Angie and Lola clarify:

> *…if you beat a boy at racing you feel more confident because you're like 'I just beat a guy so…' but if you lost to him, you'd still laugh and wouldn't be upset. Where I know like if some of these girls had to lose against each other they would be so angry (laughs)* – Angie

> *…it's somewhat pleasing to beat a guy that's next to you cause like 'well, he's a guy' so, it's cool that I'm keeping up with him or that I can keep up with him.* – Lola

For the participants in this study, losing to a male teammate is more tolerable than losing to a female teammate and there seem to be two reasons for this. The first, the majority of participants believe that male swimmers are physically stronger and faster than they (as females) are, thus males are expected to "win". Secondly, the participants did not consider male teammates as their competition because they would not be competing against one another at swimming events like they would with female teammates.

In addition to the competitive dynamic, Lola and Cordelia added that the perceived physical benefits that accompanied training with their male teammates contributed to a positive dynamic.

> *They (guys) are naturally more powerful and it is exciting to have that in the pool because* ***it pushes you beyond those limits*** *and that's what I'm really enjoying.* - Lola

> *…the guys, they help you – they go in front the whole time and I think that* ***helps you also develop and become stronger and faster.*** – Cordelia

Although many participants favoured training with their male teammates, some of them felt this was a double-edged sword. Shelley's account below summarises the unfavourable consequences of training with their male counterparts.

> *We all have the same routine, so, we all have the same send-off. And the coach obviously wants to make it tough for the guys [be]cause like they don't want to give us a routine that's going to be suitable for the girls and then the guys are like there and they're relaxing. So, the girls, kind of, have to like race every single thing; even the warm-up, we need to sprint it because we need to make send-off because the routines are like fast enough for the boys to also like put some effort into it or whatever. So, sometimes it's quite hard. Also, like, at gym, like, I think either the gym instructor is really like underestimating the boys strength or she like really believes in me (chuckles) because my weights are the same as the boys so when it comes to training I'm like dead; I'm tired and the guys are like kind of sore where I'm like 'I'm finished'.*

Darla, Pearl, Cordelia and Lola agree with Shelley and add the physical and emotional strain it put on them:

> *…let's say you're swimming a 200m, um, the first 50m you push hard enough [so] you can actually stay with them but then, onwards, it's just like 'ya, okay' – you just can't keep up anymore.* - Darla

> *…so, let's say we both have a 6km session – both guys and girls – and we're mixed but, then, there's a 1500-straight where the guys can go at a steady pulse-24 – for me to keep up with them I'd have to go at a steady pulse-27, which would kill me.* – Pearl

> *…they'll try and race each other and it can be a bit irritating and frustrating when they sprint the whole set and you're left behind doing the set properly.* – Cordelia

…being a female and being a little bit weaker I'm not going to keep up with them and that's going to burn me out completely. – Lola

My personal reflection

As a female student-athlete, I never really considered the repercussions of training with male athletes – I always believed that because I was becoming stronger and faster by training with them that it didn't really matter; as long as I was improving, it was okay. But looking at these accounts I find myself questioning how adequately do female athletes rest when their recovery sessions are done at a male athlete's pace? Most of the 'recovery' sessions I did were made up of me sprinting to keep up with the guys (who were running at their recovery pace, which coincidently was sometimes my 'hard run' or 'sprinting' pace). This left me many-a-times feeling like I had the hardest session, then looked over at my male teammates and heard them reflecting on how the session was 'just what they needed' to loosen their legs. I wonder what makes it so difficult for us to manage ourselves in these sessions. Would it be more helpful to focus on groups made up of just females?

From the above it can be concluded that the participants feel that the dynamics *between male and female swimmers* are kind of like a double-edged sword, meaning that even though it benefits them to train with the male swimmers it is also at times a liability that can result in burnout, inadequate recovery, or frustration. Despite this, these participants also see training with their male counterparts as valuable to their physical development. The next squad dynamic that will be discussed is *between senior and junior female swimmers*.

Five participants spoke about the dynamic that exists ***between senior and junior female swimmers***. While some participants perceived this dynamic as stressful and frustrating because of the pressure it put on them, others found that it motivated them to work harder.

Angie, for example, was the most vocal about her frustrations with the junior female swimmers in her squad. Her frustration and nervousness stemmed from comparing her rate of improvement to that of a junior female swimmer. She admitted:

I feel like racing older girls; it's fine if they beat me. But if younger girls come close, I'm quite nervous for myself cause then I feel like 'where am I now?' I mean I don't have much time left and they have so much time and they're already beating me, like how am I supposed to go forward? So especially like the younger – like two of the girls here … [are] very fast in their junior age-group and they're obviously trying to

catch up to me; especially in training, when we're training next to each other and here they are racing next to me and I'm like 'stop racing me!' (tone is frustrated). For them, they swim so young – they just want to swim faster and they don't know what they're doing [to me] obviously, sometimes. But for me, it bothers me sometimes a lot because especially in training there's all these young girls so sometimes they do beat me and that's what happened to my friend as well; they kept on beating her in training [and then she stopped swimming].

Angie's account suggests that a competitive dynamic between the senior and junior female swimmers exists. However, unlike the competitive dynamic with the male swimmers, this was considered more "serious" than "friendly" – at least, from a senior female swimmers' perspective. Additionally, Angie's excerpt suggests that she as a senior swimmer feels threatened by a junior swimmers' progress or improvement, which prompts uncertainty and doubt regarding her future in swimming.

Evans et al. (2013) also noted that competitiveness had either positive or negative connotations attached to them and would thus either have a healthy/unhealthy effect on the team's cohesion. This was similarly observed in this study. For instance, the friendly competitive dynamic between male and female swimmers was seemingly positive because the participants were encouraged by the challenge and believed they had more to gain from this competitive dynamic (e.g., enhancing speed and strength) but also they had nothing to lose from it (e.g., confidence or decreased mood). Thus, this competitive dynamic enhanced the squads dynamic. In contrast, the serious competitive dynamic that existed between the senior and junior swimmers in the squad reduced it because some senior female swimmers felt threatened by the junior female swimmers and subsequently it enhanced their anxiety and frustration with the junior swimmers. Therefore, these patterns of competitiveness are similar to those observed previously by Evans et al. (2013).

Similarly, Darla reflected on how losing to a junior female swimmer affected her as a senior swimmer. She explained:

…when a younger girl beats me I'm like 'but how? I'm older than you, I'm supposed to be faster'. ...you get that feeling, like, everyone is going 'oh, look! She's going so slow' cause a 12-year-old just beat her.

For Darla, the concern about losing to a junior swimmer was related to how others would perceive her as a result of this loss.

To some extent, Pearl also appeared frustrated with the junior swimmers in her training squad. However, in Pearl's case, she was mostly frustrated by the younger swimmers taking their training less seriously than she was because she and they were at different stages of their athletic development. She said:

> *For me personally, this is the youngest squad that I have ever been in. I don't train with [XX], I train with [XX] and her squad is very junior so I'm talking about 15-and-under, so, that sometimes [makes me] feel a little old because sometimes my training is a little bit more serious and I take it a little bit more seriously than they do because for them it's still like fun swimming.*

In contrast to the above participants, Lola and Shelley saw the challenge that the junior swimmers brought positively. After competing with junior swimmers, both of these senior swimmers were motivated to improve their times or refine areas to focus on in training.

> *...When I went to [XX] there was a 12-year-old next to me and she absolutely – she beat me by far. But it was so nice to see like 'you're 12 but you're getting such amazing times' and also, it's motivating. I find it motivating. I find it very exciting. It gives me something to push towards cause I'm like 'I'm 18, she's 12, she's beating me by 2-seconds so I've got to get there. I've got to.' If you want to compete internationally you've got to beat the 12-year-olds; you've got to beat the 24-year-olds.* – Lola

> *...it's also nice to swim here because everybody puts in their own amount of effort into training so maybe like that 15-year-old is putting in everything and if she is then she deserves her position! And maybe I need to change something that I'm doing in my stroke [or] in my training. So, I don't really mind. I enjoy it.* – Shelley

From the above discussion, it seems that the dynamic between junior and senior female swimmers is a stressful one— it is stressful for the perceived 'juniors' as well because they have athletes who are junior to them, too. For some senior participants, the pressure they receive from the juniors is beneficial as it helps motivate them to work harder to improve their performance, while for others the pressure appears to be destructive and affects the swimmer's ability to focus during training, their perceived competence, confidence and mood.

The dynamic ***between female swimmers*** will be discussed next. This sub- subtheme focuses on the relationships that female teammates have with one another. However, in this case, the female swimmers' age is not the factor influencing the dynamic.

Majority of the participants who referred to this sub- subtheme noted that the relationships that female teammates had with one another were paradoxical in that they highlighted rivalry, competition, and tension but also support, closeness, and empathy. Dory explains:

> *Um, there's always someone to race. Laughing, and joke-making and talking about our days. So, in a way we form that 'clique' but then that 'clique' is also broken very fast.*

Both Dory and Cordelia regarded their female teammates as 'family' or 'friends' because of the amount of time they spent together. The close bonds and friendships that were formed helped them support and empathise with one another which ultimately helped them *stay afloat* and navigate through difficult situations. This theme will be discussed a little later on.

Other participants felt similarly to Dory, too. However, they felt similarly about how easily these bonds could be broken due to rivalry and competition. Shelley felt that female swimmers' competitiveness made relationships inside and outside the pool confusing and difficult to define.

> *…my one friend – we like rock up to training together and we're all like nice and you know that kind of thing but as soon as we like get into the pool she doesn't talk and is so competitive. And then after training, she'd be all like chirpy again. So, I think that's like the only negative part with training with other females because they take everything so competitively. Like, I know you're supposed to push yourself in training but I mean if I had to like ask you something or like have a conversation with you, I'd at least expect us to – not like just shove me off and then afterwards we having a normal conversation.*

Darla and Dory add:

> *…sometimes girls are just not – I'm not too sure what's the word now – but they don't always like you. Like; catfights, kind of like that. But it doesn't happen that often. I think it depends on what girls are in your squad.* - Darla

> *So, girls like obviously race against each other so there's always going to be bitching between girls and trying to break down [one another].* – Dory

When Dory was asked to clarify how female swimmers do this to one another she added that female swimmers were more inclined to gossiping, spreading rumours, and ignoring each other. For Dory, the rivalry, conflict, and competitiveness that existed between female swimmers affected her motivation to continue with swimming. Relationships that female swimmers have with one another are paradoxical and as a result, they have both negative and positive effects on the participants' enjoyment of swimming.

The findings regarding sports peer conflict among female swimmers is not an unexpected finding seeing that researchers like Holt, Knight, and Zukiwski (2012) and Patridge and Knapp (2016) found that interpersonal conflict is more prevalent among sports teams with adolescent females in them than they were among sports teams consisting of male athletes. According to Patridge and Knapp (2016), such sports peer conflict can result in competitive anxiety, negative emotional outcomes, poor team cohesion as well as decreased athletic performance.

With South Africa's political history in mind, I had anticipated hearing more about the dynamic *between white swimmers and swimmers of colour*. However, Dory was the only participant who spoke about it. This could have been attributed to the following reasons; 1) the semi-structured interview guide did not explicitly ask about racial interpersonal dynamics, rather *squad dynamics* was a subtheme that emerged from the participants' narratives. Therefore, the participants did not have to consider the dynamic between white swimmers and swimmers of colour unless it was a pressing issue for them, then. 2) There are so few swimmers of colour at this specific swimming club that this dynamic may not occur as frequently as the other squad dynamics mentioned. And 3), Dory could have experienced this dynamic more recently than the other participants, thus it was more readily available to her when sharing her experiences with me, the researcher.

Although only one participant mentioned this dynamic, I felt this was a significant finding because of how this dynamic is shaped and perpetuated by wider macro-environmental factors (e.g., the transformation policies enforced by SSA and SASCOC; Desai & Veriava, 2010). This is evident from Dory's excerpt below, which reflects Dory's frustration with South Africa's quota policies in swimming.

> *Um, they (Swim SA) get more money for the teams if they put more black [swimmers] on. So, the girls that actually deserve to be on the team – So, if you actually look at the SA rankings, um, so, say you're first [on the list] and the next swimmer, a coloured swimmer, is third and they're (Swim SA's) choosing the team, they will take the third swimmer instead of you. So, what are you really getting out of your sport if you're training and you're training and you're just not getting the international exposure that you're meant to be getting? … I'm actually meant to be on some of the national teams but I'm not because the third swimmer is coloured.*

Having not been selected for the South African national swimming team had negative emotional and mental consequences for Dory, too; specifically, it left Dory questioning her competency in swimming. She shared:

> *It's horrible. Like, I've hit many stumbles, walls and like mental blocks because I'm not being chosen for the teams. So, then it comes to me like 'why am I doing this if I'm not getting anything out of it? … with not getting chosen for the team you immediately think that you're not good enough for the team so then, the girls feel like why are they not getting chosen? Is there something wrong with them? Is there something wrong with their swimming?*

Dory's anger towards the transformation policies in South African swimming had left Dory feeling resentful towards swimmers of colour and as a result, impacted how she interacted with them. As such, it created unpleasant dynamics between athletes. She said:

> *… getting back onto the blocks next to those girls that got chosen; it almost creates like a fierceness in you because you know that they didn't deserve to get chosen for the team so then you just show them that they didn't deserve to get chosen to be on the team.*

The above discussion suggests that the policies implemented by SSA and SASCOC had indirectly and negatively affected Dory as a female swimmer, her experience of swimming in South Africa as well as caused tension and conflict to arise between herself and her teammates; specifically, female swimmers of colour. The challenge with this situation is that there is little that Dory can do about it; she has no control over the policies being reinforced or who is selected for these teams. This powerlessness Dory feels gets projected onto those athletes who did get selected for the team, thus forming a potentially unhealthy dynamic between white swimmers and swimmers of colour.

My personal reflection

I found myself being very intentional with the words and phrases I used in this section. Race is still a sensitive topic in South Africa (at least from what I hear and not hear; see and not see). Consequently, I found myself not wanting to 'step on any toes' with what was being said. I hadn't previously paid much attention to the racial dynamics that existed in athletics. But having heard Dory's experience, I found that this is a topic that needs further exploration. I wonder how other athletes feel about these transformation policies. What are their experiences with it? Is it similar or different to Dory? How many athletes feel that their talent is being overlooked as a result of the transformation policies? How do athletes of colour feel about being perceived as being only selected because of their race? Have these transformation policies done more harm than good? How do these transformation policies impact the dynamics within a team?

In conclusion, this subtheme offers valuable insights into the dynamics that exist within individual-sport teams, specifically swimming squads. This contributes to existing and still a relatively unexplored area of research. Similarly to other studies on individual-sport teams (e.g., Evans et al., 2013), this study found that athletes who compete in individual sports are affected emotionally, cognitively, and physically by the interpersonal dynamics within their training groups. Other findings include; there are varying accounts of competitiveness that exist between teammates in individual-sport teams and training against male teammates can boost competence, confidence and mood while training against junior female swimmers can hinder these. Training with male swimmers can also place female swimmers at risk of burnout and negative emotional outcomes (e.g., frustration) due to inadequate recovery. Female swimmers perceive their relationships with other female swimmers in their squads as paradoxical. In other words, they move back and forth between rivalry, competition, tension and support, closeness, and empathy. The conflict mentioned by the participants is consistent with research by Patridge

and Knapp (2016) on female adolescent athletes. Another factor that seems to contribute to conflict between athletes in this study is related to the transformation policies which demand that sport is more representative of South Africa's racial dynamics. This finding is unique to the South African context and does contribute to tension, competitive, and rivalry between female swimmers. Patridge and Knapp (2016) note that sport peer conflict can result in negative performance outcomes (in individual and team performances), a decrease in team cohesion, competitive anxiety, and negative emotional outcomes. A meta-analysis conducted by Carron et al. (2002) has also pointed out that cohesion within sports teams are reliably associated with performance among individual sports teams. A larger cohesion-performance effect was also found for female teams than for their male counterparts (Carron et al., 2002). With the above findings in mind, even though swimming is an individual sport, these female swimmers perceive themselves as being a part of a "squad". As such, the dynamics within the squad affect them emotionally, mentally, and physically. Subsequently, it would be valuable for coaches to implement team building interventions so that it can improve team cohesion and performance and reduce consequences associated with poor squad cohesion.

Other interpersonal dynamics

In this subtheme, it became apparent that not only did swimming impact the athletes' lives but also the lives of those around them, including; their friends, family, and romantic partners.

All of the participants in this study sought out ***friendships*** with people who would understand, respect, and accommodate the demands and responsibilities associated with being a student-athlete. Holl and Burnett (2014) explain that when peers do not share the same experiences and goals as the athlete, the athlete is likely to feel unsupported. As a result, they are also likely to choose friends who will be more accommodating of their athletic lifestyle; who offer them a safe, supportive space and place less pressure on the athlete to attend social events (Holl & Burnett, 2014). This can be observed in Angie's account below as she describes the perceived benefits of forming friendships with co-athletes.

> *I think that's the nice thing about it. … They both did swimming and they're both in sport … so it's always nice to quickly speak about swimming but then they know when I need to study, they know when I need to train so they sometimes ask for a coffee around my swimming schedule or they ask when my classes start. So, they always know that they have to plan around my schedule. Where I feel like someone that*

doesn't take part in sport would be like 'hey, do you wanna go out tonight?' and I can't go out like I'm not supposed to be out past 9, or whatever. So, I just sometimes feel our relationships are so much better because we have an understanding of each other's lives and especially with swimming and studying. – Angie

Despite Angie's preference for co-athlete friendships, she did recognise that there are also challenges that come with pursuing friendships with other swimmers. She said:

I feel like making friends with other athletes is good because you don't just always have to be with swimmers. Because with swimmers; they're always talking about swimming and it's all they know and all they talk about are the sets and swimming, swimming, swimming.

For some participants, it was not so important that their friends did sport. Instead, they sought to build friendships with people who could understand or relate to them in some way. For example, Darla formed friendships with students who were just as busy as she was. She said:

I choose my friends so that they can understand me. If they don't understand me, they're not always true friends also. I have friends who are also really busy so I think they understand how I sometimes feel, like I'm a really busy person and everything but I want to— like with friends, I want to tell them that I'll be there for them if they'll be there for me but I won't necessarily like go for socials or something like that.

Shelley, on the other hand, formed friendships with people who were equally passionate about their interests; like art and drama. She believed that because they pursued other interests to her, they were also less likely to get jealous of her success and be more supportive of them, unlike friends who pursued similar interests to her. Thus, implying another challenge to athlete-athlete friendships; jealousy. She said:

…sometimes amongst friends there can be that sense of like jealousy or – so, amongst my school friends I must say it sometimes felt like that. Like I couldn't really tell them if I went away overseas and I was able to get a medal, you know? … whereas with my two best friends there isn't really like that feelings or whatever um, because we don't do the same thing. So, my one friend is into like the drama and the acting and stuff and the other is into art so, when the one achieves we still happy for each other and I

must say it's very nice to have them like so close to you because they; although they don't fully understand swimming, they try to understand it for me because I swim…

Similarly to Thomas (2017), all eight of the participants reported that they were expected to forgo social activities and events so that they could be better prepared for swimming. As a result, participants purposively selected friends that would understand the social sacrifices they had to make as athletes. This was evident in Lola's excerpt below, as well as some of the accounts above.

I made sure that I'm friends with people who understand that 'listen, Lola isn't going to be here in the mornings or the afternoons and most likely on the Saturday's [because] she's racing' … They understand that 'I can't do "this"— that if I go out, I have to be back latest 12[am] because I've got training at 6 o'clock in the morning and I can't go on 2 hours of sleep'. Um, so, their very understanding and I've made sure I've made friends with people who are understanding. They do understand that this is the time that I have to be there. Just as much as they have lectures, I have training. So, they're not going to miss lectures so I'm not going to miss training.

Even though most participants sought out friendships that would understand these social limitations, it did not stop them from feeling like they were missing out on important events. This was evident in Cordelia's extract below.

… you miss out on a lot of like friends and social gatherings that normal people would normally go to… and I think it's just difficult to manage …when they have plans and I miss out on them it just (long pause); it's difficult to say to them like 'can we make it later?' or 'sorry, I have training', you know?

Dory and Shelley also felt excluded when their friends would speak about their social lives around them.

… they speak about their social lives and everything that they do on weekends and then I'm like 'nooo… I'm just at the pool—' and that's quite hard. – Dory

…it was always like you feel so left out most of the times because all your friends are going out and then you get to school the next day and they're talking about this and

you're just like 'ah I missed out on the fun' (cringe), um, 'maybe I should have skipped out on that session so I could go out with them' you know, that kind of thing. – Shelley

Cordelia's extract below also emphasises that forgoing social events can also cause tension between the athlete and non-athletic friends subsequently, causing the athlete to withdraw from the friendship. According to Holl and Burnett (2014), athletes severing their ties with peer relationships that are perceived as unsupportive is not uncommon amongst international and national student-athletes.

…my friends that don't swim, I don't think they understand entirely like what you go through as a student-athlete. So, you definitely create like a lot of distance [from] them, if I can say that. … But I think that my best friends that don't swim they do feel frustrated sometimes when I can't make it or I'm too tired or something…

Most of the participants recognised that having to forgo social activities and events did affect them negatively. However, for many of them, this sacrifice was justified because they loved what they do and they wanted to succeed in it. This was observed in Dory and Shelley's extracts below:

I can't go out on Friday night because I'm training the next morning and that's hard for me but it is what it is and ***sport is important to me so I just have to make that sacrifice****. – Dory*

…so even though they like went out all the time … I had to just ignore that a bit and just stick to doing what I was doing cause ***at the end of this you know, I have swimming goals*** *and they don't do sport so they wouldn't really understand it. - Shelley*

In conclusion to this sub-subtheme, all of the participants purposively selected their friends based on the person's ability to understand and accommodate the social restrictions brought on by their student-athlete lifestyle (this will be further discussed under the *Career* theme). These social restrictions specifically refer to the swimmers having to forgo social events and activities in efforts to be better prepared for swimming. Most of the participants were negatively affected

by these social limitations but tolerated them because they believed that it was what was best for their swimming career (i.e., rationalising to cope).

My personal reflection

What is also evident from the above findings is that participants' choice of friends and the friendships they choose to pursue were influenced by their swimming aspirations. It is this that makes me question whether their choice of friendships is based on their personal preference or if it is based on convenience? How autonomous is this process of building friendships in sport?

Several participants spoke about their ***family***. Their accounts implied that their athletic commitments did have a negative impact on their familial relationships. Similarly to Park and Kim (2014), this section highlighted how, when parental support is not congruent with the needs of the athlete, their support may not always be perceived as positive. Instead, it can come across as pressure and subsequently increase the student-athletes' stress. The extent of the pressure and stress varied between participants in this study, however, it is important to note that it was still to some extent present. How this emerged will be detailed below.

When Dory spoke about the impact her swimming had on her relationships with her family, she admitted that it has strengthened some of her relationships and weakened others. She attributed this to the limited amount of time she had available to spend with family members; time that had to be dedicated to her swimming. She said:

> *Well, in a sense it has brought us (parents and her) a lot closer because we do everything together [and] because we know we don't have weekends or travel a lot when we do go away for swimming, it's made into a family holiday. But my family relationships, like outside my mom and dad—it's broken down those relationships completely because I'm never home and we never have time to spend with them.*

In accordance with other studies reviewed by Bean, Fortier, and Post (2014), the above quotation also illustrates the compromises that parents who are raising a student-athlete have to make so that they can spend time with their child and so they do not hinder their child's dream of becoming a professional athlete in any way.

Cordelia agreed with Dory. She recognised the sacrifices her parents and brother had to make for her to pursue her swimming as well as the time her swimming took from her and her family.

I got the impression, from her tone of voice and the amount that she shared, that this was something that had been weighing on her emotionally. She also sighed regularly while speaking, which suggested to me that this was a difficult topic for her to speak about. While Cordelia spoke, I got the sense that she felt responsible because her ambitions were taking away from her family's perceived needs. She said:

> *It's definitely hard cause you don't see them most of the time because you have training, which is two hours, so you don't see them and then you're immediately off to school, where you don't see them, then after training you don't see them as well so you only see them in the afternoon or at night, especially (sigh). Um, it's definitely difficult and they have to manage around you, um, personally we haven't been on many family vacations together and stuff like that and I think we miss out on a lot of family time together because I'm always away training or there's a gala or you know there's a swimming camp that we need to stay for…*

Cordelia also seemed remorseful for the impact that her swimming career was having on her brother. She added:

> *I have a brother and he's older … and I think he's also missed out on a lot of family trips and that [be]cause he has to stay [be]cause I'm training and I think that impacts [him] a lot (long pause). … I understand he wants to go places; like he wants to go to the sea or to the mountains or something but he can't [be]cause I'm training and I know that's hard for him to understand, um, (sighs) I know it takes a lot of time away from them (long pause). But I feel like if it works out it'll all be worth it.* – Cordelia

The above quotation also suggests that there may be additional pressure on her to succeed in swimming so that the sacrifices she and her family have made for her swimming were worth it. This was confirmed later in the interview when she was asked what sources of pressure has she experienced. She said:

> *Definitely from the family side (pause) because you do this every day and its time and money spent on doing this and I think if you let them down then I'd feel so—really bad; like you've wasted all that time and money…* - Cordelia

The pressure was not outwardly placed on her by her parents, rather the pressure was precipitated by her intrapersonal fears relating to her family. Specifically, the fear of letting her family down or disappointing them or having wasted their resources (i.e., time and money).

Darla's experiences with her parents highlighted that the sacrifices and demands of swimming in the family context cause conflicting thoughts and feelings for the female swimmer. She said:

> *They're really understanding of my swimming but sometimes it just feels like they don't understand because if my mom wants to go away for two weeks in December, I have to tell her 'but I have to train' and then she's like 'but you can train there' but it's not always the same (training on holiday). Ya, but, sometimes I do* ***think*** *they understand it's just sometimes it* ***feels*** *like they don't but I also understand that they also want to just spend time with me and do something else [other] than swimming.* – Darla

My personal reflection
Who sacrifices in this situation? The parent or the child? Would this cause resentment?

According to Bean et al. (2014), studies have also found that parents who had to adapt the family's routine in order to meet the student-athletes' athletic commitments did experience higher levels of stress, frustration, anger, guilt, and resentment towards themselves and the sport context. These negative emotional experiences, especially frustration, can also be observed in Darla's accounts.

Although Darla can cognitively make sense of her parents' support or perceived lack of it, emotionally she does not seem to feel it convincingly. She continued:

> *Like we argue sometimes because I need to swim and then my mom is like 'no you don't have to swim, you can actually take off!' Um, but it sometimes makes me feel guilty because I don't feel sick, I don't feel sore or anything like that so why am I not at training? Because I have to go away for a weekend with my parents? I want to spend time with them but sometimes it's just like 'okay— but there is a schedule and I*

have to follow it', 'I have to swim those exact times in a week so that I can improve my times later on'.

My personal reflection

There seem to be legitimate and non-legitimate reasons for taking time off. Taking time off for perceived non-legitimate reasons have potentially catastrophic consequences in the mind of the athlete.

The above quotation highlights, the dynamic between personal ambitions versus family needs— her mother wants her to have "normality" of a life separately from just training. Consequently, conflicting with her ambitions and making her perceive her parents' actions as sabotaging or restricting of her potential, as evident below.

> *Um, sometimes I'm really angry at them because maybe don't understand that I have to be there at every training session. … It's just like my coach tells me; he wants me to feel guilty if I miss a training session. And sometimes because I'm so hard on myself I get guilty really easily so I'm just like 'okay, what am I going to tell coach today? I can't come to swimming because my mom wants me to go away for a weekend?' (Tone is sarcastic). So then it's just kind of a guilty feeling like I'm not at swimming and everybody else is. I'm not going to improve my times.* - Darla

Coach induced guilt and her family's needs seem to also cause Darla anxiety. Darla's experience above also illustrates how challenging it is to balance the needs of the adults in her life (i.e., her parents and her coach).

In contrast to the above participants, Shelley spoke extensively and explicitly about the pressure she received from her parents and the impact it had on her, her swimming, and her relationship with them. Speaking about the situation with her parents seemed cathartic for her too.

Shelley perceived her parents' support as a source of stress and pressure. In accordance with Lee and MacLean (1997) and Wuerth, Lee, and Alfermann (2004), the pressure Shelley experienced was precipitated by her parents' demanding and controlling behaviour, their insufficient praise and understanding, and their over-involvement in her swimming. Her parents' behaviour also made it challenging for Shelley to express her thoughts and feelings

openly with them and subsequently resulted in her feeling unsupported and alone; only being able to rely on herself. She explained:

> *There was a lot of pressure from my parents. So, it was like you have to go all out [and] you have to know this race inside-out or stuff like that…. so, like I couldn't handle it (the pressure) sometimes [and] I'd end up going to the bathroom and having my little moment there for like two minutes and then I have to come back … it was basically just me, myself, and I at that moment where I just couldn't handle it; couldn't deal with it.*

She added:

> *It wasn't nice, hey. Especially because I had to go through it alone. I had to go through it alone because I was getting the pressure from them so I couldn't like go to my mom or my dad. I kind of had to deal with it all alone. So, it did feel very lonely at stages.*

Both of Shelley's parents were athletes when they were younger. This seemed to also add to the perceived pressure Shelley was experiencing. This was similarly found among adolescent swimmers in Fraser-Thomas et al.'s (2008) study. From Shelley's account below, it is also evident that she believed that her parents were trying to fulfil their past athletic dreams through her present success and achievement in swimming.

> *...um, I do think they thought at a stage that they were trying to live their lives through me and they just wanted me to achieve and reach a certain height. Um, but then also like I did learn that they're only pushing me so that I can reach my full potential.*

My personal reflection

Rationalising parents' behaviour with the perception that every parent ultimately has their child's "best" interest at heart? Seems like she needs to believe that her parents still care more about her then they do about her achievements and success in swimming.

According to Brummelman, Thomaes, Slagt, Overbeek, de Castro, and Bushman (2013), parents can project their unfulfilled ambitions onto the child when the child is viewed as a part of the self. Brummelman et al. (2013) added that these parents generally want the child to become successful in domains that they failed in themselves (e.g., sport) so that they may then be able to resolve feelings of regret and disappointment associated with previously lost

opportunities and subsequently feel successful. This can, however, have negative consequences for the child's sense of autonomy.

Shelley added that what made her parents' pressure more challenging to cope with was that it came home with them too. Her father and she would frequently argue about swimming at home which created an uncomfortable home environment for her. Swimming also seemed to cause tension between her father and her. She explained:

> *It's just like, you know, that tension like you can sense the tension in your house or whatever. ... So, my dad and I would have so many arguments because he would literally like shout at me for not being able to swim as good on [specific event] and I can't take that. Like I don't like them to shout at me, especially not my parents where I expect the support to come from, you know? And I mean they aren't my coach. But like they don't fully understand my sport like my coach does so I just felt like if there was anything I should do about it, like my coach would tell me; you know, not my parents where they're supposed to be my support structure and here's my dad kind of breaking me down that I can't put my [event] together.* - Shelley

According to Knight, Boden, and Holt (2010), adolescent athletes are aware of the type of parenting they find useful or not. The study found that parents who provided feedback regarding the athletes' attitude towards the game, their sportsmanship, and their effort was considered more helpful by the athlete than the technical or tactical comments that parents made regarding the athletes' sport (Knight et al., 2010). This was similarly observed in Shelley's account above. Shelley did not find her father's comments about her swimming helpful. Instead, it appeared that she found them negative and critical which inevitably caused tension within their relationship. It was also apparent, from Shelley's account, that she desired additional emotional support from her parents – not technical or tactical advice. Shelley preferred comments made regarding her swimming to be made by someone with relevant or prior experience in swimming (e.g., her coach).

As a result of the pressure she received from her parents, Shelley noted that her swimming was negatively affected. Subsequently, not having her parents present at her swimming events seemed to improve her performances. She explained:

I must say like for the past two years maybe three years, where I've just been travelling with my coach and my parents have like stayed back— … I've swam so much better without my parents being there. Even though I like love their support and it's really nice to have them there but it's just, unfortunately, the conclusion I came to; I swim so much better if they are not there.

She continued:

I think I'm more relaxed. Like, there's no tension; there's no stress. I'm just relaxed and when it comes to racing, I'm just ready for it. I think I like it better phoning my mom and being like 'I swam this time!' and like being able to tell them over the phone that I performed and then I'd rather have someone record my race – so I have someone record my race all the time and then I'm able to send it to my mom. So, I think that's been so much better than actually having them there.

Parental pressure has been associated with an increase in pre-competitive anxiety, however, Bois, Lalanne, and Delforge (2009) did not find a reduction in anxiety when parents did not attend the athletes' competitions. Shelley's experience contradicts this seeing that she observed an improvement in her performance and a reduction in pre-competition anxiety when her parents were not present at her swimming meetings.

From the above two quotations, it is also palpable that Shelley prefers her parents being less involved in her swimming. Having overly involved parents seemed to hinder her potential rather than enhance it. Angie, similarly to Shelley, preferred her parents being less involved in her swimming. Angie reported that having her parents be too involved in her swimming would likely leave her feeling overwhelmed. In addition to this, it would likely take time away from her relationships with them, outside of swimming. She explains:

…I've seen with [XX]'s parents and my parents; I'm glad my parents aren't like [his] parents because when he gets there they're always like 'how was training, what's this, what's that, have you seen this, have you seen that?' and everything is just swimming and I'm just like, 'I don't know why you would want to speak to your parents so much about swimming'. Like, I like it when my parents ask 'how was training?' But I don't always give them like amazing answers, I'm like 'ya, it was fine [or] it was tough this week'. And if I really feel like there's a story to tell then I tell them by myself. … I

> *don't feel like we talk about it that much that it bothers me, which is nice. Like,* ***I want to go home and spend time with them not go home and spend time with them whilst talking about swimming.*** *So, wherever I can and whenever I am away from the pool then I really like feel like I need things except swimming.*

Angie finds it important to compartmentalise (i.e., keep swimming at the pool as much as she can). In efforts to do this, Angie manages her parents' involvement in her swimming by informing them on a "need to know" basis. This seems to help Angie establish a sense of balance or normality outside of swimming.

In conclusion to the above sub-subtheme, parents can be a source of support but can also be a source of stress and pressure for the participants in this study. Having parents who are more of a source of stress and pressure than support can also leave the athletic child feeling alone, lonely and struggling to express their thoughts and feelings openly, which could affect their well-being and mental health, negatively. Parental pressure can come from a variety of factors; including parents' unfulfilled sports ambitions conflicting with the student-athletes' needs or from the student-athletes' ambitions conflicting with her family needs. The above findings also suggest that swimming can negatively impact relationships with family members and this has the potential to cause a tense and uncomfortable home environment for the athlete. Another significant finding was that parents and siblings are also required to make sacrifices for their student-athletes' dreams, not just the student-athlete. This finding was consistent with other research on parent-athlete relationships reviewed in Bean et al. (2014). This can be a challenging situation to negotiate around and can ultimately cause the child to feel responsible for the family's unmet needs. Also, less involved parents were preferred by some of the 18-and-over participants.

All four 18-and-over participants spoke briefly about ***romantic relationships***, while none of the under-18 participants did. To some extent this was expected, seeing that many of the 18-and-over participants gave me the impression that romantic relationships were frowned upon by parents and coaches because of the perception that romantic relationships were a "distraction" to female swimmers and would thus hinder their performance. These perceptions were evident from Shelley and Angie's accounts below.

> *…my mom would always like tell me like the biggest distraction would be like getting a boyfriend or that kind of a thing cause according to my mom they just take your attention away [from swimming]…* – Shelley

> *...I feel like some people like are forced by their parents to not have a (romantic) relationship … my old coach used to say that you're not allowed to have a (romantic) relationship, which I feel like and I also think [my current coach] feels like if you can like manage it then it's fine. If you can make sure that it doesn't affect your swimming then it's okay.* – Angie

From Angie's account it seems that as long as her romantic relationship does not affect her swimming, it is considered an acceptable relationship to have. The other 18-and-over participants felt similarly.

All of the participants who spoke about romantic relationships preferred having romantic relationships with other athletes. They believed that non-athlete partners could not understand the intensity and commitment that shadowed an elite swimming career as other athletes could. Consequently, romantic partners were also purposively selected, like their friendships, so that their partners had a similar lifestyle and would thus be pursuing similar goals. Pearl expressed this eloquently when she said:

> *Swimmers can only date swimmers; it's like a thing in the swimming community that swimmers can only date swimmers because people on the outside don't understand the level of commitment that we have to have…*

Shelley added:

> *…it's hard – especially cause you're a swimmer so you have to train in the morning and you have to train late in the evening's and then on the weekend you're tired and you don't want to go out; you just want to sleep, you just want to have that little chill time to yourself (smiles). So, it's hard for non-swimmers to understand that, so, they don't always understand that. … when I look for a guy, he has to do sport; any sport, it doesn't matter what sport it is because sport people are goal-driven. They know where they want to be, they know where they want to go…*

Lola, offered an alternative perspective, by reflecting on her relationship with a non-athlete partner. She said:

> *…last year I had a boyfriend and it was hard because it was hard to fit in time with him as well as time with training. He didn't always understand so when he was with me it was like 'it's just one session. What is one session?' and you go 'but I can't miss one session; cause one session's important' and then when he carries on you just think to yourself 'well, what is one session?' and then you kind of fall into that trap…*

From Lola's excerpt, it seems that non-athlete partners may not understand what swimming entails (i.e., the importance of attending training sessions and the possible consequences of not attending them). Consequently, it affected her commitment and motivation to train. While this relationship may have served as a distraction from swimming for Lola, it is not known if the same was true for her relationships with athletic partners.

Despite Lola's account above, the remaining three 18-and-over participants felt that their relationships were also a source of emotional support. All of these relationships are co-athlete romantic relationships. The partner's role in emotionally supporting these participants will be further discussed in the *staying afloat* theme, later in the chapter. Research studies focusing on the effects of romantic relationships are scarce (Arai, 2017; Campbell, Hosseini, Myers, & Calub, 2016). Both Arai (2017) and Campbell et al. (2016) found, in their own ways, that athletes who were involved in romantic relationships performed better in their respective sports than those who were not involved with anyone. Arai (2017) also found that having an understanding romantic partner also increased the athletes' satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing.

To summarise; ***romantic relationships*** are generally perceived as a distraction to parents and some coaches. However, for the majority of the 18-and-over participants who spoke about their romantic relationships. These relationships were a source of emotional support and could only be a distraction if they were not managed well or if the relationship is with a non-athlete partner; who may not fully understand the commitment swimming requires. Majority of these participants preferred romantic relationships with other athletes or swimmers who, according to the participants, would understand.

In conclusion to this subtheme, this study found that for many of the participants, their choice of friends and romantic partners was contingent on the person's ability to accommodate and understand the demands and pressures associated with being a swimmer. Relationships that were perceived by the athlete as unsupportive were frequently withdrawn from by the athlete. Being a swimmer also had a negative impact on their relationships with family members, particularly parents and siblings. This is consistent with the review conducted by Bean et al. (2014). For some participants, their ambitions conflicted with their family's needs while for others, their personal needs conflicted with their parents' ambitions. From the participants' accounts, it was evident that being a swimmer and pursuing a professional career in swimming also came with many social sacrifices. To cope, participants would rationalise that these sacrifices were necessary and would be worth it when they ultimately succeed in swimming or they would compartmentalise to keep their swimming and personal lives separate.

Social comparisons

Participants were frequently observed comparing their lifestyle as female student-athlete swimmers with those who were in some ways similar to them (e.g., non-athlete students, other athletes, male swimmers, non-student athletes, and international female swimmers). According to Festinger (1954, as cited in Guyer & Vaughn-Johnston, 2018), making social comparisons is relatively common because people have an innate drive to appraise themselves and when there are no objective ways of doing this, they rely on social comparisons. Social comparisons can have either a positive or negative emotional effect on the person making the comparisons (Guyer & Vaughn-Johnston, 2018). This was observed in the participants' experiences.

The most frequent comparison observed was between themselves as student-athletes and their non-athlete student peers. This was followed by comparing themselves as female swimmers and their male counterparts. The other comparisons made were between themselves and: other athletes, non-student athletes, and international female swimmers. The "other comparisons made" were only mentioned by one or two participants. As such, I will focus on the most frequently made comparisons only as those were significant to the majority of the participants.

Student-athletes and non-athlete students: All eight participants felt that available time differentiated them from non-athlete students, as is evident from Katie and Cordelia's accounts below:

I feel like non-athletes probably have a lot of more time ... Like I know I have training on a Saturday; well, we have training on Saturday's which can kind of limit your time a little bit and, ya, I don't know, it's mostly time than anything else. - Katie

I think there's a lot of spare time that they have that we don't have … they don't have the intensity of managing both swimming and studying. – Cordelia

The majority of participants believed that non-athlete peers had more time to dedicate to their school work and studying which had made it easier for them to manage their academic responsibilities. With "time" being a scarce commodity for student-athletes, Angie and Shelley also felt that they were somewhat academically disadvantaged in comparison to their peers.

Like if we (student-athletes) had the time that they had for studying, I know for sure I would have done better… - Angie

It was very overwhelming at times … you'd have that sense of 'ooh flip am I really ready for this test? I was swimming while everyone around me was studying so they basically had those extra two hours and you were in the pool at that time'… when it comes to writing the exams you're just like everyone around you is like well-prepared, you know? That kind of a thing, and you're like 'did I get in enough hours?' You always doubt yourself. - Shelley

For Shelley and Angie, their non-athletic peers were perceived as being in a better academic position than they were. This was attributed to the additional time their peers had from not doing swimming. Because "time" was seemingly perceived as something that could not be controlled in the participants' lives, it seemed to have different effects on Angie and Shelley. For example, Angie seemed to use "lack of time" to rationalise her academic performance (i.e., if she had more time like her non-athlete peers, she would have performed better academically). This is in accordance with Guyer and Vaughn-Johnston (2018) who noted that social comparisons can also assume a biased, self-serving function (e.g., to protect self from hurt feelings or to protect one's self-esteem). In contrast to Angie; because time was not something Shelley could control, it inevitably diminished her confidence and left her feeling overwhelmed and uncertain when writing tests with her seemingly better prepared non-athletic peers.

Lola and Darla also felt that their non-athlete peers had it "easier" than they (as student-athletes) did. As a result, these participants found it increasingly difficult to relate to,

understand, or empathise with their peers who were non-athletes. While speaking, both Lola and Darla's tone of voice suggested their frustration with their non-athlete peers.

> *...her struggles and my struggles are completely different. So, her complaining and my complaining they're completely different levels. She complains [be]cause she has too many lectures and I complain [because] I'm tired and I have a 6km set to go to and it could seem very rude but your life is a lot easier. You have lectures, class then you get to come home and you're not sore. Whereas [for] me, I get to come home and I'm sore, I'm tired and I can't necessarily go out on student night because I have training the next morning…* - Lola

> *Most of them are overly dramatic. Most of them are like 'I have this and this and this to do', 'I'm going to die', 'I can't do it' and then sometimes I feel like 'you're not swimming', 'you're not doing a sport so you can't actually talk about that', um, … 'things aren't so overwhelming for you'. But sometimes I just ignore them because they actually don't know how it feels. Because sometimes if I say to them 'you don't know how it feels to also do a sport' then they will sometimes say 'okay, but I have like orchestra', … 'I have choir' but I don't think it's like the same because when you're playing an instrument it's not so hard on your body like swimming. It's more like you're more tired afterwards then just playing an instrument*. – Darla

Pearl added:

> *… you also become very isolated because you can't relate to the people that you're studying with because none of them are doing what you're doing.*

My personal reflection

There is an apparent lack of ability to relate to their peers who don't do sport. I found it ironic that these participants felt that their peers couldn't understand, relate to, or empathise with their struggles or challenges (as student-athletes), yet they (as student-athletes) also couldn't offer their peers the understanding and empathy they looked for, either. I wonder how this affects the non-athletes' ability and desire to understand, relate and empathise with the student-athlete? There is also this "me/us" and "them" thinking which could be a defence mechanism - them rationalising perhaps? Swimming is seen as more demanding or a sacrifice as what their peer's experience, thus it must be worthwhile?

Therefore, the perceived distinctions made by the participants make it difficult for them to relate to their non-athlete peers, thus causing them to feel isolated in or withdrawn from this social milieu. In addition to this, student-athletes (in this study) believed that the limited time they had available to them made their academic lives more challenging than the life of a non-athletic peer. Upward social comparisons made between themselves and their non-athletic peers also had a predominantly negative emotional, mental, and behavioural effect on these participants. Next, I will discuss the comparisons the participants made between themselves and male swimmers.

Female swimmers and male counterparts: Six of the participants compared themselves to male swimmers. The most prominent comparison made was related to the differences in their physical abilities. Majority of the participants believed that male swimmers were physically stronger and faster than they were, as evidenced by Lola and Cordelia's extracts below.

> *…male swimmers,* ***they are a lot faster than female swimmers****; even from a younger age. I mean, if you compare the times [of] a 14-year-old 100m free female swimmer and a 14-year-old 100m free male swimmer the times are four-seconds apart because* ***males are naturally stronger****. They can push a lot further, t****hey do have more muscle****, they do, they can, [and] they are a lot faster. They are* ***naturally more powerful.*** - Lola

> *I think physically they can handle a lot more than female swimmers can just because* ***they're stronger****— genetically they're stronger than us, um, so, I think they can handle a lot more km in the training sessions than we can…* - Cordelia

Not all participants were able to come to terms with or accept their physical limitations as a female. As such, physical limitations seemed to pertain to their identity of being a female swimmer too.

> *…but it just feels like I'm not as good enough as the boys because I'm a girl. I'm built different and sometimes I just can't get that into my head.* - Darla

Pearl also emphasised how differently male swimmers interpret and respond to comments that coaches made. Pearl believed that she, as a female, was inclined to take these comments and feedback personally (i.e., internalise them), while her male teammates would take the comment literally.

…if he (coach) had to say something to a guy he (the guy) would then be like 'okay, I'm going to go and work harder' and I like, kind of, sit in the situation … and think like 'what is wrong with me as a person?' Like 'what have I done wrong?' And like how can I make me – not my swimming necessarily, but how am I going to perform better as like an athlete?' … I think that's just how girls interpret things differently, like from a more emotional perspective when things happen.

Lola agreed and added:

Girls can sit and cry and they (male swimmers) don't. If [my coach], for example, shouts; they don't take it too heart whereas for female swimmers; well, for me, I know I'll take it a little bit to heart.

Due to the above, Lola argues that female swimmers also need more emotional support than male swimmers do.

I think so we (female swimmers) do need more emotional support. I mean we go through a lot more hormones. Like, if you have a bad day then you just don't want to get in the water; which every girl has. I think every guy has too but [they] just get on with it and don't really care whereas a girl, they just need it (support) a lot more.

The final comparison made by the participants focuses on how male swimmers respond to one another at training and competitions. Some of the participants felt that the male swimmers are more encouraging of each other than female swimmers are.

So, like the boys will swim a race and if one beats the other one, they will give each other a high-5 and everything will be fine. If that happened with girls that drama carries on for a whole another week.

She continued:

… boys don't like experience that "bitching-factor" so, they support each other a lot more during training than what girls do. The boys are always laughing, always telling each other 'okay let's go do this'; where girls are more everyone is on their own.

The participants in this study recognise that male swimmers are physically stronger and faster than they are and for some of these participants their physical limitations as a female are

difficult to accept. Some participants also feel that male swimmers are better able to push uncomfortable emotions aside than they are. With this in mind, it could be said that female swimmers need different emotional support than male swimmers do. Lastly, participants highlighted that male swimmers were more supportive of each other at training than female swimmers were.

In conclusion to this subtheme, participants regularly compare themselves to those around them. These comparisons are perceived positively by some participants and by others, negatively. What emerged from these comparisons was that female student-athletes perceived themselves as having limited time to dedicate to their academics in comparison to their non-athletic peers. As a result, female student-athlete swimmers also had difficulty building meaningful relationships with non-athletic peers who were perceived as having it "easier" than they as student-athletes did. Additionally, female swimmers felt physically less adequate than their male counterparts and female swimmers believed that they had difficultly regulating uncomfortable emotions at training than male swimmers did.

The coach-athlete relationship

Based on the substantial amount of information on the participants' experiences with their coaches, it was evident that all of the participants placed a lot of importance on the coach-athlete relationship.

What I found most interesting when we discussed their coach-athlete relationships, was that most of the participants compared what their current coach was doing effectively to what their previous coaches neglected to do, or did poorly. For some participants, it was the other way around; they compared what previous coaches did effectively to what their current coaches were neglecting to do, or did poorly. This gave a unique perspective on what factors helped cultivate a healthy, seemingly strong relationship between the coach and his or her athlete and what factors caused issues between them (i.e., contributed to an unhealthy, seemingly weak coach-athlete relationship). *Table 2* provides a summary of the factors that contributed to a

healthy and unhealthy coach-athlete relationship, as interpreted from the participant's narratives.[7]

Table 2

Summary of factors contributing to a healthy and unhealthy coach-athlete relationship

Factors contributing to a **healthy** coach-athlete relationship	Factors contributing to an **unhealthy** coach-athlete relationship
✓ Coach is technically and tactically knowledgeable	✓ Has **no relationship** with athlete
✓ Is **passionate** about what he or she does	✓ **Lacks** enthusiasm or passion for swimming
✓ Coach **takes equal interest** in all swimmers	✓ What coach says is **not** consistent with what the coach does
✓ Provides **unconditional support** (includes; reassuring, motivating, guiding & giving advice)	✓ **Expectations** are too high for the swimmer to meet
	✓ Coaches praise does not match the intensity of criticism
✓ Takes time to build **trust** with swimmer	✓ Engages in **controlling behaviour**
✓ **Compromises** appropriately and when necessary	✓ Picks **favourites** in squad
✓ **Solution-focused** approach to problems	✓ Fosters an "**unsafe**" swimming environment

[7] A few of the factors mentioned in *Table 2* will not be discussed in this section as they have been or will be discussed in other themes or subthemes relating to the coach-athlete relationship.

✓ **Clarifies** expectations with swimmer and keeps self and athlete accountable ✓ Coach is **approachable** and **understanding** ✓ Is **demanding** without being demeaning ✓ Gives **critical and constructive** feedback to the swimmer ✓ Coach **listens** to swimmer and **tries** his or her best to **meet** swimmers' individual needs ✓ Allows swimmer to have a say in decisions regarding their career (**autonomy**) ✓ Creates a **safe, non-judgemental space** for swimmers to share thoughts and feelings openly ✓ **Challenges** athlete appropriately and when necessary	✓ Is **not accountable** for own actions ✓ Engages in **unpredictable** and **abusive behaviour** ✓ Offers support **conditionally** ✓ Offers **destructive** feedback ✓ Does **not** show interest in or understand other areas of swimmers life ✓ Does **not** meet swimmers' emotional needs effectively or consistently ✓ Is **easily manipulated** by athlete ✓ Is too focused on **weight, body image, and physical appearance** ✓ **Rarely compromises** ✓ Makes swimmer feel **"dispensable"**

Factors contributing to a healthy, seemingly strong coach-athlete relationship. Similarly to Phillippe and Seiler's (2006) and Fraser-Thomas et al.'s (2008), several participants in this study stressed their coaches' interpersonal communication skills more than his/her coaches technical and tactical knowledge. Specifically, they highlighted the importance of having a coach that listened, understood, and recognised their individual feelings and needs as well as guided, supported, and instructed them effectively and individually (Phillippe & Seiler, 2006). This was evident in Angie and Katie's accounts below. Angie said:

> *…he always wants to know how you're feeling [and] he knows everyone by name. Like, he knows exactly what each person wants and like the one girl likes a lot of attention*

so then he'll mention her name so many times in a session just so that she feels that he cares... Then, he'll have like someone else [who is] very quiet and she doesn't like being like talked and joked around with, so then, he just leaves her and like asks her separately 'how are you doing?' So, he knows everyone and like it's so –I don't understand how he gets it right (Laughs). I honestly don't.

Angie's respect, admiration, and appreciation for her coach was evident in how she spoke about her coach's ability to recognise and meet his swimmers' personal needs so effortlessly— her face lit up with a smile, she sat up straighter in her chair, and the tone was awestruck. A similar non-verbal response was observed with other participants who seemed to have a close, healthy relationship with their coach. Angie's quotation also emphasises how important it is for her that a coach takes an equal interest in all his swimmers, as this makes each swimmer feel like they are important and cared for.

Katie agreed that having a coach who knows how to adapt to the personal needs of the swimmer is important; a coach that can compromise and challenge an athlete appropriately and when necessary. She said:

…in terms of swimming he knows what he's doing and he knows how to handle his swimmers. Like I don't know how to explain it, but if he sees someone slacking on their training he knows to tell them to start getting their things together or start working harder or emotionally or when they get sick— just how to deal with different situations.

Communication was indispensable for the athlete and coach to get to know one another and establish mutual understanding. This was most evident the narrative of the participant below. By communicating with her coach, she gained clarity and insight into what was expected of her, thus easing how overwhelmed she felt.

It (speaking to coach) just made me understand how things work here cause like the first three weeks I was kind of thrown into the deep end and I wasn't told; 'okay you have to be here at this time; you have to make sure you're eating correctly; you've got to make sure you're sleeping correctly; you've got to make sure you come and speak to [the coach]' cause obviously he has a lot of swimmers so you've got to fit [it] in. You're not going to get that attention that you need or emotional support if you don't

fit it in and you don't try to like force yourself onto him and he explained that to me. And he explained to me how things work here which was really helpful. Very comforting and very helpful.

The same participant reiterated the importance of the coach clarifying his/her expectations and establishing a meaningful relationship with athletes who have recently joined the squad, club, and/ city, like she was. She believed that this reduced the chance of her misinterpreting what the coach said and also enhancing the athletes' desire to reach out to the coach again should a problem arise. She said:

Yes, it's (communication) very key. And also, [as a] female I have to like have a relationship with my coach, otherwise, I don't feel like I'm welcome or I don't feel like I can speak to him when there's a problem which obviously you have to speak to your coach – and that's what he said to me. Cause like on Saturday I went to him twice and like the two times I went to him I was crying – I was like hysterical almost and he said that he didn't understand where I was coming from [be]cause he didn't understand me. He said that if I communicated better – which I understand [be]cause he doesn't know me as well as my old coach knew me, um, then things would've turned out a lot differently. I would've had a better experience…

She continued:

…now that I've spoken to him I feel a lot better cause I didn't know kind of where I stood so when I said to him like '[Coach], I'm struggling I can't come to training this morning' he was like 'what's your problem, come to training!' and I took offence to it and I was like well I don't understand but now that I understand – like I said the communication was so key – that was probably the best thing that I could've done otherwise chances are I'd probably gone home. I don't know if I would've stuck it out.

Communicating with her coach and having him clarify what was expected of her in that environment also seemingly helped reduce her thoughts about dropout. This will be discussed comprehensively in themes to follow.

Other participants also highlighted the importance of having a coach that could relate to their experiences as a swimmer and as a ***female*** swimmer because they were former swimmers themselves. This was important to Lola and Cordelia because it helped them feel understood

by their coach as well as helped strengthen their respective coach-athlete relationships. According to Becker (2009), great coaches had to have an idea of what athletes were experiencing and this was typically better achieved by coaches who had experience as athletes themselves.

> *It's a lot easier to have a connection with a female [coach] than it is with a male [coach]. [A] female coach kind of understands the hormones –she's a female, she gets it – what we're going through, what our bodies are going through. And I don't think [my current male coach] doesn't get it, I just think that it's sometimes harder to approach him about it than it is to approach a female coach about it.* – Lola

> *… he understands a lot about what we've been through; [him] being a former swimmer as well. And he understands what we go through— maybe not exactly as females but as swimmers and I think he can relate a lot to us on a personal and professional level.* - Cordelia

From the above, it also became apparent that gender can negatively impact how the female athlete interacts with a male coach. It can, to some extent, serve as a barrier. This is consistent with Norman's (2015) findings. This does suggest that normalising such topics in a male coach female athlete dyad would be essential to reducing barriers and cultivating better communication between them.

A coach's experience was also believed to be important for instilling trust in the athletes s/he coached, as observed in Katie's account below.

> *…we have a really good coach and he has been overseas and he has coached overseas so he does know a bit more than the average coach in South Africa would. Um… so just trusting in what he does know.*

Another main characteristic was the importance of having a coach that works through problems together with the athlete, rather than expecting them to do it alone. Although the participants did not elaborate much on these aspects, this still appeared to be significant for some of the participants in this study. This can be observed in Dory and Lola's accounts below.

> *…like at a gala; if I don't swim well and then I obviously want to know what's going on but we sort it out in a way that we don't fight but we find a solution*. - Dory

> *[my coach] was saying to me that I need to lose weight and I took it to heart but when he first said it, I took it really to heart. It upset me. And then when he explained it to me – he explained why to me and he gave to me solutions. He didn't just say 'you've got to lose weight…' and like now what do I do with that information? Like how do I do it?'* – Lola

Therefore, consistent with adolescent swimmers (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008), male swimmers' (Phillippe & Seiler, 2006), and female athletes (Norman, 2015), the social and relational expertise of coaches are of utmost importance when coaching female swimmers. Communication, collaboration, understanding, and support was significant to cultivating a healthy, strong coach-athlete relationship with the female swimmers in this study.

Factors contributing to an unhealthy, seemingly weak coach-athlete relationship. For the majority of the female swimmers in this study, their coaches' poor communication skills were considered a substantial barrier to establishing a healthy, strong coach-athlete relationship. The poor communication skills that emerged in this study were similar to those identified by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008), Gearity and Murray (2011), and Stirling and Kerr (2008a), which included repetitive and destructive feedback, short tempers, verbally abusive behaviour, and the use of autocratic or authoritarian coaching styles.

For Dory, her female coach had worse communication skills than her current coach, who is a male. She reported that even though her female coach was "*nurturing and mother-like*," her short temper frequently manifested into verbally abusive behaviour and critical feedback. She said:

> *Um… they're much more nurturing and mother-like. But, they're also very fast to snap. So, they like shouting and yelling and treating you like rubbish whereas men (male coaches) are very careful about the way that they treat their female swimmers.*

She added:

> *When I started having a male coach; he started treating me with way more respect. So, the way we would discuss things wouldn't turn into a major screaming fight or it wouldn't turn into any media fight, we would discuss it. Whereas with a female coach, it's constant fighting, and screaming and just very snappy.*

Her previous coach's frequent criticism, short temper, and verbally abusive behaviour hindered her motivation to swim as well as her experience of swimming. According to Sterling and Kerr (2008a, 2008b), verbally abusive behaviours (e.g., being yelled at or criticised) can trigger distress in female swimmers and affect their performance, perceptions about themselves, as well as have a negative effect on their emotional well-being; contributing to feelings of anxiety, depression, and overall discontent with swimming. This was observed in Dory's extracts below.

> *It was hard. I hated every minute. Because I'm not going to wake up at 4 in the morning if she's just going to take me onto [the] pool deck and tell me how bad I am, or how terrible I am … You don't want a grumpy, unmotivated, no-one-want-to-swim-vibe cause no one wants to swim then. So that breaks down a swimmer even more then. Then, she just doesn't want to swim at all.*

As such, Dory decided to change coaches. Phillippe and Seiler (2006) similarly found that male swimmers reported that the coach-athlete relationship needed to be a positive one to be considered worthwhile and if it was not perceived worthwhile then they were likely to seek assistance on their swimming from another coach. This was also observed with a few of the other participants in this study.

From the above quotations, it is also evident that female swimmers need to feel respected, valued, and nurtured by their coach. They also need a coach that does not impulsively react off of their emotions when challenges arise but can manage his or her emotions so that problems can be solved effectively. According to Chan and Mallett (2011) enhancing a coach's ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions (i.e., having emotional intelligence) can enhance their ability to lead high-performing athletes more effectively.

Similarly to Dory, Pearl was also negatively emotionally affected by a coach's poor communication skills. She said:

> *…we were doing a really, really, hard session and I was already super tired – I think I was on my period or something as well, um, so, you obviously feel like you are more emotional; you are tired and, um, the [assistant] coach just got up and said to me like 'you don't have what it takes' like 'you're never going to make it' and you know I said to him 'you know you're such an asshole for saying that' and um, the head coach called me in and he said 'don't you think I'll address my athletes when I think they're*

stepping out of line', ugh… (frustrated) 'my assistant coaches' so I said 'but like don't you think that that is stepping out of line?' and he said to me 'well seeing the way that you're reacting, I'm starting to wonder if you really do have what it takes…' and I mean from that perspective like I was broken. I mean, I was ready to stop swimming because that's just not how I see it like I mean from a coach's perspective that's not how you handle an athlete. That's not how you speak to an athlete. I'm not saying that all coaches do that, [be]cause they don't. Um, I've had a very different experience since I've been here…

From Pearl's account, it is evident that coaches who tend to take on an autocratic or authoritarian style of coaching whereby the athlete is expected to accept critique without resistance impacts the athlete's experience of swimming negatively and may precipitate thoughts about career termination prematurely. According to Stirling and Kerr (2008a), being yelled at or criticised is normalised in swimming. As such, female swimmers accept such abuse because they believe it is part of the sports culture and is thus necessary to endure in order to succeed in sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). However, by enduring such abuse, the swimmer is at risk of being psychologically worn down, experiencing a loss of self-confidence, and underperforming (Stirling & Kerr, 2008a). As such, resisting such abuse and demanding to be treated better is a healthy reaction to abusive behaviours and should be encouraged.

Pearl added that shouting can also reduce how approachable the coach seemingly is. This is problematic seeing that it hindered Pearl's help-seeking behaviour. Subsequently, she felt lonely with her problems and had to suppress her thoughts and emotions. She said:

I had a coach shouting at me from the side-lines saying I'm not doing enough or I'm not – and I don't feel like I can approach that person. I don't feel like I can go to them and be like 'I had a really shit day at home or I'm on my period or I'm really hormonal or I'm really just not feeling okay' or whatever, if I don't have a relationship with my coach then I can't really speak to anyone about that in the pool and I can't really hand that message over to them and say listen this is what's going on. … I would be less open with a coach; I wouldn't communicate as much, um, and then it gets very lonely. Then, it's quick for feelings and emotions and opinions and stuff to get bottled up because you don't have that relationship where you can just sit down and say 'listen, I don't think this is working, can we try something else?' Because also a lot of the

coaches are either you do it my way or you move; they aren't open for discussion. - Pearl

For Angie, having a coach who did not practice what he preached hindered his credibility when future problems arose. In contrast, a coach whose actions were consistent with his or her words strengthened the trust between them as well as enhanced the athletes' help-seeking behaviour. These points are highlighted in the extracts below.

... he [previous coach] had no relationship with his swimmers. And he would always tell us like 'come have a relationship; tell me when you're sore' and then when you tell him he's like 'Agh okay, so?' (Laughs) I'm like 'okaaay, guy' (sounded irritated). ... Whereas [my coach now] would like say, 'okay, but tonight's session is quite an important session so can you try and make it for tonight, even if you only manage to do one set' then I'd say 'okay' or I'd be like 'no, actually I'm really so tired and I have nothing left' then he'd be like 'okay, see you tomorrow'. Or otherwise, if you say you're really tired he will say okay see you in two days. - Angie

How a coach responds to an athlete following a performance was also seemingly important to the athlete and could hinder their ability to cope with the disappointment following underachievement. This was observed in two participants' accounts. One of these participants was a swimmer who had just missed the 2016 Olympic qualifying times. From her transcript, it was apparent that her coach's reaction to her race affected her more emotionally than the disappointment from the performance had.

I think because I missed the Olympics by so close, it was really hard but I just accepted it. As I touched the wall and saw it (the time) I was like 'Okay. Like it's not my turn to go. It's – God doesn't want me to go [be]cause obviously something else might happen that'. ... And then I went to my coach smiling and I was like 'so, how was that?' and he just looked at me and was like—I don't even know what he answered but he was basically like saying 'no, that wasn't good'. Like, 'you messed up and your relationship' and then he started blaming and that's when I started breaking down because I kept myself strong in front of everyone and then going to my coach to go hear how like my race was he— it was like [less than half a second] off the qualifying time so it wasn't like I missed it by like 5-seconds and he just said it was a horrible race and he said that everything, like my relationship – and [that] I wasn't focused,

but ya that broke me. That's when I did cry, and ya then I was quite over the swimming…

Darla was another participant who noted how emotionally detrimental a coach's response to performances can be. She said:

He sometimes screams too quickly at me. So like the first thing— that's why sometimes I think I have to perform the whole time— the first thing that happens when I do bad he's going to say to me 'you didn't train hard enough' or something like that. Um, it's not necessarily that he'll tell me that I'm stiff or something. The first thing that he tells me is that 'you didn't train hard enough'. So that's why I feel like I have to perform to show my coach that I can swim good.

She emphasised training harder and having to put in more hours, however, this leaves me to wonder whether that is all there is to training? What about technique and psychological aspects that could have affected her performance?

She added:

He expects a lot from me and sometimes when I do good he doesn't necessarily give me the recognition that I expected … Um, he isn't that happy but I know that's just his personality. Like if I tell him that I just came first in the junior nationals he would be like 'good, well done'. Against like my previous coach who would like hug me and scream like 'well done! I knew you could do it!' So, it's just like a little bit different— [I] want [my] coach's recognition also but it isn't as satisfying as my old coach's was. … if my coach screams at me and everything when I do bad I also want him to show a little bit more emotion when I do good. He makes me feel so bad when I swim bad and I just want him to sometimes make me feel really good if I swim a good time.

My personal reflection

This broke my heart – coaches don't recognise the power that their words have on female athletes.

Darla's quotations above indicated that the coach's intensity of praise provided during favourable performances needs to match the intensity of criticism provided during undesirable performances. Furthermore, if the intensity is not there, the recognition or praise is seemingly

less satisfying, thus leaving her disappointed. Alternatively, even leaving her wondering what more she could do to get that sort of recognition. As such, there is a need for coaches to provide female swimmers with more positive feedback and validation.

It is apparent that following undesirable performances, female swimmers need additional support and validation, rather than destructive criticism. Previous research has shown that a coach's feedback can impact: how the athlete perceives his/her athletic ability, his/her affect, as well as his/her motivation to participate in sport. Athletes with low perceived physical competence were found to be more at risk of dropping out due to higher experiences of pressure (Carlman, Wagnsson, & Patriksson, 2013). Allen and Howe (1998) found that female adolescent athletes perceived themselves as more physically competent when their coach responded with praise and information to a good performance and with less encouragement and corrective information following an undesirable performance. Allen and Howe (1998) suggest that even if frequent corrective information is offered following a mistake, female adolescent athletes may construe their performance as a failure which then decreased their perceptions of their athletic ability. Therefore, coaches need to be more cognisant of how they respond to female swimmers about their performances; whether they be good or undesirable.

Another main factor contributing to an unhealthy, seemingly weak coach-athlete relationship is the coach offering support conditionally. By this, I mean the coach will support the swimmer as long as they are performing well. This is evident from Pearl's account below.

> *…sometimes I just feel like a pawn on a chessboard and the coaches are playing and I have to do what they want so that they look good; not so that I look good. I mean it's become very political in the sense that if I swim well then my coach looks good or [the university] looks good for instance or the country looks good – it's never like solely about me but as soon as I don't perform, I just get dropped – like the support goes away.*

From Pearl's quotation above, it was evident that she does not feel the coaches, university, or country has her best interests at heart. She is seemingly a chess piece that is being manipulated and used by those around her. Her quotation further emphasised her frustration, anger, and hurt by the lack of unconditional support provided. She needs to know that even if she performs poorly that those around her will continue to support her through those challenges, not discard her because of them. This was similarly observed in two other participants' narratives.

In conclusion to this subtheme, the coach-athlete relationship is of utmost importance to the female swimmers in this study. Participants' narratives offered insights into factors contributing to both healthy, strong coach-athlete relationships and unhealthy, weak relationships. The coaches' interpersonal communication skills appeared to be central to both of these. Participants in this study, similarly to male swimmers in Phillippe and Seiler's (2006) study, emphasised their coach's listening skills and being able to understand and recognise their individual feelings and respond appropriately to these feelings. The coach's ability to do this was responded to with admiration, respect, and appreciation from participants in this study. Clarifying expectations was another important factor that emerged from this study. Communicating expectations clearly and early in the coach-athlete relationship was essential as it established a mutual understanding between the athlete and her coach. Gender was also observed as a communication barrier, especially with participants who had male coaches. As such, male coaches need to normalise such topics so that communication channels can be enhanced with female athletes. Finally, collaboratively seeking solutions to problems also strengthened the coach-athlete relationship. These findings were consistent with other literature reviewed (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Norman, 2015). Poor communication skills were the main factor that emerged when looking at factors that hinder the strength of the coach-athlete relationship. These were consistent with previous literature like Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008), Gearity and Murray (2011), and Stirling and Kerr (2008a) which included destructive feedback, short tempers, verbal abuse, and autocratic coaching styles. Coaches are encouraged to be more cognisant of the manner in which they communicate their thoughts and feelings to female athletes as they can have detrimental effects on their thoughts, feelings, and success.

The decision

My personal reflection

At my initial meeting with the swimming club manager, he mentioned his concern about 16- to 20-year-old South African female swimmers dropping out of swimming prematurely. Further research I did on the subject also suggested that there were many complex reasons for athletes deciding to conclude or continue their athletic career. However, most of these reasons were obtained quantitatively. So, with the above in mind, I decided to ask my participants what factors would make them pack their swimming caps away for good and what motivated them want to continue. What I had not anticipated was that this might have been a sensitive topic for a few of the participants. What led me to believe it might have been sensitive was the way they answered these questions. For example, the one thing I noticed was that they used 'you' instead of 'I' while speaking about their experiences on this topic. This suggested distanciation and that they might have been trying to put some distance between themselves and the discomfort of the experience. I also found myself increasingly concerned (and frustrated with myself) during this portion of the interview/ transcript because 1) I felt that some of the answers to these questions were too brief and I thought they may not provide the best insight into their motivations to continue or dropout of swimming and 2) I wish I probed further into their motivations and how they decided to keep swimming – specifically, the decision-making process.

All athletes inevitably have a decision to make; do they continue with their sports career or do they terminate it? Sometimes their choice to terminate their sports career is involuntary (e.g., terminating due to injury or health-related reasons) and sometimes it is voluntary (e.g., wanting more time for family and friends or their academics).

John (2007) found that 40% of female athletes in Britain discontinued their sport participation by the time they were 18-year-old and Gatorade reported that girls tend to discontinue their sport participation 1 and a half times the rate that boys do (Jedrzejcak, 2017). With the above in mind, it was somewhat expected that all eight participants mentioned that they have had thoughts about dropping out of swimming.

With the exception of some studies, for instance Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) and Slattery (2012), a large extent of the research that was reviewed on athletic engagement and termination were from the perspective of male and female athletes together, who take part in different

sporting codes, and who have already terminated their athletic career. Thus, this present study contributes to the existing literature by exploring this topic exclusively from the perspective of female swimmers who are still engaged in their sport. Additionally, a systematic review was conducted by Monteiro, Cid, Marinho, Moutao, Vitorina and Bento (2017) on dropout among swimmers suggested that there was also a paucity of research focusing on the determinants and reasons for dropout in swimming from a South African perspective. As such, this study contributes to this gap by focusing exclusively on female swimmers in South Africa.

Of the eight participants who mentioned reasons that precipitate thoughts about dropping out only six of the participants mentioned factors that motivated them to remain engaged in swimming. There also appeared to be times that thoughts about dropping out were stronger (e.g., when they had not adequately rested or if they perceived their performances were getting worse) and times when they would be weaker (e.g., when their performances reflected progress, they felt adequately supported by those around them, or they were able to have some time off from swimming). This suggests that thoughts of dropout can potentially be reduced by increased social support and additional time for rest and recovery.

Despite thoughts about wanting to discontinue their swimming career; all of the participants remained persistent in continuing with it. In other words, none of them had entertained the thoughts about dropping out enough to manifest them into action. In doing this, they subsequently decided "to swim", over and over again.

The two subthemes that emerged were "to swim" or "not to swim" which specifically focus on the factors that precipitated the participants' thoughts about dropping out of or continuing swimming. These will be discussed next.

To swim

Several reasons to continue swimming emerged when interpreting the participants' narratives. These included; *interpersonal reasons*, *goals to achieve*, *high athletic identity*, *proving critics wrong*, *enjoyment and love for swimming*, and *having no regrets*. Only one of these motivators were mentioned by more than one participant. This was the *interpersonal reasons.* Four of the six participants stated that having support from their coach helped them challenge thoughts about dropping out, two also referenced their friends, and one referenced her parents. This is not surprising seeing that Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) found that significant others (e.g.,

coaches, parents, and peers) play a critical role in fostering a propitious environment that helps enhance a swimmers persistence in sport.

Slattery (2012) did a study on South African sportswomen and identified that female athletes were motivated to continue with sport for the following reasons: the rewards that followed participation (e.g., satisfaction from others' approval and anticipation of extrinsic rewards), the competitiveness of sport (e.g., proving to others they were the best and having goals to achieve), enjoyment of sport, to challenging themselves physically and mentally (e.g., improving fitness, strength, and ability and persevering even when defeated), to utilise the talent they recognised they had in sport, and staying in shape. Not many of these reasons were identified by the South African female athletes in my study, aside from *goals to achieve* (i.e., competitiveness in sport), *enjoyment and love for swimming* (i.e. enjoyment of sport), and *proving critics wrong* (i.e., rewards that followed participation). Therefore, this research enhances present research on South African sportswomen's motivations for participating in sport by including motivations like *interpersonal reasons, high athletic identity,* and *having no regrets*. In this study, I expand on the *interpersonal reasons* as they were significant to the majority of participants who answered this question.

For Dory, having a coach that created a stimulating and positive training atmosphere made a difference and helped motivate her to continue with swimming. Additionally, the friendships she has formed through swimming also enhanced her motivation to continue training.

> *Definitely the friends that I have made at swimming and the training motivation that we have. And definitely my coach because he definitely makes everything exciting. He makes jokes during training; he just makes everything that's long seem a little shorter and making the best out of a bad situation.* – Dory

Cordelia admired having a determined coach that valued his female swimmers. His persistence to keep female swimmers swimming was seen as a reflection of his good intentions (i.e., wanting them to do well) and his passion for swimming. This had a positive impact on her decision to swim or not to swim.

> *Personally, my coach, (smiling broadly) – he's very driven and he likes to keep swimmers – and he tries very hard to keep female; especially, female swimmers*

swimming, um, for as long as possible. And I think that's very good because it actually means he cares about swimming and he actually wants people to do well.

Cordelia added:

Ya, there was a point where I didn't want to swim anymore … and, um, a lot of people helped me through it and they were talking to me and, um, just helping me to get through it.

For two participants, speaking to their coach when thoughts about dropping out arose and having the coach listen, reassure and validate their feelings and subsequently encouraged them both to continue swimming. Slattery (2012) found that academic stressors were the third most common factor precipitating dropout or thoughts about dropout among South African female athletes who had already dropped out of sport and those who were still engaged in sport. Similarly, one participant was feeling overwhelmed by academic-related and future (career) uncertainties and subsequently contemplated dropping out of swimming. She explained

…in the beginning of the year, I was struggling with anxiety and things. And then I was kind of contemplating: 'Should I? Should I not? [leave swimming] Is it going to be worth it? Is it going to be worth struggling with [my academic work] and maybe not getting anywhere or (pause) So, ya that kind of contributed to my thoughts of maybe leaving but that's when I spoke to my coach about the programmes, and where I was and everything. And it was my coach that made me stay.

As the researcher, I was curious to understand what it was about the coach that motivated her enough to commit for several more years, especially since she had already begun to weigh the costs and benefits of terminating her swimming career versus continuing with it. She eloquently stated:

I trust [my coach] with what he does. So, just hearing him say that in the next few years some development might happen, it helps knowing that it is possible.

This emphasized the importance of cultivating trust between an athlete and her coach. Cultivated trust can enhance a female swimmer's commitment to her sport as well as instil a sense of hope where once there was doubt.

According to Saxe (2015), transition blues are common amongst first-year female student-athletes and can prompt feelings of wanting to go home or quitting. This was similarly observed by one participant who was transitioning from high school to university. She reported feeling out of her depth with being in a new province, city, university, and swimming club and subsequently thought about dropping out. Speaking to her coach and having a better understanding of what was expected of her had made her feel reassured and subsequently calmed her. As a result, the participant felt less motivated to act on her thoughts of dropping out of university and going back home. She said:

> *It was so much better. It (the talk) just made – it cleared up so many things for me. It just made me understand how things work here [be]cause like the first three weeks I was kind of thrown into the deep end … he explained to me how things work here which was really helpful. Very comforting and very helpful … Um, this week I can say it's been a lot better and the only reason is because I met with [my coach] on Monday … I'm missing home this week but not as much as I was. I didn't get into my car and want to go home.*

This participant's experience reiterates the importance of coaches recognizing and nurturing female student-athletes who are transitioning from high school to university early, as they are seemingly more at risk of dropping out of sport prematurely (Swabey & Rogers, 1997).

One participant offered an alternative perspective on a coach's influence on a female swimmers' decision to swim or not to swim. Pearl believed that in the same way that a coach-athlete relationship may enhance a female swimmers' motivation to continue swimming, coaching issues may also motivate them to drop out of swimming. She explained:

> *I think it is, um, especially because of the girls that I know that have stopped swimming and I have gone and spoken to them and asked 'why you have stopped swimming?' That's always been [be]cause they end up on bad terms with their coaches. So, there's so many girls that stop swimming because of a coach, not because that they're tired of the sport, or they're retiring; they're retiring because of something that happened [with the coach]…*

A review conducted by Crane and Temple (2015) identified that perceptions of negative team dynamics (with coach and teammates) were identified as a correlate of dropout amongst

athletes. Similarly, in a South African context, Slattery (2012) found that coaching issues were the second most prominent reason for dropout among sportswomen. This is consistent with Pearl's perspective on the impact of the coach-athlete relationship on female swimmers' dropout.

In conclusion to this section, the coach-athlete relationship has a significant impact on female swimmers decision to remain in sport. This is consistent with research by McGee and DeFreese (2018) who found that when a coach and the athlete establish closeness with one another and can work co-operatively, the athlete is more likely to continue engaging in sport. An additional finding was that the coach-athlete relationship can reduce athletes' thoughts about dropout by having the coach offer additional emotional support when they are experiencing adversities that precipitate thoughts about dropout (e.g., transition-related or academic-related stress). Openly communicating with the coach regarding their thoughts about dropout seemed to help female swimmers in this study remain in sport, especially when the coach listened and reassured them. This is consistent with findings from research conducted on adolescent swimmers by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008).

The female swimmers in this study also confirmed they can manage the demands of training more efficiently when they are motivated to swim. For many of the participants, their coach's presence and playful and passionate nature contributed significantly to their motivation to swim. Additionally contributing to their motivation to swim was their ability to relate to their coach. This is consistent with Ryan and Deci (2000) who noted that relatedness (i.e., feeling connected to and cared for and feeling a sense of belonging in one's athletic environment) is essential for athletes to feel motivated. Coon's (2015) research also emphasised the importance of female athletes' relatedness to her coach. Coon (2015) found that perceptions of autonomy and coach relatedness increased the athletes' intrinsic motivation and decreased their amotivation (which seemingly predicted dropout in athletes of that study). This was similarly observed in this study. Female swimmers felt they were more motivated to continue with swimming as a result of their relationship with their coach who makes the atmosphere more fun ("*exciting*"), makes them feel cared for, understood, and listened to. Coaches are encouraged to be caring, supportive, and encouraging of their female swimmers as well as to openly communicate and engage with them about their uncertainties, stressors and challenges that precipitate thoughts about dropout. This will not only enhance the relationship between themselves and the athlete but also reduce their thoughts about dropout when they are experiencing them.

Only one participant spoke about how her mother's personal experience impacted her decision to stay in swimming, positively. She said:

> *What my mom always told me – [be]cause my mom got chosen for the SA team for basketball when she was in university and she never went and she never played for the team cause she was too afraid that she would fail. So, she's the one who always tells me like 'what if you stop now?* ***You're always going to wonder what would happen if you continued*** *so why not just continue and see what happens and if you fail then you know at least'.*

It seemed, from my interpretation, that this mother had projected her regret of not continuing her athletic career onto the participant. This seemed to make the participant obliged to continue with swimming so that she may not experience the same regret that her mother did.

In conclusion to this subtheme, these findings enhance present research on South African sportswomen's motivations for participating in sport by including motivations like *interpersonal reasons*, *high athletic identity,* and *having no regrets*. Female swimmers in this study were predominantly motivated to continue with their sport career due to the influences of their coach. Teammates and parents were not as frequently mentioned but do have a positive impact on female swimmers continuing to swim. The next section will be focused on the factors that triggered thoughts about dropping out in the female swimmers of this study.

Not to swim

Numerous factors precipitated the participants' thoughts about dropping out of swimming. These included; *performance-related reasons*, *missed social experiences*, *family-related reasons* (e.g., wanting to spend more time with family), *future* (career) *uncertainty*, *study-related reasons*, *transition-related reasons* (e.g., having difficulty adjusting to new environment), *sport peer conflict*, *injury*, *coaching issues*, and *loss of motivation or interest*. The majority of these reasons were only mentioned once or twice. *Performance-related reasons*, however, were the most frequently mentioned reason with seven of the eight participants referring to it. Monteiro et al. (2017), who did a systematic review on the determinants and reasons for dropout in swimming, showed that the main reasons for dropout among swimmers in America, Canada, and Spain were "conflicts with coaches, other things to

do, failure in competence improvement, pressure by the parents, peers or coaches, lack of fun, [and] boredom" (p. 10).

In the local context, Slattery (2012) found that South African sportswomen (who continued with sport) identified injuries, politics in sport, and a lack of financial stability in sport as the three main factors that affected their decision to continue with or terminate their athletic career. The female sportswomen who had already terminated their athletic careers identified the following; decreased motivation and interest, coaching issues, and academic pressures (Slattery, 2012). In my study, *performance-related reasons* were the primary cause for thoughts about dropping out of swimming. However, such factors did not seem to present themselves in the six articles analysed by Monteiro et al. (2017). Additional reasons like *missed social experiences*, *family-related reasons*, *future (career) uncertainty*, *study-related reasons*, *transition-related reasons*, and *sport peer conflict* were also new. Although these are seemingly new in relation to research focusing on dropout reasons amongst swimmers, similar reasons have previously emerged in research focused on other sports (e.g., Carlman et al., 2013; Crane & Temple, 2015; Enoksen, 2011; Lavallee, Grove, Gordon, 1997; Moesh et al., 2012; Slattery, 2012). With performance factors being the most frequently mentioned factor, the remainder of this section will be dedicated to it.

When Dory was asked about what factors would contribute to her dropping out of swimming, she bluntly said:

> *Definitely not getting the results that I want.*

She explained that by not getting the results she wanted, her motivation to swim and her attitude towards swimming would be negatively affected. Consequently, she reported that she would likely become less interested in attending training sessions. This was consistent with research findings on Norwegian track and field athletes. Enoksen (2011) reported that athletes who observed a regressed athletic performance also experienced a decrease in their motivation which ultimately contributed to them discontinuing their sport. Ames (1992, cited in Enoksen, 2011) explained that when elite athletes observe improvement, attain their athletic goals and receive recognition from significant others, they will likely prolong their athletic career. Therefore, it makes sense that athletes who are unable to do this experience a decrease in motivation and an increase in desire to dropout of sport.

Lola, in comparison to Dory, had a lot to say about how 'not getting the results she wants' made her feel and how that precipitated her thoughts of dropping out. She explained:

> *...it just get[s] emotionally straining. The training sets and the disappointment because* ***that disappointment sometimes is so deep*** *and you put in so much work and you don't get there, and then having to deal with that disappointment sometimes – I can see why swimmers stop because you put in 10 hours and you think 'I've worked so hard' and then, again, you touch that wall, you look up and you've put on time.*

She continued:

> *It's not easy, it's a soul-wrenching sport [be]cause you only have a good race – where everything falls into place – seldomly, and everything else is a bad race and you take it to heart every single time.* ***So then, you start to question why you're doing it.*** *Why you're making more sacrifices. Why you're putting on time. Why are you training till your body aches every morning? Why are you waking up at ridiculous times every morning for training? And if you don't have that thing that gets you out of the bed or you don't have that something in you then it will make you give up swimming very quickly.*

Although Lola does not explicitly say that she perceives these performances as failures, it does seem implied. For Lola, a good performance is one where "***everything*** *falls into place*". Subsequently, anything less than that is perceived as a failure; something that would affect her chances of reaching her goals (Sagar, 2007; Newman, Howells, & Fletcher, 2016). This also implied an all-or-nothing way of thinking which is believed to fuel emotions like anxiety, anger, and sadness (Beck, 2011). Lola's perceived "bad" races seemed to diminish her confidence and made her question whether the sacrifices she had made for swimming were actually worth it; ultimately, making her consider dropping out. A study conducted by Weiss, Weiss, and Amorose (2010) explains that this may be related to the perceived costs. They elaborate that when an athlete's personal investments (e.g., time, effort, and energy) are perceived as costs (e.g., no return in the form of improved times), it will likely "detract from their enjoyment, desire to continue, sustained effort, and participation behaviour" (Weiss et al., 2010, p. 431).

In addition to the above, Lola's quotation suggests that athletes do rely on their performances for validation and reassurance which can also reassure and validate an athletes' insecurities

(e.g., that the sacrifices made for swimming have not been worth it), should performances not go as expected. It thus seems applicable that Lola emphasises the importance of intrinsic motivators ("…*that something in you…*") as a reliable source of motivation when this occurs (Ryan and Deci, 2000). According to Coon (2015), when athletes feel that they have neither internal nor external reasons to continue participating in sport, they will likely consider dropout and act on it.

The above was similarly observed in Katie's account. Not seeing her time and effort translating into a faster time was both demotivating and frustrating:

> *I think it's mostly like* ***frustration****; kind of knowing that you're putting in a lot of work… Like we train in the morning and we train at nights and when it comes to competitions and you just see that you're not going anywhere;* ***you're stuck*** *on the same times, if not even a bit slower.* ***You're not moving forward, you're not getting anywhere so just being frustrated with all the time and effort you're putting in but not getting anything from it.***

Even though underperforming had such a negative emotional effect on Lola and Katie, both had mentioned how seeing their performance improve or having a rare, 'good' race also enhanced their confidence and made them significantly motivated to stay.

> *…it's motivating to run or swim your race and look up and seeing a faster time and knowing that you've made progress. Then afterwards thinking 'if I go back now and I train again maybe next time I'll go even faster!' …. So, that's nice to see and motivating [to stay].* – Katie

> *…the good races make up for the bad races. So, when you touch that wall and you look up and you've made that time [and] you've worked for months, and months, and*

months – that feeling makes everything else go away. It makes everything else worth it. – Lola

My personal reflection

Lola mentioned that she was likely to get one good race out of ten. This concerned me to be honest because if a good race was the only thing that made her feel that these sacrifices are worth it then how much of her swimming career was filled with doubt and/ disappointment? I wish I asked what successful and "unsuccessful" performances meant to them.

This aligns with Newman et al. (2016), who found that self-esteem increased as an athlete improves their performance. However, Newman et al. (2016) also emphasised that this was ultimately short-lived. Therefore, teaching and encouraging athletes to find pleasure in small achievements in each performance could increase their motivation and self-esteem as well as reassure them that their sacrifices, time and effort are not for nothing.

"Losing" a race had also seemed to diminish Darla's confidence and self-belief. However, for Darla, underperforming had negatively affected the way she thought about herself (i.e., seeing self as inadequate) and her competence as a swimmer. While swimming, her thoughts would become critical and punitive which ultimately made her consider quitting her swimming career. She said:

I'm very hard on myself. So, when I sometimes lose I'm like 'no, man you are just like the worst person', 'you'll never be good enough'. But, it's just like in that moment. But sometimes, because of that, I put it in the back of my head and then sometimes when I'm just not having a good day I tell myself 'it's because you'll never be good enough' cause still in the back of my head because of that one time that I lost. So, that's also sometimes when I think 'I want to stop swimming' because it feels like I'm just not good enough but it's just because of the strong mindset that tells me that I can't always do it.

According to Crane and Temple (2015), intrapersonal constraints like perceived physical and sport competence was one of the dominant factors related to dropout identified in 26 studies they reviewed. Crane and Temple (2015) further explain that thoughts about dropout are higher among athletes who perceive themselves as less competent in their sport because people are generally drawn to activities that they do well in and withdraw themselves from those they

perceive themselves as unsuccessful in. Perceptions of competence have also been related to the enjoyment of sport (Crane & Temple, 2015). Thus, low perceptions of competence can negatively impact an athletes' experience of sport, as was observed by Darla's narrative.

Losing is difficult for any athlete and a lot of the time it is about how the athlete copes with these disappointments that make a difference in them dropping out of or staying engaged in swimming. At other times, athletes may not be losing but they may not be observing an improvement in their performance, either. Experiencing a plateaued performance is another *performance-related reason* that Angie and Shelley highlighted. Angie stated:

> *…if I feel like I'm not improving for years then I feel like there's no point in carrying on.*

For Shelley, working through a performance plateau was difficult. She noticed little to no improvement in her swimming for a period of two-years but did not understand why. She coped by persisting with her training and seeking out a new coach. "Change", according to Shelley, was what helped her out of the dip. However, she believed that a plateaued performance would contribute to female swimmers dropping out of swimming prematurely; before they reached their full potential.

> *[There's] this wall that you hit and you can't go past your times, you can't. Instead of going forwards, you're going backwards. So, a lot of girls end up just giving up and quitting – they were just so good and then they just stopped the sport.*

Pearl was seemingly most "active" in her thoughts about dropping out of swimming. She referred to performance-related criticism she received as the precipitating factor. She announced:

> *...if I have 5 more shitty races – which are going to come my way; they do to every athlete – and I continue to receive that criticism that I do – even though, the hard work that I put in is not acknowledged at all – I mean, I would stop for sure.*

The above suggested that what others think and say about female athletes' performances matters and can significantly and negatively impact their sport experiences. This was consistent with Withycombe's (2011) findings. Pearl, and other participants in this study, needed for their hard work to be acknowledged and their performances to not be solely scrutinized. This finding

aligns with other research, which has indicated that female athlete's feel that their performances and accomplishments frequently go under-recognised, de-valued, and under-appreciated (Rayburn et al., 2015). Perceptions made regarding female athletes' performances were also found to have damaging effects on female athletes' self-worth (Rayburn et al., 2015), their athletic performances (Gentile, Boca, & Giammusso, 2018), as well as their desire to continue with sport, as observed in this study.

Therefore, the majority of the female swimmers referred to *performance-related reasons* commented on how underperforming had negatively impacted their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours when it came to their swimming. A wide range of *performance-related reasons* were highlighted by the participants of this study. This offers a unique perspective on the factors that precipitate thoughts about dropout in female student-athlete swimmers, which has not previously been identified in research on dropout among swimmers. Therefore, these findings can be used to strengthen literature on the determinants and dropout reasons among swimmers. In light of the above, the following recommendations can be made to assist in alleviating thoughts about dropout following undesired performances. *Firstly*, parents and coaches need to offer female swimmers additional emotional support following undesired performances. *Secondly,* female swimmers are encouraged to recognise the smaller successes and achievements in undesired performances, rather than their developmental areas could assist them in building their confidence and intrinsic motivation. *Thirdly,* female swimmers require that their efforts and hard work are recognised and appreciated by those around them and by media, even if the performance is not as expected.

In conclusion to this theme, female swimmers in this study have experienced thoughts about terminating their swimming career—sometimes these thoughts are more pervasive; especially when no athletic improvement has been observed or when they have not had time to adequately rest. Numerous reasons to swim and not to swim were identified in the participants' narratives. Many of these were new to research on reasons for dropout in swimming as well as those related to South African female athletes. The main reason to continue swimming, as observed in this study, was related to interpersonal reasons like their relationship with their coach and teammates. From the participants' narratives, it did not seem like parents had a big role to play in the student-athletes' decision to swim or not to swim. Thus, the coach-athlete relationship has a significant impact on female swimmers' experience of swimming and their desire to continue swimming despite challenges they might be facing. When looking at their motivations

to dropout of swimming, the majority of participants referred to performance-related reasons as a significant contributor to their thoughts about discontinuing their athletic career. For many of these participants, the emotional and psychological effects associated with not performing as expected or not seeing improvements in their performances was what precipitated these thoughts.

Career

All of the participants were following a dual career path (i.e., they were simultaneously pursuing their swimming and their academics).[8] In line with other dual career studies conducted in France, Finland, the UK, South Africa, Slovakia and Canada (e.g., Aquilina, 2013; Burnett, Peters, & Ngwenya, 2010; Geraniosaova & Ronkainen, 2014; Miller & Kerr, 2002), the participants in this study also perceived their dual careers as stressful and demanding. Some participants, however, found the demands and stress associated with a dual career more manageable due to the practical accommodations offered to them by their school/university or teachers/lecturers.

The challenges, demands, and stressors that emerged from the participants' narratives ranged from academic (e.g., class and schedule clashes) to practical (e.g., finding balance and not enough time) and social (e.g., missing out on social activities). Despite these challenges, there was evidence to suggest that several of the participants still found it valuable to pursue a dual career. I will begin by discussing the value of a dual career, as perceived by the participants of the study. Then I will focus on the challenges. This study had not explicitly sought out to identify coping strategies that helped the participants manage their challenges with a dual career. However, some coping strategies did emerge and thus will be briefly discussed in this section as well.

[8] When participants were asked about their experiences as student-athletes, some of them did reflect on their final year of secondary education. In light of this, some of the challenges that they faced in the past may not apply to their experience now. Despite this, these experiences offered valuable insights into the challenges these female swimmers faced while pursuing a dual career.

Value

There were a range of responses justifying having a dual career. The most common response was that a dual career provided several of them with a backup plan or a fallback, as evident by Angie, Darla, and Dory's accounts below.

> *Ya, and especially like with all sports you can get injured, you always need something to fall back on. Like, a lot of people don't have anything to fall back on so that puts them in a sticky situation where like I at least have my studies…* – Angie

> *…if I want to go and swim professionally, I have to have maybe a plan B. If I get an injury or something in swimming then I need something else to fall back on so that I can have a degree also.* – Darla

> *I have to get a real job and if swimming doesn't work out then it doesn't work out; it's just a sport. … Swimming isn't going to be or last forever [and] obviously we know that your sport career ends very fast so you can't just rely on swimming…* - Dory

The participants perceived their athletic career as unpredictable and knew that it would not last forever. In contrast, education was considered reliable, practical, and stable. It offered athletes a sense of security knowing that when they obtained their degree they could count on future employment opportunities. Similar "benefits" to a dual career were identified by Aquilina (2013), Geraniosova and Ronkainen (2015), Li and Sum, 2017, and Tshube and Feltz (2015). By pursuing a dual career, it seemed that the participants felt like they were somehow in control of the risks that accompanied pursuing a professional career in swimming. Subsequently, a dual career was also beneficial in that it seemingly eased their anxiety and uncertainty about pursuing a professional athletic career.

While all five participants believed that having something to fall back on was essential, one participant only realised how essential it was after she failed to qualify for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. She recalls how her disappointment was also a moment of clarity. She said:

> *…the last 8 months leading up to trials, I switched to home schooling completely; just in the sense of I was registered but I didn't really do much because all I did was 7km of training every morning and then 7km in the afternoon; Monday to Sunday. So, like my whole life at that point was just swimming … I didn't have a plan B. I mean I was*

> *still in school but like that (swimming) was the whole focus … But because of the disappointment and because of how long it took me to get my life back in order I've kind of—not shifted focus, but also I've been trying to manage my academic side so that if in 2020 push-comes-to-shove and I don't make it then I have a plan B and something to fall back on.*

This participant had made academic sacrifices to ensure her athletic success. Once she was unsuccessful in reaching her goal, she realized that it could happen again. According to Sagar (2007), this is an appropriate response to failure as it can illicit insecurities (fear, worry, doubt) about failure re-occurring. This subsequently led to the participant reappraising her future and her priorities. A similar response was also observed among student-athletes who had unexpectedly procured a concussion (Epple, 2015). The injury not only put things into perspective for these athletes, like it did the participant in this study, but also having things in place (e.g., focusing on academics) also helped the student-athletes in Epple's study move forward from their injury. Similarly, opting to prioritise her academics was an attempt to reduce the effect associated with a similar outcome in 2020.

An under-18 participant had a similar moment of clarity that she needed to prioritise her academics better. Hers, however, was precipitated by a decline in her academic performance. She said:

> *When my marks dropped last year, I think the realisation kicked in that I really need to get into university and I need to study in case swimming doesn't work out or I get an injury and I can't swim anymore.*

Another explanation about the value of a dual career was provided by Angie and Darla. Both participants felt that their dual career offered them a sense of balance in their lives. This was similarly found among French, Finnish, and British student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013). For Angie, her academics served as a distraction and a "break" from her continuous thoughts about swimming. Academics allowed Angie to feel like her whole life was not being consumed by swimming, thus she believed academics helped her to establish balance in her life. She said:

> *Mm, I don't know, like it (academics) keeps me busy. Like it just keeps my head focused somewhere else— but I actually do think I enjoy being able to get my mind off*

swimming. I don't want to be someone that's always swimming, swimming, swimming. Ya, so for me I think it's nice to get your mind off of swimming.

Darla agreed that having a dual career made her life more balanced, which subsequently made the stress from doing both somehow worthwhile. She explained:

Sometimes it's very stressful to do both things at the same time because you have to juggle it. Um, but it's nice to do swimming and academics and not just focus on one thing at a time. … Just to get a balance in your life. To not just focus on swimming but also focus on academics.

Lola was the final participant to offer her views on how a dual career can be advantageous to an athlete. She believed that a dual career offered her opportunities that she would probably not have had, had she not enrolled at university. Thus suggesting that an athlete can pursue a dual career in efforts to advance their athletic career.

Um, being a student-athlete, coming here, opens up so many more opportunities … Swimming at home; taking a gap year; not studying; whereas in coming to a university environment opens for many more opportunities. Like this gala, for example, today; having the opportunity to race against international swimmers whereas this isn't an international meet but we're getting that exposure that I was speaking about earlier; this is good exposure. – Lola

Lola's account provides a unique perspective on the benefits of pursuing a dual career at a tertiary level. This particular benefit has not been observed in other reviewed literature on dual career benefits. Thus, it enhances the frequently mentioned motivations identified by Guidotti et al. (2015) which included; to focus on other spheres of life, to be intellectually stimulated, to establish a sense of equilibrium, to have something to fall back on, to transfer life skills from one area to another, and for the perceived better transition into a post-athletic career.

Therefore, there are many reasons why a dual career can be considered valuable to an athlete. For most, a dual career offers athletes a sense of emotional security because they know that they have their academics to fall back on should their swimming career not go as they expect (e.g., due to injury or failing to reach athletic goals). For others, it helps keep their lives balanced; not allowing themselves to feel consumed by their athletic career. A dual career can also expose an athlete to experiences that enhance their athletics career. The challenges,

demands, and stressors that these student-athletes faced while pursuing a dual career will be discussed next.

Academic challenges: Even though participants understood the importance of their academic success, more than half of them struggled to completely fulfil their academic demands (e.g., attending classes and staying up-to-date on their school work, tests and examinations). It seemed that many of the participants felt that they could not compromise their athletic responsibilities for their academic ones. This was evident in Pearl and Cordelia's accounts below:

> *... one of them (academics or swimming) is going to have to suffer and, like, at this point in time it cannot be my swimming* - Pearl

> *You need to prioritise sometimes. So, sometimes your school work doesn't get done…* - Cordelia

Sacrificing educational success in efforts to prioritise athletic responsibilities is not uncommon amongst student-athletes, as evident from Cosh and Tully (2014), Gomez, Bradley, and Conway (2018), Miller and Kerr (2002), and Thomas' (2017) studies. Similarly to Cosh and Tully (2014), this present study found that "athletes [were] oriented to wanting to achieve academic success but as being restricted in practice from doing so" (p. 183). Perceived barriers to the participants in this study were also similar to Cosh and Tully's (2014), which included being passive in making decisions on priorities and the perception that they had insufficient time. The limited accommodations made by academic institutions also emerged as a barrier to academic success amongst the participants in this study. Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) identified this as an external factor that can interfere with student-athletes successfully adjusting and coping with the demands of a dual career.

According to Thomas (2017), educational sacrifices student-athletes made manifested in many forms; for instance, dropping courses and missing school to attend camps, tournaments and training sessions. This was similarly observed amongst female student-athlete swimmers in this study. Additional stressors observed among the participants in this study were; falling academically behind, having to do copious amounts of work, tests and examinations to catch up, experiencing a dip in their performance, and struggling to manage with an increase in

workload going into Grade 11 and 12 (secondary education) and First and Third year (tertiary education).

In efforts to better manage her time, one participant had to extend her studies; "*…it's normally a three-year course but I extended it into a four year because of my swimming*". This participant decided to extend her studies because of her swimming. As a result, she found herself an academic year behind her peers. This seemed to bother the participant as she was observed nervously giggling, fidgeting with her fingers, and looking down at her hands while speaking. In addition to this, she explained that when people would ask her what year she is in she would respond: "… *(normal tone) three; (whisper) two…*" This suggested to me that she might feel embarrassed or ashamed about being a year behind. Lee and Sten (2017) offer a unique perspective on why this may be negatively impacting the student-athlete. According to Lee and Sten (2017), there are academic motivation differences between male and female student-athletes. Female student-athletes were found to possess higher academic motivation levels than males and thus expected themselves to excel academically and athletically (Lee & Sten, 2017). Lee and Sten (2017) add that female student-athletes also scored higher on introjected external motivation which suggested that female student-athletes may experience a greater sense of guilt, pressure, and anxiety from underperforming academically. In light of this, having to make such sacrifices for sport may negatively affect a female student-athletes' self-esteem, perceived academic ability and feelings of worth, as suggested by Ryan and Deci (2000).

When the same participant was asked whether she felt that being a student-athlete entailed a lot of "catching up" she instantly said: "*Ya! A lot!*" Five other participants agreed with this too. Most of the time participants had to catch up on the academic work they missed because they had to travel for swimming. This put added pressure and stress on them. One participant even had to change schools in efforts to improve her academic performance. She said:

> *The reason that I moved was my [old] school was getting too hectic to manage with the swimming, and my marks dropped by quite a bit when I went overseas for galas and I missed school work and it was just really difficult to catch it up with the already hectic schedule.*

Another participant, who had previously struggled to catch up work she missed, felt that it would be for the best to put her studies on hold if she qualified for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games so that she would not find herself in a similar situation again. She said:

Like the whole 2020 year I'm taking off [of studying]. … I said 'no' because I'm going to be away for like three months; I'm going to miss all the tests and all the exams and to catch that up when I get back is just (stops speaking—shakes head side to side).

A final participant also commented on having to do school work until the day she leaves for Commonwealth Games and possibly, even while she was there so that the amount of school work she had to do when she returned would not accumulate in size.

… we have Commonwealth Games in a month where you miss like two weeks of varsity and then you get back and you're already so far behind. … …at varsity, it's not like I can go to my lecturer and be like 'hey, you know I'm leaving'. So, I'm going to have to work like up until the day I leave and even when I go…

From the above quotations, it seems that travelling makes it difficult for participants to keep up to date with their work. For all three of these participants, their academic environment did not accommodate for the schedule clashes they had which made it more difficult for the participants to catch their work up effectively when they returned to school or university. This was most evident in the second participants' interview. She recalled having had to catch up all of her supplementary examinations in one week; with three of them being scheduled on the same day. She said:

…if we miss some exams you have to write Supps (supplementary examinations) as your exams. So, the one year I missed all my exams and I had to write Supps that were all in one week. So, I had to write three of my subjects on one day and then when you go to them and tell them 'hey listen, don't you think this is a bit impossible that I have to write three subjects on one day?'… they just said they couldn't help me. So, I had to like (laughs) really just decide that I was gonna fail the last test because my marks were so low anyway so for me to actually pass ... I just felt like the university – like they always talk about how they're helping athletes; swimmers, but they actually really don't. A lot of us feel like they don't really help us in any way. …

Research (Jolly, 2007) found that student-athletes often feel discriminated against in the academic setting because of the negative perceptions and biases associated with being an athlete. At a different university, but also in the Gauteng Province, it was noted that student-athletes experienced their lecturers as resistant and dismissive when student-athletes requested

rescheduling a test/examination or sought to get an extension on work that was missed due to athletic obligations (Burnett et al., 2010). Consequently, the student-athletes in Burnett et al.'s (2010) study experienced role conflict (i.e., discrepancies between athletic dreams and the demands reinforced by others) (van Rens et al., 2018). Therefore, having an academic environment that accommodates for such clashes could help the athlete catch up work missed more efficiently, thus helping them reach their academic potential rather than hinder it. Additionally, many of the student-athletes in my study, who were not part of a sports school or enrolled for a sport-related degree, also appeared to experience higher levels of stress than those who were a part of such a learning environment. According to Chuan, Yusof, and Shah (2013) having a supportive learning environment enhanced student-athletes' academic performances as well as their motivation to prioritise their academics.

Another challenge that the participants faced was with regards to the quantity of work they were being given and the limited time they had available to do it. Katie said:

> *…student-athletes do have a lot less time than other people yet we still get the same amount of work…*

Most of the under-18 participants were in Grades 11 and 12 at the time of the interview. These are both very demanding academic years for a variety of reasons. The first is that this is when students typically apply to university and secondly, the workload increases abundantly. Lastly, university acceptance is based on academic performance thus keeping marks up is essential. Student-athletes, however, have to do all of this while simultaneously swimming. This seemed overwhelming for most of the under-18's, as is evident from the following participants' transcript below.

> *There's definitely pressure from the school side um, grade 11 is the hardest year before matric. There's a lot of work, so, I think, to keep my marks up so that I can go to university, is especially difficult.*

Another participant was overwhelmed by her academic demands and doubted whether she, as a student-athlete, would be able to cope with them. She said:

> *So, at the beginning of the year, it was kind of like everything felt too much for me. Everyone [is] telling you how much [academic] work Matric was [and] how you're going to have to cope and all I was thinking is if people struggle to cope with Matric*

in a normal setting; a non-sport setting, then how am I going to cope with sport and [academics] and all of that?

Although the above quotes were by under-18's, there were 18-and-overs who felt just as overwhelmed by their workload, as expressed by one participant below.

It's rough. It's so rough. Um, it's not like – everyone was like 'aw, you're doing a [XX] – it's easy – you should do that so that you can focus on your swimming' and I'm like 'ya, I also think so' and then when I started I was like 'ya, it's not that easy'! It's just the volume of work and I think students swimming – those who like just do it to swim for the university – can manage but to swim at the level where we swim at like especially [XX] and I; like it is super demanding.

The above quotation also highlights how athletes might be "encouraged" by those around them to do easier academic courses so that they can focus on their sport.

Based on the findings above, the female student-athlete swimmers in this study found themselves facing many academic challenges in efforts to successfully fulfil their athletic responsibilities. Consequently, the participants found themselves increasingly stressed, falling academically behind to their peers, or having to make tough decisions about their academic career. The participants who were in a learning environment that did not accommodate for the schedule clashes seemed additionally stressed to those participants whose environment offered more practical accommodations for their athletic responsibilities. This suggested that the learning environment can be a barrier to student-athletes effectively managing the demands of a dual career.

Practical challenges included difficulties finding a balance and there being not enough time to do everything. Five participants had difficulty finding the right balance between their academic, athletic, and social lives, as observed by the participants' account below. She said:

...it's been an overwhelming experience as well as a good experience cause you're having to fit in lectures, you're having to fit in work, and also on top of this, I'm redoing maths and science. So, having to fit that all in and now my training schedule has gone a lot more. So, instead of doing 8 sessions a week, I'm doing 11. So, like balancing that and also, I stay in res so, having to balance the res life, the student life

and the athlete life is quite difficult [be]cause I mean you have your friends at res and they want to go to bed at midnight and you have training the next morning.

An accommodating environment (i.e., school, university, or degree) helped some athletes find a better balance between their swimming and academics. In contrast, those who attended a less accommodating environment had more difficulties with finding the appropriate balance. The extracts below highlight this contrast.

> *Um… it's hard especially with me moving now. Like, the sports school kids train later and I have to train earlier so that's a lot harder and managing with less sleep and more workload.* – An under-18

> *…my degree at the moment is very flexible. So, it's training and then my degree – [my degree] revolves around my training. Whereas next year I might struggle a bit more because next year I'm not going into Sport Science. So, my department isn't going to be like 'okay, miss a lecture here [be]cause you've got training here.' They're going to be like 'you've got training, you've got lectures; you have to choose' so that's going to be a lot harder next year. …this year it's a good way to get into varsity life. At least I can get into my training, full swing and then try and balance everything around it instead of going straight into what I want to do; a more strenuous, stricter degree and then having to deal with that and training, and then the student life, and then the res life and being alone on top of it all. So, I think my load is a lot easier to deal with which I'm really appreciative of, um, I don't know if I would be coping as well as I think I am now…* - An 18-and-over

For one participant, what seemed to make balancing her academics and swimming more challenging was that her parents and coach had different views on what she should be prioritising. She recalled her how this happened during her Matric year-end examinations. She said:

> *…Matric was very hard and, you know, my dad told me [that] his matric exams were the most stressful exams of his life! He was like, 'it was even worse than university exams!'… So, I felt the pressure – I definitely did! (Laughs). Um, so, it was quite hard [be]cause I wasn't able to attend all 9 [training] sessions; I was only able to maybe do like 5 sessions and my coach would be like 'it's all about timing. … if you get that*

right then you should be able to attend all your sessions' but it's not that easy you know? So, matric is a very important year so you need to prioritise your studies at the end … my dad was all about 'you need to study now' – like, 'leave the swimming [and] study now—just for these exams'. And my mom would be like 'you need to attend all your [swimming] sessions'. So, I'm like 'what am I going to do?' My dad is like 'study' and my mom is like 'go swim'. I was very like torn between the two but I had to like negotiate with the two of them and be like 'look here, instead of the 9 sessions I'll only be able to make 5 because you also go to bed late studying and then you have to wake up early to swim and then you have to write and you have to try and not fall asleep during the day… so that was quite tough. – An 18-and-over

Another participant believed that her need to excel at both made it difficult to find a healthy balance between her swimming and academics, which resulted in her feeling emotionally exhausted. She said:

…cause unfortunately, very, unfortunately, I'm not the type of person who just passes. So, my academics is also very important, like super important to me. So I can obviously just do the bare minimum and I'd probably scrape through but especially cause of like getting in for master's and stuff your marks have to be so high and so I know that on the other side of things I kind of have to balance both. In my situation particularly, it's something that I still have to decide because one of them is going to have to suffer and like at this point in time it cannot be my swimming— cause I tried to balance both in matric and it just didn't work; I was just man-down by the end of the year… - An 18-and-over

The above participants' experiences highlight how challenging it is to find a balance in their dual career as well as what factors might have played a role in this (e.g., lack of practical arrangements made by the academic institution, family pressures, and personal factors). Similar external factors were identified in Stambulova and Wylleman's (2019) systematic review, as barriers to a student-athletes' adjustment to and coping with the demands of a dual career. Miller and Kerr (2002) add that the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance can also be hindered by tiredness, a lack of experimentation with other roles, and delayed identity development.

The quotation above also highlights the potential consequences that may follow an unhealthy balance (e.g., emotional exhaustion). Another participants' experience also corroborates this by expressing how overwhelmed she felt by her dual career. She said:

> *… sometimes I just want to cry or scream because it just feels like it's getting too much. Sometimes, especially when I have like morning training, have to study in the afternoon then have to come back for night training and everything like that. It's just like I want … sometimes it's just a little bit overwhelming…*

Research has found that student-athletes who have difficulties with balancing their dual career may experience lower academic outcomes, stress, undesirable athletic performances, dropout, a lack of motivation and a mental health challenges (Guidotti et al., 2015), like burnout (Han et al., 2015).

In addition to this, two other participants' transcripts also highlighted how an unhealthy balance can result in one career superseding the other. Two of these participants seemed to experience their athletic career as mentally consuming. The one participant said: "*I don't want to be someone that's always swimming, swimming, swimming"* and the other: "*it's just too much. It's always just swimming, swimming, swimming and nothing else".* This suggested to me that they were both uncomfortable with having their life be consumed by their athletic career and that they desired a healthier balance. When I asked the first participant to clarify what it meant to be someone who is always 'swimming, swimming, swimming', she said:

> *…it's just like; you go to training and then you go home, do nothing, and then you look again and the times over and it's like you haven't really done anything with your life then.*

This participant sounded frustrated while speaking, and somewhat unfulfilled by the repetitive routine that follows a student-athlete lifestyle, which she described as: *"wake up, swim, go to class, swim, sleep, wake up, swim, go to class, swim, sleep…"*

The other participant felt that if she was not able to find a healthier balance she would eventually burnout. She said:

> *It's too much. It's like very bad because with too much swimming, you're going to burn out. If your whole life revolves around swimming and you see the same people*

> *at swimming, school, gym then swimming again; you're in their faces the whole time. And that's just too much.*

Throughout these participants' interviews, it also became clear how they both were managing how consumed they felt by their athletic career. They compartmentalised. For example, one participant decided to move from a sports school to a mainstream school so that she would not have to continuously see the people she swam with and speak about swimming with. The other participant said that when she was at home or with her friends she would rarely speak to them about her swimming. This helped her manage how much swimming she was exposed to outside of the pool. She said:

> *…when I'm with her we also don't talk about swimming. She can ask me how my set was and I can explain but then swimming is like not on my mind at all then which I like, I think. That helps me a lot as well.*

The above findings suggest that it is challenging for these participants to find a healthy balance between their academics and swimming. As a result, many of them feel overwhelmed, stressed, tired, and drained from their dual career. In addition, some participant's may feel resistant towards their swimming because of how consumed they feel by it.

The consuming nature of the athletic environment was also evident in Saxe's (2015) findings with female student-athletes. According to Saxe (2015), this affected how the female athlete developed and grew as a person outside of sports because so little of the athletes' time and energy was dedicated to other aspects of their life. Despres, Brady, and McGowan (2008) noted, athletes may encounter personal and social challenges when an athlete identifies early and exclusively with their athletic identity. As such, employing the skills of a sport psychologist may be valuable.

Another practical challenge that emerged in four of the participants' transcripts was with regards to *time*; specifically, not having enough time to do everything that was required of them academically and for swimming. The excerpt below summarised this by saying:

> *It's that whole thing in your head like 'how am I going to study, do all my homework and be at every session, every time?' …So, in your head you're thinking 'when am I going to do that?'*

In accordance with previous literature (e.g., Cosh & Tully, 2014; Gomes et al., 2018), this study found that time was an external barrier that hindered the successful integration of an athletes' athletic, academic and social domains. Poor time management was found to precipitate stress and pressure for student-athletes (Burnett et al., 2010; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). These researchers' findings rang true for participants in my study too. However, increased levels of stress, in student-athletes, has been associated with a decrease in life satisfaction (Surujlal, van Zyl, & Nolan, 2013). Therefore, it would be valuable for the athletic department to introduce academic counsellors who can assist with time-management related issues (i.e., offer student-athletes relevant instrumental support). This way the athletic department can also support student-athletes in their academic pursuits as well as reduce the stress that the student-athlete might be experiencing due to time-management difficulties.

Social challenges: Aquilina (2009) and Miller and Kerr (2002) noted that a student-athletes' social and personal life is the first to get sacrificed in efforts for student-athletes to manage their athletic and academic demands more successfully. When looking at female student-athletes; and specifically female student-athlete swimmers, Tekavc et al. (2015) found that these sportswomen were more likely to sacrifice the majority of their other interests and intimate relationships because of their dual career obligations. These participants reported experiencing less psychological well-being as well as a decrease in their satisfaction (Tekavc et al., 2015).

In accordance Aquilina (2009), Miller and Kerr (2002) and Tekavc et al. (2015), this study found that swimming and academics regularly took precedence over these participants' social and relational experiences, as evident from Angie and Pearl's quotations below.

> *I feel like being a student-swimmer and relationships; two of these things are like above and one not. So like, for me, it's swimming and studying and my relationships are like there in the corner and sometimes it gets tough…* -Angie

> *…at this level, because I am doing varsity and swimming, there is no time for that [a social life].* - Pearl

Cordelia also expressed her concern with having to miss out on important social experiences, outside of school and swimming, because of her demanding schedule as a student-athlete. She said:

I think you definitely miss out on a lot of social experiences cause we're always like training and swimming and then on the weekends you have to catch up on all your school work from the week that you haven't done yet so I feel like definitely you don't experience as much as you should like outside the pool and school.

Similarly, Katie said:

There's a lot of time that I can't spend with them (friends). [Time] that I have to be studying or [be]cause I had training on Saturday so, I need to catch up on work.

Due to the limited time she had with her friends, Katie found it difficult to maintain her strong relationships. This bothered Katie. She said:

*It does kind of bother me a bit that [the friendship] is kind of slipping away but **I guess I know** that they would always be there because that's just the type of people that they are even though it's a bit of a challenge now.*

While speaking, I noticed Katie using contradicting words like "I guess" and "I know" consecutively, which suggested to me that she may feel insecure and uncertain about her relationships and to dampen the possible doubt, she makes it a characteristic of the "it's who they are". Romo et al. (2015) similarly found that it was normal for student-athletes experience social uncertainties, especially if they were having difficulties managing their roles as an athlete, scholar, and friend.

Katie also used the words "can't", "have to be", and "need" which suggested that she believed she did not have much control or say in what her time is being used for because her swimming and school work needed to be prioritised above her relationships. Similar discursive patterns were also identified amongst student-athletes in Cosh and Tully's (2014) study; suggesting that student-athletes perceived themselves as passive in making decisions around their priorities. This was similarly observed in other participants' interviews. For example, Dory also felt that there were certain things that she as an athlete just could not do, even if she wanted to. Most of these were social. She said:

*…obviously we want to go out with them (friends), and we want to have fun with them and hang out with our friends but we (student-athletes) all know we don't have a social life. So, that's really hard. It's hard because I know that I **can't** do certain things. I*

> ***can't*** *go out on Friday night because I'm training the next morning and that's hard for me but* ***it is what it is*** *and sport is important to me so I* ***just have to*** *make that sacrifice.*

In Dory's case, this was a sacrifice that needed to be made in order to succeed in her swimming. Lola and Pearl believed that prioritising their social experiences would label them as "an irresponsible athlete". Pearl, who decided to attend a social event with her friends, found herself feeling guilty over prioritising her social needs over her athletic ones. She felt conflicted regarding her decision and opted not to tell her coach.

> *... I can't tell her (coach) that I went out because then I look like such an irresponsible athlete. I mean* ***what kind of athlete*** *goes out on a Thursday night?*

In Lola's case, her friend (who also plays sport) kept her accountable for her actions when deciding whether to attend social activities or not. She said:

> *Yes,[it'll be] nice to go out tonight, and I'm going to have fun but I'm going to be* ***paying HUGE consequences*** *tomorrow morning and she understands that and she's not like 'well, it's only one session; just miss it'— she's like 'you can't go out. Be responsible.'*

The assumption made by most of the participants in this study is that prioritising their social life can affect their success in swimming and school, but mostly swimming. Pearl reiterated this by saying: "***You can't really afford to*** *do that [go out] because like the consequence is that you will have a bad session*." As did Lola, above, who emphasised the "*huge*" consequences associated with pursuing a social life. It seems that these participants have been conditioned to believe that all their decisions, choices, and actions have to put swimming first otherwise they risk succeeding in it. This is evident in Shelley's excerpt below—as is the emotional effect this had on her.

> *you feel so left out most of the times because all your friends are going out and then you get to school the next day and they're talking about this and you're just like 'ah I missed out on the fun' (cringe), um, 'maybe I should have skipped out on that session so I could go out with them' you know, that kind of thing. ... I had to just ignore that a bit and just stick to doing what I was doing cause at the end of this you know, I have swimming goals.*

Most of the participants, like Shelley, rationalised their social sacrifices as being worth it if they reach their goals in the end. However, what happens if they do not?

My personal reflection

The participants are expected to forgo their social experiences so that their swimming career can be prioritised. What about their academic career? They don't mention it very often… It also sounds like an either-or situation ('all-or-nothing') where they can only have swimming or they can only have a social life. Does it have to be so? The current psychosocial stage these girls are in requires them to build meaningful and close relationships with those around them, but the demands of being a swimmer doesn't really allow this to happen with anyone other than those they swim with.

Therefore, the social challenges that student-athletes face are predominantly associated with the fact that a dual career takes time away from them being able to build strong and meaningful relationships outside of swimming and school. The participant's do not enjoy having to forgo their social experiences; as it often leaves them feeling isolated and left out of their peers – which are developmentally important people in their life right now, with them being in the identity versus role confusion stage of their psychosocial development and transitioning into their intimacy versus isolation stage of development (Erikson, 1968, as cited in Rageliene, 2016). Limiting their social experiences only to their athletic domain may consequently result in premature identity foreclosure which, according to Sandhu et al. (2012), may make it difficult for athletes to form meaningful relationships with others or feel as though they belong anywhere other than the swimming pool. Despite these possible outcomes, attending social events and activities did leave participants feeling guilty and like they were being an "irresponsible athlete". It appeared that believing that these sacrifices were going to increase their chance of success in swimming made it these sacrifices tolerable, in the participants' minds.

In conclusion to this theme, participants find value in pursuing a dual career. However, there are many challenges that they face in pursuing it. These include academic, practical, and social challenges. This is consistent with the literature on dual careers and student-athletes.

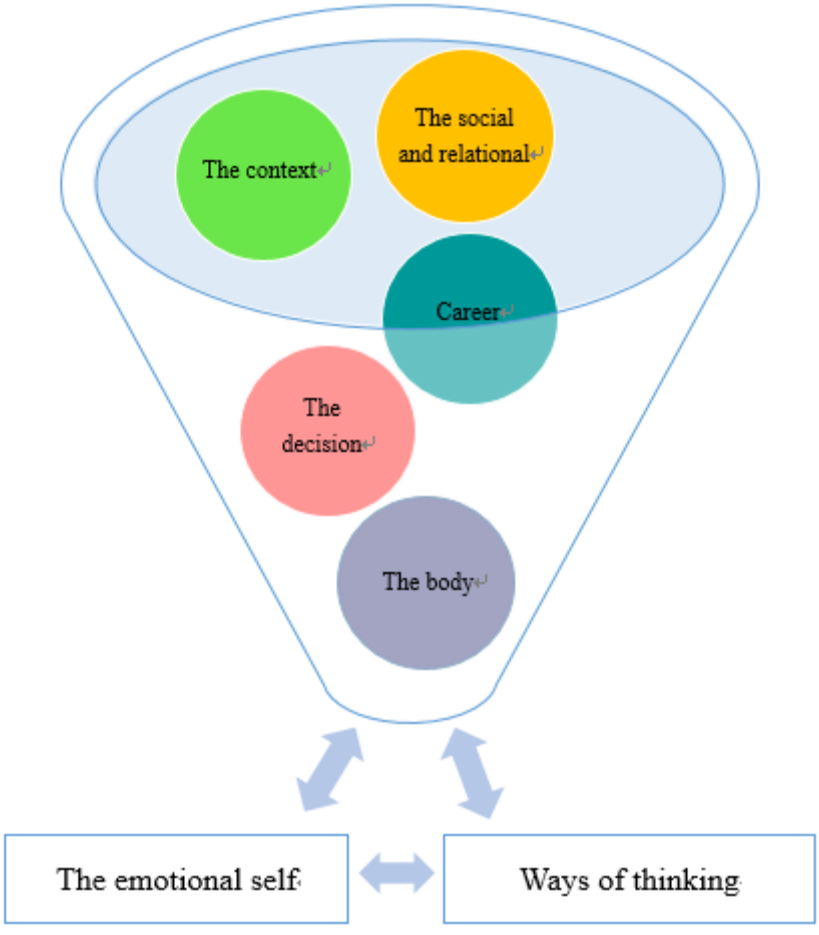
Integrated themes

During interpretation, it became clear that participants were emotionally and mentally influenced and impacted by their context, their social and relational interactions, their career,

their physical body and expectations placed on it, and their decision to swim or not to swim. As such, the way they felt and thought also affected how they experienced the situations they found themselves in. This is represented diagrammatically below, in figure 3.

Although the integrated themes are briefly discussed in each main theme and subthemes above, it makes conceptual sense to also separate them from these main themes so that the reader can get an overview of the participants' holistic emotional and mental experience.

Figure 3: A view of the reciprocal relationship between five of the main themes and the participants' emotions and thoughts. As well as how the participants' emotions and thoughts influence one another.



My personal reflection

These integrated themes were honestly the toughest to write about. The reason for this was because I had, to small extent, discussed them already in each of the main themes so I found myself asking 'what is the point of doing a whole other section on them?' I went back and reread the themes I had completed to see if their emotions and their "ways of thinking" came across as strongly as I felt or observed them to have when conducting the interviews or interpreting their transcripts. I didn't really think so. Hence, this section. To me, their emotions and their ways of thinking were a really big part of their experience. But then I worried about repeating myself in terms of the quotes I would use in this section. I realised, and would like to emphasise, that the focus in this section is not on what precipitated these emotions or thought patterns, but rather that they exist and how this impacts their experience.

The emotional self

This integrated theme is relatively short. *Table 3* offers an overview of the main emotions that were either expressed by the participant or that were interpreted by me during the interpretation phase. These were not only based on *what* participants said but also *how* participants said what they said (i.e., non-verbal responses). After a string of emotions are identified, square-brackets have been put alongside them to direct the reader to the general situation that triggered those specific emotions. The focus in this section, however, is not specifically on what triggered the emotions. Rather, the focus is on the emotions the swimmers felt.

Table 3

Overview of main emotions expressed by participants/interpreted by the researcher

Participant	Emotion
Angie	Embarrassed, disappointed, unsupported [*academic-related*]; overwhelmed, left out, lonely [*interpersonal*]; frustrated, isolated [*injury-related*]; angry, upset, nervous, discouraged, uncertain [*squad dynamics*]; pushed aside, rejected, frustrated [*coach-related: past*]
Lola	Overwhelmed, distressed [*adjustment-related*]; uncomfortable, intimidated, anxious [*pressure to perform*]; comforted, at ease [*coach-related: present*]; missing out [*interpersonal*]; anger, disappointed, upset, doubt [*performance-related*]; inspired and motivated [*international exposure*]

Dory	Frustration, uncertainty, resentful, aggrieved, not good enough [*squad dynamics*]; not good enough, worthy, judged, rejected, overlooked [*media criticism*]; frustration, anger, guilt, fear, resentment [*expectations on body*]; left out, isolated [*interpersonal*]; helplessness, powerless, apathetic [*macro-related*]
Cordelia	Fear of disappointing significant others, guilt, blame [*interpersonal: family*]; anxiety [*academic-related*]; demotivated, uncertain future [*limited sport role models*]; left out [*interpersonal: peers*]; frustrated, irritated [*squad dynamics*]; drained, tired [*training-related*]; supported, encouraged [*teammates/coach: present*]
Pearl	Fearful, insecure, resentful, frustrated, angry, unnoticed, unrecognised [*media-related*]; demotivated, anxious, uncertain [*future (career) related*]; confused, frustrated [*expectations: the body*]; unsupported, uncared for [*academic institution*]; overwhelmed [*criticism from others*]; cared for, supported, not alone [*teammates/parents*]; hurt, betrayed, angry [*lack of unconditional support by coaches*]; drained, tired, stressed [*dual career*]; isolated, lonely, trapped, guilty [*interpersonal strain*]; angry, resentful [*coach-related past/present*]; disappointed [*performance-related*]
Darla	Scared, guilty, anxious, demotivated, disappointed [*coach-related: present*]; uncertain, overwhelmed, pressure, panicked, helpless, fearful [*dual career: not enough time*]; fearful [*judgement or criticism*]; guilty, frustrated, stressed [*missed training sessions*]; misunderstood, frustrated [*non-athletic peers*]; guilty, resentful, angry, anxious [*conflict with family*]; overlooked, less capable [*media-related*]; guilty, frustrated, disappointed [*performance-related*]
Shelley	Fear of letting significant others and self down [*inter/intrapersonal-related*]; inspired [*younger swimmers*]; pressured, need to keep up, stressed [*adjustment-related*]; tired, stressed, frustrated, discouraged [*body-related*]; lonely, alone, pressured, irritated [*parent-related*]; supported, listened to, understood [*coach-related: past*]; lonely, doubtful, insecure, irritated [*squad dynamics*]; happy [*dual career: present*]; overwhelmed [*dual career: past*]; proud [*intrapersonal*], missing out, excluded; left out, not fitting in [*social*]
Katie	Doubt, uncertainty, frustration [*performance-related*]; overwhelmed, frustrated [*academics*]; reassured, validated [*coach-related: present*]; uncertain, helpless, fearful [*future in swimming*]; encouraged, supported [*teammates/parents/coach*]; exhausted, apathetic [*training related*]

Based on the above emotions that emerged from the study, it is evident that participants are under a significant amount of pressure and stress from their athletic and non-athletic domains,

in both their micro- and macro-environmental levels. For most of the participants what seems to be the light in the midst of unpleasant and overwhelming emotions, is the support they receive from their coach, family, and friends. With this in mind, additional resources and support are needed for participants in this study to cope better with the unpleasant emotions so that their experiences are not solely unpleasant and overwhelming.

The next section will look at the participants' ways of thinking that emerged from the participants' transcripts.

Ways of thinking

This integrated theme refers specifically to the participants' thought patterns that emerged from their narratives. In some cases, the way in which participants thought assisted them to cope with stressful situations and intense emotions. In other cases, however, thought patterns intensified the participants' emotional reaction to the situation they were in. The main thought patterns observed were minimising, catastrophizing, all-or-nothing thinking, social comparison (discussed in *the social and relational* section), self-talk, and reframing.

All of the participants were observed minimising and downplaying the significance of a particular situation or the emotion precipitated by it when they spoke (Beck, 2011). This was further emphasised by their use of reduction words like "a little", "just", and "a bit" while speaking. Examples of this are provided below.

> *I couldn't do it because of my injury and like that* ***puts me down a little*** *because obviously like everyone's proving to the head coach like how they're doing and ya here you are like just kicking…* – Angie
>
> *…I'll take it* ***a little bit*** *to heart…* – Lola
>
> *…it's* ***just*** *a sore back…* –Shelley
>
> *…your time is* ***a bit*** *more limited than other students', I guess. But, it's* ***not too bad*** – Katie
>
> *…there was a point where I didn't want to swim anymore and it just got* ***a bit boring*** *and, um, I wasn't really like going overseas or anything…* – Cordelia

*I was a **little bit** disappointed like; 'why couldn't I swim this time'?* – Darla

By minimising, the participants were able to some extent avoid acknowledging the intensity of the situation or emotion they were describing or experiencing. For some participants, I got the impression that by minimising they were able to express how they felt without becoming overly vulnerable. As such, they were able to keep up a façade of being strong and impenetrable.

Another common thought pattern I observed amongst nearly all of the participants was catastrophizing. Catastrophizing is when a person believes that a situation is worse than it actually is or that a situation will ultimately result in the worst possible outcome (Beck, 2011). When participants were observed with these thought patterns, it also appeared to enhance their anxiety about the situation. An example of this was taken from Lola's transcript. She said:

> *...some people go 'okay, that was a bad race, [and] move on' whereas with me if it was a bad race, it was going to be a bad gala; so, it's going to be a bad season. So, it's like a snowball effect for me and then you start thinking negatively and as soon as you start thinking negatively then ... you have a bad race. If you're going to go and stand behind the block and say 'agh (frustrated), I've had a bad race just now so this one's going to be bad' then more than likely it's going to be bad. [Be]cause you're not going to be in the right mind set, you're not going to be calm, you're not going to be relaxed in the water; you're going to be fighting with the water and then you're going to have a bad race. And then you're having to deal with more disappointment.*

From Lola's account, it was also evident that having a negative mindset inevitably results in underperformance. In other words, being a swimmer involves the body as well as the mind and emotional self. This is consistent with Dougherty (2017) who noted that this pattern of thoughts can be considered a performance-interfering cognition because of the anxiety it produces. This was similarly observed in Katie's account below.

> *It's more like [you think] '**this programme is going to kill me now**'. Yeah, you kind of know that you're not going to do well; you're not going to swim the right times or you get into the water and your stroke is completely off; **you just know it's not going to go well.***

Katie's quotation is also another example of catastrophizing as the programme might be tough but it will not actually kill her. However, by thinking it will kill her, her confidence diminishes and she feels incapable of taking up the challenge (i.e., a tough training session).

All-or-nothing thinking was the third thought pattern observed in the majority of the participants' transcripts. All-or-nothing thinking is when people think in extremes; for example, some participants believed that their performances had to be "perfect" otherwise the performances were considered "failures" (Beck, 2011). This was evident in Darla's extract below.

> *...sometimes it's a little bit too much pressure because I still have that time in my head (goal). Even though I maybe set the time myself two weeks ago um, I'm going to keep that time in my head and* ***I won't necessarily be proud of myself until I've reached that time****. ... Sometimes it feels like I have to perform my best the whole time. And when I don't perform, or [I] do badly that makes me feel kind of guilty or so bad.*

From Darla's quotation, it is apparent that anything less than her main goal is considered a failure; triggering feelings of disappointment and shame. This thought pattern can fuel emotions like anxiety, too. It is also evident from her quotation that this type of thinking impaired her ability to recognise her own progress because her main goal was not achieved. This was similarly observed in a few of the other participants' transcripts.

"Should" statements were also used by the participants in this study. These statements are typically indicative of how the participant thinks they "should", "must", or "ought" to behave (Beck, 2011). Although these statements can be used to motivate someone, they can also precipitate guilt, frustration, anger, or resentment should the person not be able to perform these behaviours to the extent they believe they ought to be performing them (Beck, 2011). An example of this way of thinking was observed in several of Darla's extracts below.

> *...there is a schedule and* ***I have to*** *follow it', '****I have to*** *swim those exact times in a week so that I can improve my times later on'.*

> *...sometimes I'm really angry at them because maybe don't understand that* ***I have to*** *be there at every training session.*

> *That's where the **guilty** feeling kind of kicks in like **you have to** train actually now, you can't be here lying before the TV. Um, **you have to rest another time** because that's the schedule for swimming. Ya, so I think overall it just makes me feel guilty*
>
> *...it feels like **I have to perform my best the whole time**.*

This was similarly observed in Pearl and Dory's transcripts too.

> ***I have to**, every night before I go to bed, set my alarm and make sure I **have at least 8 hours of sleep** because otherwise I'm going to suffer in the next session the following morning.* – Pearl
>
> *...sport is important to me so **I just have to make that sacrifice**.* – Dory
>
> *...**you just have to suck it up and just do it. –*** Dory

Self-talk and reframing were used by the participants to cope with challenging emotions and situations. However, these patterns of thinking were only observed in a few of the participants' transcripts (n=3-4). This suggested that psychological assistance would be valuable for the participants so that they can learn to challenge and counter the unhelpful patterns of thinking described above.

Reframing is when a person shifts their perspective on a situation so that it may change the meaning behind the situation for the person and ultimately regulate the intense, unpleasant emotions, thoughts, and behaviours triggered by the situation more effectively (Beck, 2011). The one way Shelley shifted her perspective on a stressful situation was by looking at the situation from another person's position. By considering how her senior female swimmers feel about her "racing" against them, she can come to terms with the emotions that accompany having junior female swimmers "take her on" as a senior female swimmer.

> *...at the moment there's like a 16-year-old who is like nailing it – she's like literally up there and I think for like everybody else, like sometimes the [older] girls get despondent because the younger girls are kind of like taking them on but also we need to like see it in the way of how the older girls – older than us – feel about us racing them. So, the way we feel about the 15-year-old's is the way the older girls feel about us.*

She also viewed stressors as opportunities. In other words, she shifted her perspective to look at the positives when in a seemingly negative or stressful situation.

> *I think either the gym instructor is really like underestimating the boys strength or she like really believes in me (chuckles) because my weights are the same as the boys so when it comes to training I'm like dead; I'm tired and the guys are like kind of sore where I'm like 'I'm finished'. So, I don't really understand the logic in that because like what's the point in having your girl do the same weights as the boys because physically they are stronger than what I am.* ***But, I enjoy pushing myself. If my coach believes in me why can't I?***

Darla also tried to manage the intensity of her disappointment by focusing on the bigger picture, as evident below.

> *...sometimes you just think 'I've trained so hard and nothing comes of it'. But you have to think long term about it. Maybe I trained so hard the last two years um, but it will take three years to train so hard, to actually get something out of it.*

Cordelia and Katie were the only participants observed employing positive self-talk to cope with stressful situations. These two participants' self-talk appearing encouraging and helped manage their anxiety, as observed below.

> *There's definitely been times when the pressure's on for you to qualify for a specific gala or reach a specific time goal that you need and I think you need to reassure yourself that* ***if you don't get it, it's okay… and you don't need to stress yourself out so much if you don't make it or if you're not quite there yet****. And I think as [an under 18-year-old] I think there's still time for me to reach that and there shouldn't be so much pressure on myself.* – Cordelia

> *...it's just like, you can look at a programme and say 'I can do this', 'I feel good to do this today' and ya.* – Katie

Martin (2018) noted that positive self-talk used by swimmers is effective in that it helped them remain focused on the task at hand and motivated them. However, if self-talk is not used in combination with other techniques like breathing or imagery, it may result in overthinking and hinder the athletes' performance rather than enhance it (Martin, 2018).

From the above emergent theme, it is evident that participants' ways of thinking are predominantly unhelpful and enhanced their anxiety in stressful situations rather than reduced it. Furthermore, only a few participants were able to challenge their unhelpful ways of thinking by employing helpful tools like reframing and positive self-talk. How participants think affects the way they feel and ultimately the way they behave when faced with challenging or stressful situations. Learning how to challenge unhelpful thought patterns would be invaluable to their ability to cope. With this in mind, cognitive behavioural therapy has the potential to assist participants in becoming more cognisant of their unhelpful thought patterns and learn more constructive ways to challenge these thoughts when needed. Furthermore, according to Dougherty (2017), unhelpful thinking styles – especially compared to others and magnification was associated with lower levels of mental toughness. As such, reducing the frequency of these unhelpful thought patterns could assist in enhancing the student-athletes' mental toughness.

Staying afloat

Hassell, Sabiston, and Bloom (2010) explored the various dimensions of social support (structural, functional, and perceptual) among elite female adolescent swimmers. The present study's findings were similar in regards to the main support functions offered by multiple social support providers, which included: emotional support, network support, tangible support and informational support. Additional support providers emerged in this study. These included; *the coach*, *romantic partners*, *co-athletes/teammates*, *family*, *academic institutions*, and *psychological assistance*. The social support that these figures provided the participants in this study assisted the majority of them to stay afloat when faced with an overwhelming tide of unpleasant emotions or pressure.[9]

I will discuss each of the above figures (in that specific order) next.

The coach

Six participants identified their coach as their main source of emotional and informational support. This is not surprising seeing that Hassell et al. (2010) found that coaches were an

[9] For some participants, the figures mentioned were perceived as supportive while for others, those same figures were sometimes perceived as a source of stress and pressure that made it more challenging to stay afloat (this was discussed under *the social and relational* theme).

important provider of almost every aspect of social support; emotional, esteem, and informational support.

Shelley's coach offered her emotional support by listening to her. By talking to her coach and having him listen to her, the pressure she was receiving from her parents was alleviated.

> *... I, kind of, like, learned how to talk to my coach about it. So, I must say talking to him about it really did help me. … what I couldn't speak to my parents about, I would end up speaking to my coach about.*

Having a coach to talk to and who listened also lessened how alone she felt with her problems.

> *I learned that I didn't have to go through my swimming problems alone. Like, you know, if you need someone to talk to there is always that person. And it won't necessarily be your parents because sometimes you feel like you can't (pause)— … even though you know your parents are supposed to be there for you all the time but if the pressure is coming from their side then it's quite hard to speak to them because they don't listen to you. So, I learned that I didn't have to go through my swimming problems alone, I could speak to my coach about it and it was like, you know, a weight of my shoulders to just get advice from him. Yoh! It was so nice (smiling broadly).*

Shelley's accounts suggest that receiving emotional and informational support from a coach is just as important as receiving tactical and technical support – if not more; should an athlete not be receiving sufficient emotional support at home. Furthermore, it shows that athletes can carry their emotions from home to their training sessions and that it might be valuable for a coach to do a frequent check-in with the athlete about their emotional state seeing that as their emotional state can impact their performance.

Shelley's account below also indicates that a coach can assume various roles for the athlete, even as a substitute parent.

> *…it was like he was our second father almost [be]cause he has two daughters it was like he was very protective over the girls so it was really nice. And also when I needed advice he would give me open advice because he would see it as he has two daughters so how would he respond to this if it was his daughters. So it was really nice in like that sense also.*

At the time of the interview, one participant was having a really difficult time being so far away from home and having to adjust to many new situations on her own. This had left her feeling overwhelmed. Her coach did two things that seemed to ease the participants' distress; firstly, he took the time to listen and attend to her emotional needs. Secondly, he introduced her to someone who could better relate to and normalise what she was experiencing.

> *… he was very, very, nice and he called in [XX]; who is an Olympian and she works here and she's female and she also went through a similar experience being far away from home and it's been better.*

My personal reflection

I really appreciated how the coach went about this. Sometimes there is a lot of pressure on the coach to have the 'right' answers to an athlete's problem but sometimes directing them to someone else who may have a better understanding of the situation is the best thing they can do.

In Dory's case, having a coach that can offer an alternative perspective to the problem helped her cope with it more positively. She said:

> *So, if something sensitive is happening or you just swam bad at a gala, he will always flip it to look at the positive side. It's a lot better. It's motivating and you want to come to swimming.*

And for Katie, having her coach offer her useful, reassuring information helped her make more informed decisions regarding her swimming career:

> *I spoke to my coach about it a little bit at the beginning of this year… So, in terms of what he said was that his training programmes and the way that I'm doing things now we're only at the beginning of my development and like, from the time I started last year I already dropped a few times and made some progress so he said that it might be good for me to just continue for the next 3, 4, 5 years just to see what happens.*

Therefore, female swimmers find their coach to be a reliable source of emotional and informational support. Their coach offered them informational support that assisted them with problem-solving and decision-making but also emotional support which made them feel empathised with, cared for, and valued. The emotional and informational support that a coach provides also helped reduce the emotional distress precipitated by challenging situations.

Romantic partners

Romantic partners were also believed to be emotionally supportive of Shelley, Angie, and Pearl. Shelley noted how helpful it was to speak to her boyfriend about the physical challenges that came with her swimming, especially because he could relate to it with him being an athlete himself.

> *It's nice to talk to him about all my like, sport problems or just like my injuries because he knows what it's like [be]cause he does athletics and soccer now, um, so, he knows the pain that I'm going through or that kind of a thing.*

On the other hand, Angie felt her boyfriend was the one person she could rely on to help her take her mind off of swimming:

> *…if I didn't have my relationship then I would have like no one to talk to outside of swimming. … I can like go to him [and] I can just talk about different things. We can go grocery shopping, or we could go to movies or we could go eat out then I feel like you need something to get your head off of swimming …*

Pearl simply said:

> …he understands.

For Pearl, it was important to have a partner that understands the level of commitment it takes to be an athlete. By him understanding this, it made her feel more at ease with the relationship and supported.

Co-athletes/ teammates

Similarly to Evans et al. (2013) and Hassel et al. (2010), participants in this study derived network and emotional support from their *co-athletes/ teammates*. Participants felt connected to their teammates because they both shared similar experiences and could thus understand, empathise, and support one another more appropriately when it was needed. Having teammates that they could relate too also helped the participants feel less alone when problems or stress arose. This was observed in Katie, Cordelia, and Pearl's accounts below.

…we kind of understand – emotionally – we understand if someone is feeling, or having a bad day and how that is impacting on their training. Ya, more like having emotional support than anything else. – Katie

I think it just gives you people to relate to and talk about similar things that you're going through cause most of us go through the same things at the same time so I think it just helps you get through it a lot easier if you have someone to talk to. – Cordelia

…there's so many people here that help you through it and especially with your teammates… like we're all going through the same stuff and they really help you emotionally to get through it. – Cordelia

…it's just nice to have that someone and you also kind of know that they go through the same stuff that you go through in a month or in a year or – the pressure for [a certain swimmer] is the same as it is for me. – Pearl

Katie's narrative also highlighted that teammates could also offer one another esteem support. She recalled swimming against a male teammate during practice and having him verbally challenge her to swim faster. Katie perceived this as both encouraging and motivating. This was similarly found by Evans et al. (2013) who noted that teammates in individual sports teams help one another achieve greater performances by keeping them accountable in training (e.g., pushing teammates when they seem to be slacking off at training).

…I would come in a little bit slower and he would be like 'come on, push!' or he would come in a little bit slower and I would be like 'swim a bit faster!'… It's not necessarily to do with guys/girls but just to encourage one another. – Katie

Katie and Cordelia's accounts also highlight how teammates are perceived as a source of support rather than a source of competition.

My personal reflection

What is the line between competitors, teammates, and friends? Does being competitors affect the friendship between teammates?

Having a 'squad' or team kind of serves as a built-in support system for athletes.

Family

Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) found that parents of female swimmers are expected to provide more emotional support during adolescence, even if they are less involved in their child's swimming. In this study, only one participant mentioned her parents as a source of emotional support. This could be because majority of these participants do not live at home (i.e., they live in boarding school or university residence) and according to Holl and Burnett (2014); student-athletes who no longer live at home full-time naturally gravitate towards their coach and peers for emotional support instead of their parents because of the physical distance that exists between themselves and their parent. Thus, fewer opportunities exist for parents to offer their student-athletes the same level of emotional support as they did when the student-athlete was living at home. However, this is not to say that their parents do not offer them emotional support at all, as observed within Katie's narrative below.

> *I do speak with my mom over the phone regularly, and she comes here sometimes and then I go home every weekend and I see them every weekend. … My dad he works a lot so he doesn't get a lot of time off but whenever he can he tries to take some time off to come and watch some swimming. ….It really helps; just kind of if I start doubting myself or if I do feel down or not lus for the day then it's nice kind of speaking with them (parents); they can put some things into perspective and make me realise that it's not as bad as you actually think it is.*

Despite the distance, Katie's parents found alternative ways to support her (e.g., by speaking on the phone, visiting her, or going to her swimming competitions). From Katie's account, her parents offered emotional (e.g., encouragement) and informational support (e.g., looking at things differently). This helped Katie cope with a wide range of challenges she faced; including, uncertainty, sadness, lack of motivation, and catastrophizing (thinking things are worse than they actually are).

*Academic institution*s

Similarly to Diakun (2015) and Hassell et al. (2010), four participants in this study mentioned the value of tangible support offered to them by the school, their teachers/lecturers. Practical arrangements in the form of flexible class schedules and assignment deadlines helped participants manage their athletic and academic demands more efficiently as well as made them

feel accepted, understood, and supported in their academic environment (Dory and Cordelia). Similar outcomes were highlighted by Diakun (2015) and Guidotti et al. (2015).

> *Um, it's nice. It helps a lot especially like cause the school starts a bit later so we can easily fit morning training in, and ya, get to school on time and not be as tired.* – Katie

> *…at [my new school], my relationships with my teachers have become very close because I'm a swimmer. … because they know I travel a lot so, they'll focus on me in class and make sure that I'm up to date with my work and sit with me after school and just make sure that my work is up to date. And they won't hesitate to ask me how training was or if I'm okay.* – Dory

> *It's more relaxed and they understand like what you go through as like a sport person and what you need.* – Cordelia

Cordelia added:

> *I feel like moving to [a] sports school, um, was actually a good thing for me especially because the more times I go overseas they actually make time for you to catch up the work.*

It is noteworthy to mention, of these four participants who referred to *academic institutions*, only one of them was a university student. What seemed to make this participants' schedule more accommodating than other participants who are also at university was the type of degree she seemed to be pursuing.

So far, [be]cause I'm doing [a sport-related degree]; the degree is adapting well into my sport. So, it's very flexible around my sport so I'm not having to struggle too much about fitting in training or like making sure I'm getting enough sleep; that is okay. That's really been accommodating so far. Um, ya. – Lola

My personal reflection

This was something that frustrated me as a student-athlete who did a non-sport related degree – seeing lecturers of sport-related degrees be more lenient or understanding of their student-athletes' athletic responsibilities while our athletic responsibilities were met with scepticism and frustration. There needs to be some understanding in departments that are non-sport related. Not only can this enhance the athletes academic performance but also their psychological well-being. I wonder if implementing workshops for lecturers and head of departments (HoD's) of non-sport related degrees would have any impact on their relationship with student-athletes. Alternatively, workshops with athletes' coaches on academic responsibilities and how best they could support them academically. Perhaps even creating a channel of communication between the athletes' athletic and academic domains could assist in establishing a mutual understanding of one another?

Psychological assistance

This refers to participants who referred to having gone to see a sport psychologist. The specific type of support the participant received could not be deduced. Despite this, one participant did emphasise that seeing a psychologist did help her work through the challenges she faced and had given her appropriate "tools" to cope more effectively should similar situations arise in the future. She said:

…I had obviously been seeing the sport psychologist because there was just so much that had happened when I was very young – [be]cause I was competitive at a young age. Like, teaching me how to deal with these things and like obviously my mind had gotten a lot stronger as I got older…

My personal reflection

I'm not surprised that only one participant mentioned seeking out psychological assistance. I really wish I explored this further in the interview. Seeing a psychologist would be a really valuable source of support for these female swimmers. But the question remains; how does one get them to buy into the idea of seeking out this type of support willingly?

Another participant believed that she had no need for psychological assistance because she believed she had a strong mind. However, in her transcript, it seemed that she attributed her strong mind to her physical strength. She said:

> *…**I felt like I never had the need to go to a psychologist.** I feel like I have a strong mind especially if I feel my groin injury and I stand behind the clock and I don't even think about it anymore. I swim and then I realise I didn't even feel my groin. So, I feel like I have a very strong mind and I can be sore and tired but when I dive in, I don't care; like I just focus and I'm like 'okay, let me just focus and just swim this race right'… that's how I've always felt and I think [at] the end of last year everything was just getting too much; like I was failing my subjects, um, I was fighting with my friends, injuries came, no breaks, so everything was just – and because of me spending a lot of time on making other people happy; I think I started losing that happiness inside of me. It was draining me.*

For this participant, her physical strength took precedence over her emotional strength. In other words, her body was perceived as being more important and of higher value than her emotions. Thus, she did not seem to believe that she needed to seek out psychological assistance even when she was struggling emotionally.

This participant's excerpt also implied to me that she believed that people only seek out psychological assistance when they are "weak". Thus suggesting that stigma and stereotypes associated with counselling do serve as a barrier to female student-athletes seeking psychological assistance, which aligns with the findings provided by Lopez and Levy (2013).

The same participant, later in the interview, added:

> *…sometimes I feel like I can't really tell psychologists about my personal things because you always think 'ah, they might judge you' (Laughs).*

According to Lopez and Levy (2013), student-athletes are largely concerned with the perceptions of others and that this does affect their ability to seek out therapeutic support when it is needed. The participant's account above aligns with Lopez and Levy's (2013) findings. However, for this participant, the concern is that the therapist may negatively judge or evaluate her.

As mentioned previously in this study, psychological support (i.e., dealing with thoughts and emotions) may be important for female student-athletes to pursue, yet only one participant in this study actively sought it out. According to a qualitative research study conducted by Daniel (2018), 25% of American student-athletes between the ages of 17 and 20, who struggled with mental health difficulties, were likely to see out psychological assistance compared to the 39% of non-athlete students. Daniel (2018) attributed this to student-athletes having an athletic support system that somewhat acted as "pseudo-counsellors" when these athletes would experience mood or behavioural changes. In contrast to Daniel (2018), Lopez and Levy (2013), identified that student-athletes were less likely to seek out psychological assistance due to the following barriers: a lack of time to seek services, a lack of available services during student-athletes' free time, social stigma associated with attending therapy (e.g., being considered mentally ill, crazy, or weak), a fear of one's teammates finding out, fear of being judged, and the belief that no one will understand their problems. Lopez and Levy (2013) recommend that athletic departments normalise the use of psychologists by diminishing negative stereotypes and stigmas through stigma-reducing programmes (e.g., educating athletes on mental health and counselling). Due to the limited amount of participants who spoke about or were open to exploring therapy, I think there would be valuable to implement these psycho-educational programmes at this swimming club too.

In conclusion to this theme, female swimmers rely on a wide range of social support providers to stay afloat when challenges and stressors arise. The coach was the most mentioned support provider and the least was psychological assistance. Coaches seemed to provide swimmers with emotional and informational support, co-athletes/ teammates provided network and emotional support, parents and significant others provided emotional support, academic institutions offered tangible support, and psychological assistance provided emotional support. These findings are mostly consistent with research conducted on social support among elite female adolescent swimmers in Canada (Hassell et al., 2010).

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the main themes, subthemes, and integrated themes extrapolated from the interpretation. The findings of the study were presented and linked to previous literature reviewed in chapter two. These participants' narratives offered a wealth of information on what it means to be a South African female swimmer as well as a female student-athlete. From the

above findings and discussion, it was also evident that there are many stressors and pressures surrounding being a South African female student-athlete swimmer, and seemingly not enough personal resources to cope with them all effectively. For the majority of the participants, this hindered their experience of swimming. In the next chapter, I will conclude the research study by offering a summary of the main findings as well as the limitations, strengths/contributions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter overview

The primary purpose of this chapter is to conclude the study. In efforts to do this, I present the reader with a reflection on the research process first and then summarise the main findings that emerged from the study. Thereafter, the limitations and strengths/contributions of the research will be discussed. This chapter will also offer recommendations and highlight opportunities for future studies. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Reflection on the research process

This section highlights some important personal reflections about the research process. This is in response to the quality criteria identified in Chapter 4 (i.e., reflexivity).

As a novel researcher, I found the plethora of data I gathered and had to interpret to be the most challenging. Most of the time it felt like I was drowning in a sea of data. It honestly overwhelmed me and I found that it affected my motivation while doing the study. I also noticed myself feeling increasingly tired, ineffective and like I was not really accomplishing anything. I suppose the only way to describe it is that it felt like I was walking through hip-high mud. I frequently wondered whether other new researchers felt similarly like I did and if they had, how did they cope with it? Was I doing it wrong? Was there even a right way to do it? In retrospect, I should have invested in more self-care during this process – but I think I was ignorant of how a perceived "big assignment" could affect me physically, mentally and emotionally. I can now truly appreciate and understand why Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) and Callary, Rathwell and Young (2015) encouraged new researchers to take on an even smaller sample size (e.g., n=3) than the one I had (n=8).

In 2018, I was simultaneously doing my counselling internship and this research study. During this time, I experienced a few setbacks which ultimately lead to me deciding to temporarily pause my research. When I decided to do this though, I felt that I was truly immersed in the data. So, when I returned to it months later; the interviews, transcripts and articles I read had somewhat faded from my memory and I did not feel as connected to the research as I once had. I found myself feeling lost and frantically trying to re-connect with my research again. I had

re-listened to the interviews, re-read articles I initially reviewed and redid initial interpretations on the transcripts in hopes of connecting to it again. This was somewhat of a blessing in disguise because even though it was time-consuming and could have been avoided, it allowed me to later compare and contrast the two sets of interpretations I had made and integrate them. According to Krefting (1991), this is also a technique that can enhance the dependability of the study (i.e., the code-recode procedure).

The final aspect of the research process that I would like to share my reflections on is with regards to the interview stage. In efforts to accommodate the participants and myself, the interviews were conducted back-to-back, over two days. The more interviews I had, the more tired I became, and therefore, the more irritable I was by the fourth participant I had to interview. This could have negatively impacted the rapport between the participant and me and subsequently, deterred how freely and comfortably she was able to share her experiences, challenges, and feelings. I realised then that I should have spread out the interviews. This would have also allowed me to be better rested, given me time to reflect on the interviews I had done more thoroughly (e.g., consider participants' non-verbal communication and the dynamics between the participant and me), and then translate what I had learnt from these interviews into the next ones (e.g., change sequencing of questions or rephrase questions that were misunderstood by previous participants). This could have affected how efficient the interviews were conducted as well as caused me to potentially miss some important non-verbal information. However, what helped was having my supervisor interview me about the interview process immediately after all of the interviews were conducted. This helped with reflecting on this information while it was still "fresh" in my mind. Subsequently helping me notice the dynamics better too.

My inexperience with using the funnelling technique (Smith et al., 2009) made it difficult to elicit a participants' full lived experience and would sometimes result in what I perceived as impersonal and vague answers. I found myself feeling concerned that I did not conduct the interviews as well as I could have and agonised over potential consequences thereof; for the participants, the study, and myself. While transcribing and interpreting, I realised that there was more data than I had previously assumed. I should have known that this might be the case seeing that since I was younger, I have been someone who had unrelenting standards when it came to any achievement settings (e.g., academics, sport) and thus I expected myself to do things well or "pick-up" on things quickly (e.g., do better with the interviews; get rich[er] data).

Consequently, I become self-critical in the way I think and resort to overcompensating to try and cope. This was observed throughout the research process, but mainly during the interview and interpretation stages. As such, it was essential to reflect on my unrelenting standards and self-critical thoughts throughout the research process.

Despite the challenges above, I believe the interviews gave the participants in this study the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences as female swimmers in South Africa by telling their stories to someone willing to listen, recognise, and acknowledge their thoughts and feelings. Nearing the end of each interview I asked the participants how they experienced the interview. Many of the participant's responses suggested that the interview was to some extent cathartic and that it offered them insights into their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings that they had not been able to share with others previously. This was personally rewarding to hear, but also somewhat increased the pressure to make sure that their "voices" were heard through my research study.

Summary of the main findings

The findings that surfaced in this study provided rich and valuable data that assisted in answering the following research questions: "what do the experiences of female student-athlete swimmers reveal about being a female swimmer in South Africa?" and "how do female swimmers perceive being a student-athlete and taking part in a dual career in South Africa?"

The study showed that being a South African female student-athlete swimmer is unmistakeably stressful. Contributing to this were both athletic and non-athletic factors; identified within the participants' micro- and macro-environments as well as their club environment (Henriksen et al., 2010). This was evident from the following themes: *the context*, *the body*, *the social and relational*, *the decision*, c*areer*, and s*taying afloat*.

The context. Majority of the existing perceptions about South African female swimmers were focused on female swimmers' performance-related difficulties at international mega-events. Participants felt that their efforts and achievements were scarcely recognised or appreciated, while their perceived failures, shortcomings and areas of development were emphasised. It was clear that the media did have a significant negative influence on the participants' athletic experience as well as how participants viewed and thought about themselves and their physical

competence in swimming. Prominent feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, stress, hurt, and resentment were observed in participants' narratives.

Limited competition available and a lack of opportunities for international exposure was perceived as the main two contributing factors to the performance-related difficulties among female swimmers in South Africa. Participants reported not feeling challenged in South African competitions but also having limited opportunities to compete internationally. As such, participants felt that this disadvantaged them when competing at mega-events or international competitions and subsequently increased the possibility of them "choking" or underperforming at such events because of their inexperience. Participants advocated for additional international exposure. Being molly-coddled and receiving relentless pressure from coach also was believed to hinder their focus and confidence while competing.

The body. Puberty, injuries, fatigue and stiffness were unavoidable hurdles and stressors on the participants' bodies. Although there is a paucity of literature focusing on how female athletes experience puberty, this study found that the physical changes associated with puberty were unsettling, demanding, and frustrating for female swimmers to work through. Furthermore, such changes were also believed to hinder participants' motivation, performances, and precipitate thoughts about dropout. Injuries and their consequences were frequently minimised or downplayed by participants in this study. This was seemingly related to the sports culture around pushing through the pain as also observed by Epple (2015). Injuries frequently left participants discouraged, frustrated, and at times socially disconnected from their squad.

Participants were under pressure to appear strong and capable. As such, pushing through injuries, pain, and fatigue was expected of them. Thus, it was normalised and accepted by participants in this study. Participants rationalised these behaviours and attitudes by believing that it was what is best for their swimming. This placed them at greater risk of overuse injuries and burnout. Participants were also under pressure to look a certain way. Achieving an aesthetic and lean physique was a significant part of the swimming culture in South Africa. Participants believed that female swimmers experienced such pressures more frequently than their male counterparts. Even though they cognitively understood the benefits of managing their weight, participants were frustrated by the pressure received from coaches, the dietary restrictions and weight monitoring they had to endure. In accordance with researchers McMahon and Penney (2013), such expectations negatively affected how participants in this study felt and thought

about themselves and their bodies and had resulted in a few of them policing their bodies. This also contributed significantly to an unpleasant swimming experience.

The social and relational. This theme highlighted the significant and complex social and relational dynamics participants formed part of and contributed to. Similarly to Evans et al. (2013), it was observed that even though swimming is an individual sport, female swimmers in this study were still emotionally, mentally, and physically influenced by the interpersonal dynamics within their training squads. There were also varying accounts of competitiveness that existed between teammates in individual-sport teams. Training with male teammates did boost confidence, mood, and perceived competence while training with junior female swimmers hindered these. Training with male swimmers also placed female swimmers at risk of burnout and negative emotional outcomes due to inadequate recovery. Female swimmers perceive their relationships with other female swimmers in their squads as paradoxical. In other words, they move back and forth between rivalry, competition, tension and support, closeness, and empathy. The conflict mentioned by the participants is consistent with research by Patridge and Knapp (2016) on female adolescent athletes. Another factor that seems to contribute to conflict between athletes in this study is related to the transformation policies which demand that sport is more representative of South Africa's racial dynamics. This finding is unique to the South African context and does contribute to tension, competitive, and rivalry between white female swimmers and female swimmers of colour.

Findings regarding other interpersonal dynamics suggested that swimming not only impacts the lives of the participants but also the lives of those they love (family, friends, and romantic partners). Participants were more likely to select friends and romantic partners who would understand, respect and accommodate their athletic lifestyle. Forgoing their social lives for swimming was expected in order to succeed in swimming. Therefore, participants felt they were missing out on "normal" social experiences and frequently felt left out. Participants' athletic commitments had a negative effect on their relationships with family members too. This caused a tense and uncomfortable home environment for some participants. It was also found that parents can be a source of support as well as a source of stress and pressure, especially if their support does not match the athletes' personal needs. This finding was consistent with Park and Kim (2014). Parents and siblings are also required to make sacrifices for the student-athletes' dreams, not just the student-athlete. This can be a challenging situation

to negotiate around and can cause the student-athlete to blame themselves for the family's unmet needs.

Participants frequently compared themselves with those around them. Making social comparisons outwardly had a predominantly negative emotional, mental and behavioural effect on the participants. The most frequently made comparisons were between themselves and their non-athletic peers and themselves and male swimmers. Participants perceived themselves as having limited time to dedicate to their academics in comparison to their non-athletic peers and female student-athletes. As a result, female student-athlete swimmers also had difficulty building meaningful relationships with non-athletic peers who were perceived as having it "easier" than they as student-athletes did. Participants also felt physically inadequate than their male counterparts. Additionally, participants noted that female swimmers were more inclined to take comments and feedback made by coaches personally while males, more literally. Finally, female swimmers were seemingly more competitive with one another which led to sport peer conflict within the squad.

The coach-athlete relationship was the most significant relationship in the participants' lives. The main finding from this sub-theme was that the coaches' social competence was of utmost importance when working with a female swimmer. Communication, collaboration, understanding, and support was essential to cultivating a healthy, strong coach-athlete relationship. This was consistent with previous research conducted by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) and Phillippe and Seiler (2006). Additionally found, was that poor communication skills (e.g., short temper, repetitive and destructive feedback, verbally abusive behaviour, and use of autocratic coaching style) were a substantial barrier to establishing a strong coach-athlete relationship. Similar findings were observed in previous literature conducted by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008), Gearity and Murray (2011), and Stirling and Kerr (2008a). The majority of the participants (n=6) were presently content with their respective coaches. However, all of the participants have had poor coaching experiences at some point or another in their career. These poor coaching experiences had detrimental effects on participants' thoughts, feelings, and performance. Changing coaches when the relationship is not perceived as worthwhile was noticeable in this study's findings, which is paralleled with Phillippe and Seiler's (2006) findings.

The decision. Nearly all of the participants thought about terminating their swimming career at some point. These thoughts were stronger when they had not had sufficient rest or they experienced a performance slump and weaker then they saw improvement, were appropriately supported and had time-off. The main reason participants in this study decided to continue swimming was because of the social support they received from their coach. Being able to relate to and openly communicate with their coach when problems arose and have him or her listen, understand, and offer guidance or reassurance increased the athletes' motivation to swim. This is consistent with previous research (Coon, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000) which found that athletes who feel connected to, cared for, and like they belong in their athletic environment were more likely to continue participating even when thoughts about dropping out were present. Parents and teammates did not have as big of a role as expected in these participants' decision to continue swimming. The main reason participants in this study considered dropping out of swimming was performance-related. Participants relied on their performances for validation and reassurance. As such, underperformances were accompanied by unpleasant and intense emotions (e.g., disappointment, uncertainty, inadequacy, and frustration) and resulted in negative thoughts about their physical ability and future in swimming. Repetitive criticism regarding their performances (e.g., from media and coaches) also significantly impacted participants' swimming experience and their desire to continue with swimming.

Career. This theme addressed the second research question. Participants valued having a dual career because it provided them with a backup plan, gave their lives balance and offered them opportunities that they may not otherwise have had if they did not pursue a dual career. However, simultaneously studying and swimming was stressful and demanding for all participants. Finding the right balance between their social, academic, and athletic lives was difficult as time was a scarce commodity. Thus, participants were observed making social and academic sacrifices so that they would be better equipped to meet their athletic responsibilities. Athletic responsibilities were rarely compromised for academic responsibilities or social needs. This is consistent with previous literature (Aquilina, 2013; Miller & Kerr, 2002). In doing this, however, participants seemingly struggled to fulfil all of their academic demands and meet their own social needs. This also sometimes resulted in one career superseding the other (e.g., swimming becoming all-consuming). An unhealthy balance inevitably had undesirable emotional, intellectual, and social effects on participants in this study.

Having an academic environment that accommodated class and schedule clashes had a positive influence on participants' ability to manage their athletic and academic demands more efficiently. In contrast, participants who had an unaccommodating academic environment struggled to meet all of their academic demands. As such, their academic performance was negatively affected. These participants were also seemingly more stressed and overwhelmed by their dual career than those in an accommodating academic environment. Therefore, a student-athletes' learning environment can be a barrier to them effectively balancing and meeting athletic and academic demands simultaneously.

Staying afloat. Having supportive people around helped participants stay afloat even when they felt overwhelmed with stress and pressure. Support was offered in various ways, including; emotional, network, tangible and informational support. The providers of such support were identified as coaches, romantic partners, co-athletes/teammates, family, academic institutions, and psychologists. Coaches were the main source of emotional and informational support for the majority of the participants in this study. Having a coach that listened, understood, and validated the participants' feelings was invaluable to them coping with adverse situations and unpleasant and overwhelming emotions. Teammates were the second-most mentioned support provider. Feeling connected to teammates was particularly important for participants to feel understood, empathised with, and supported. Teammates also helped participants feel less alone when stress and problems arose. Parents were not as frequently mentioned by participants, however, this could be because the majority of the participants do not presently live at home thus there are fewer opportunities for parents to offer their support. Tangible support from academic institutions was considered invaluable in managing how overwhelmed participants were with their dual career. Psychological assistance was only mentioned by one participant. This was concerning seeing that the participants' experiences of being a female student-athlete swimmer were predominantly observed as being stressful.

Integrated themes. How participants thought about situations enhanced their anxiety in such situations rather than reduced it. At the same time, only a few participants were observed challenging these unhelpful ways of thinking and employing helpful tools like reframing and positive self-talk. The way participants thought about situations affected how they felt and ultimately how they behaved in the situation. Additional tools to challenge thoughts are beneficial to reducing the frequency with which these unhelpful thought patterns emerge and thus the intensity of the emotions these situations precipitate.

Therefore, the above summary highlights the main findings of the research study. Overall there is a cause for concern with the amount of pressure South African female student-athlete swimmers are under, both from an athletic and non-athletic, micro- and macro-environmental perspective. As such, recommendations have been made later on in this chapter to assist coaches, parents, educators, and other key role players in assisting this population in reaching their full potential as people, athletes, and students.

Limitations and strengths/contributions

In this section, the limitations and strengths/contributions pertaining to this research study will be addressed.

Limitations

The *first* limitation is with regards to the sample used. The participants were all female student-athlete swimmers from the same swimming club located within a university in Tshwane. As such, female student-athlete swimmers from different swimming clubs and different provinces in South Africa could have had varying experiences than the participants in this study. Therefore, it would be inadvisable to generalise the findings of this study to other female swimmers in South Africa or other female student-athlete swimmers around the world.

In addition to this, the sample was also predominantly Caucasian. Thus, this sample is not representative of South Africa's racial demographics. This could be explained, however, by the fact that the highest levels of South African swimming are still dominated by Caucasian swimmers (Desai & Veriava, 2010). Even if this is the case, it is still possible that individuals from other racial groups may have had different experiences of swimming in South Africa. Therefore, it would be valuable to explore such experiences in future research studies.

The *second* limitation of this study is regarding the interview process. Even though all of the participants spoke English, it was not some of the participants' first language. Therefore, by having conducted the interviews in English, these participants may have had difficulties expressing themselves as easily as they might have had the interviews been conducted in their language (e.g., Afrikaans).

Another limitation regarding the interview process was that all eight interviews were conducted back-to-back, over a short period of time (i.e., two days). Due to the participants' time-limited

schedules and myself residing in Cape Town (for my internship), this could unfortunately not be avoided as it was the only available time that suited the participants, their parents, and me. Nevertheless, this was still an exhausting process and ultimately could have had an impact on the rapport that was built with the participants and subsequently the ease at which they were able to share their experiences with me (i.e., being more reserved). If our schedules had allowed for it, I believe that conducting the interviews over a longer time frame (e.g., two interviews every two to three days) could have reduced the possibility this happening.

My inexperience with using the funnelling technique is another limitation. This, at times, elicited answers that appeared impersonal and vague which could have affected the richness of their experiences and therefore the findings of the study. A valuable alternative could have been to conduct a pilot study (Kim, 2010) before interviewing the participants.

The *third*, and final, limitation of the study was regarding the analysis method used. This study employed IPA as its analysis method. This meant that the findings were based on my interpretations of the participants' interpretations of the events around them. In other words, I used my insights about female student-athletes and swimmers to interpret these participants' experiences. As a result, the findings in this study cannot be considered an "absolute" truth because another researcher could have a varied interpretation of the same text. In chapter three, I do however highlight the various measures I took to ensure the quality of the research (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability).

Strengths and contributions

This study highlighted and deepened the understanding of female student-athlete swimmers in a South African context. As such, it extended current literature about this population and their experiences which had not previously been explored.

Other unique contributions made by this study are:

- It offered qualitative insight into how the physical effects of puberty affect female athletes emotionally and psychologically as well as how these changes may precipitate thoughts about dropout.

- It offered insight into the psychological and emotional effects of transformation policies in South African sport. To my knowledge, there have been no academic studies conducted

on this topic. Therefore, this finding offers valuable understanding of the consequences associated with transformation policies implemented in South African sport.

- According to Monteiro et al. (2017), who did a review on dropout among swimmers, research on this topic and population was primarily conducted on swimmers in Canada, the United States of America and Spain. In light of this, the present study not only presents additional determinants and reasons for dropout among swimmers that have not been observed in the studies Monteiro et al. (2017) reviewed, but also offered insights into dropout reasons from a South African perspective.

- This study also found that student-athletes may also find pursuing a dual career worthwhile because of the athletic benefits associated with competing at a university level. This particular benefit has not been observed in other reviewed literature on dual career benefits. Thus, it enhances the frequently mentioned motivations mentioned in Guidotti et al., 2015).

- Another contribution was that one of the participants in this study reported a decrease in pre-competitive anxiety when her parents were not in attendance at her swimming meetings. This subsequently contradicted Bois et al.'s (2009) findings.

By focusing on participants' athletic and non-athletic domains as well as their micro- and macro-environments, the study offered a holistic perspective on their experiences. It further allowed us to see them as a holistic being. As individuals who are more than just athletes or competitors, instead it gave insight into their lives as friends, daughters, students, girlfriends, and females; parts of their identity that are frequently overlooked because of their athletic pursuits.

Also, with the study being as broad in scope as it was, its findings highlighted several additional areas that need to be given more attention to (from a research standpoint). Some of these include; puberty, transformation policies in South African sports, and the individual team environment.

As the researcher, I made sure that I included as many perspectives as I could so that a rich and in-depth description of their experiences as female student-athlete swimmers could be constructed. In efforts to ensure that the participants' voices remained central in the study and were heard, I frequently reflected on my interpretations and the research process and sought out supervision. This prevented me from moving too far off of the participants' transcripts (i.e.,

over-interpreting). As such, I was able to stay true to my role as the researcher which is "not that the writing is by *me*, but it is not *about me*" (Moules, 2002, p. 12).

Recommendations

This section proposes a set of recommendations based on the findings of the study. These recommendations could assist coaches, parents, educators and other relevant parties when leading and supporting female student-athlete swimmers so that their experiences, wellness, and performances in both academics and swimming may be enhanced in the future. Furthermore, recommendations about possible future studies will also be discussed.

Recommendations for athletes and key role players. Based on findings from *the context* theme, it is recommended that South African female swimmers are provided with increased opportunities to compete at an international level. This would not only enhance their confidence when competing at such events but would also reduce the possibility of choking or underperforming as a result of their inexperience. With this in mind, it is recommended that government does enhance their funding towards South African female swimmers' international exposure.

Based on findings from *the body* theme, it is recommended that coaches dispel the belief that "training through the pain" means athletes are strong and capable and not training through the pain means athletes are weak and vulnerable. In doing so, female swimmers may be willing to approach their coaches earlier when injuries, fatigue, and pain do arise. This could assist in tracking and managing the athletes' physical, emotional, and mental health better.

Additionally, the intensity and manner in which weight is monitored and emphasised by coaches had negative long-term effects on how female swimmers felt about themselves, their body, and their swimming. It is thus recommended that coaches be cognisant of how they discuss weight and physical appearance with and around female swimmers. Coaches are also encouraged to be consistent with their expectations. Lastly, exploring "intuitive eating", which has been associated with positive body image and enhanced emotional functioning in women (Bruce & Ricciardelli, 2016), could also assist in encouraging healthy eating behaviours among female swimmers.

Based on *squad dynamics*, it was evident that even though swimming is an individual sport, the female swimmers are affected emotionally, cognitively, and physically by the interpersonal

dynamics in their training squad. It is thus recommended that coaches implement team-building interventions so that it can improve team cohesion and performance and reduce consequences associated with poor squad dynamics (e.g., sport peer conflict).

Based on the other interpersonal dynamics, swimming may cause tension between the student-athlete and their parents, especially if the student-athletes' personal ambitions conflict with family needs or if parental ambitions conflict with the student-athletes personal needs. Therefore, open communication between the parent and student-athlete is essential for parents to gain a better understanding of the student-athletes' needs and how best to meet these needs. Parents are also encouraged not to set expectations that are too high or rigid as this can hinder the student-athletes' help-seeking behaviour. Lastly, balancing the needs of the coach and parents is challenging when these needs conflict with one another. As such, parents and coaches need to be on the same page with regards to what is best for the athlete so that the athlete does not feel like she has to choose one over the other.

Based on findings in the coach-athlete relationship, coaches are strongly encouraged to enhance their interpersonal communication skills and refrain from repetitively criticising, verbally abusing and using autocratic and authoritarian styles of coaching. Coaches are encouraged to enhance their ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage their own emotions as well as those in their athletes (Chan & Mallett, 2011). This can be accomplished by seeking out personal therapy. It is also important for coaches to practice what they preach. This will help enhance their credibility in the athletes' eyes as well as the athletes' help-seeking behaviour. Coaches also need to respond to successful and undesirable performances consistently and with the same intensity. Finally, communication, collaboration, and unconditional support is essential to working with female swimmers, reducing thoughts about termination, and forming a healthy, strong coach-athlete relationship.

The following recommendations can be made to assist in alleviating thoughts about dropout following undesired performances. Firstly, key role players need to offer female swimmers additional support and validation following undesired performances rather than corrective information. Secondly, female swimmers are encouraged to keep a journal where they write down and reflect on smaller successes and achievements in undesirable performances. This could assist in enhancing perceived competence and intrinsic motivation.

The following recommendations can be made to assist student-athletes with managing their dual career more efficiently. Firstly, given that participants struggled to find a healthy balance between their athletic, academic and social lives due to a lack of time, it is recommended that athletes (or with parents' help) seek out assistance from academic counsellors who can help athletes with time-management related issues (e.g., finding time in their day to dedicate to their academic work and learning to manage time when they are stressed or fatigued). Secondly, additional academic support from tutors or mentors are also encouraged. And thirdly, having academic institutions and educators offer practical arrangements in the form of flexible class schedules and assignment deadlines would help them manage their academic and athletic demands more efficiently when travelling as well as enhance their academic motivation.

Based on the psychological assistance subtheme, it is evident that there are stigmas and negative stereotypes serve as a barrier to seeking out therapeutic support. Therefore, the athletic department is encouraged to employ a mental health professional to present a psycho-educational workshop on mental health and counselling so that the negative stereotypes and stigmas surrounding these topics can be reduced. This can help educate the athletes and coaches about the benefits of personal therapy as well as potentially enhancing their mental health seeking behaviour so that they may actively begin to seek out therapy on their own when problems do arise.

Based on the integrated themes, it is evident that participants would benefit from personal therapy. Personal therapy, specifically cognitive behavioural therapy would assist participants in becoming more aware of their unhelpful thought patterns and learning appropriate ways of challenging them when they arise. This could also enhance mental toughness in athletes. Furthermore, most of the participants found it difficult to express their thoughts and feelings openly with those around them for fear of judgement and criticism. As such, therapy could provide participants with a safe, non-judgemental environment where they can freely voice their concerns and work through challenges and stressors by having professional emotional support provided to them when it is needed. This is not necessarily only for performance-related challenges, but can also assist them with self-care.

Recommendations for future research. Given that participants' narratives described the physical changes associated with puberty as a frustrating, unsettling, and stressful to work through, this stage of development would be an important avenue to explore further. A

qualitative approach is recommended because it would offer valuable insights into female athletes' subjective experiences with this stage of their development.

Given the paucity of research on individual sport team environments, further research could explore the benefits of implementing team-building interventions within individual sports teams.

Another avenue to explore further would be with regards to how South African athletes experience and feel about the transformation policies in South African sport. Not only was there a dearth of literature on this, but it was also evident in this study that transformation policies do have a negative effect on the athlete (emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally) and the interpersonal dynamics between white female swimmers and female swimmers of colour.

Academic institutions and educators may be more inclined to accommodate student-athletes if they had better understanding and awareness of their dual lifestyle. As such, future research could design and implement psycho-educational workshops on this population group directed at non-sport related degrees or mainstream schools and see whether these participants were more open to accommodating athletic students after the workshop as opposed to before it.

Conclusion

This research study sought to explore the experiences of South African female student-athlete swimmers. This chapter summarised the findings obtained by means of IPA and highlighted the complexity of these participants' lives as female student-athletes as well as South African female swimmers. In addition to this, the limitations, strengths/contributions, and recommendations for future research were addressed in this chapter.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH INVITATION AND INFORMATION, AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities
Department of Psychology

SECTION A

RESEARCH INVITATION

Dear Student/Learner-Athlete,

I am a MA (Counselling Psychology) student at the University of Pretoria. The title of my research study is: "**Female student-athlete swimmers: Lived experiences in a South African context**".

I would hereby like to invite you to take part in the research study I am planning to conduct. If you are interested in participating, please read through the information provided in this hand-out before you agree to participate in the study. If there are any questions regarding the study, that this hand-out did not fully explain, please do not hesitate to ask me.

If you are happy with all the information and are willing to take part in the study please sign the "Consent to Participate" section. This will grant me permission to include you as a participant in my research study.

Ms. Adri Prinsloo, from the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria is my supervisor for this research study (email: adri.XXXXXXX@up.ac.za).

Kind regards,

Andrijana Jeremic (Researcher)

Humanities Building, Room 11 – XX | Tel: 012 XXX XXXX | Adri.XXXXXXX@up.ac.za
PRETORIA 0002 | Fax: 012 420 3479 | www.up.ac.za/psych

SECTION B
RESEARCH INFORMATION

Purpose of study

The study is about what the experiences of female student- and learner-athlete swimmers reveal about being a female swimmer in South Africa. Female swimmers will be a very important source of information for this study, therefore I require eight female swimmers to participate in this study, four under-18 and four over-18 would be ideal.

Procedures

If you decide to take part in this study, the researcher, Andrijana Jeremic, will conduct an interview between 50 – 60 minutes long. The questions asked will be specifically related to what experiences you have as a female student/learner-athlete swimmer and what it means to be a female student/learner-athlete swimmer, in South Africa. These interviews will also be audio-recorded to ensure that all the information provided is properly transcribed by the researcher.

Risks and discomfort

If there are any questions that cause emotional discomfort, you can either decide to not answer them, skip to the next question, stop for a break or stop the interview completely. If you feel that due to our conversation you would need additional emotional support, please contact Adri Prinsloo at (w) 012 XXX XXXX or (e) adri.XXXXXXX@up.ac.za.

Possible benefits

There are no financial gains for participating, but your participation will enable researchers and coaches to understand your experiences better. This may in turn help us develop more effective approaches to coaching and managing female swimmers and their needs in South Africa.

Rights as a participant

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from participating at any time without giving a reason. There will be no consequences for withdrawing.

Confidentiality

All information gathered in the study will be kept strictly confidential. Anonymity cannot be protected from the researcher. However, all references to you and your experiences will be done by using pseudonyms. Also, data will be destroyed if you withdraw from the study. All characteristics that may identify you will be altered or omitted from the written document.

Data storage

Data gathered will be stored on my personal computer which will be protected by password and will only be accessed by me. Upon completion of the research, data will be stored in the Department of

Psychology (Room 11-24) at the University of Pretoria for 15 years or longer for research and archival purposes. Please note, data stored may be used for further research.

Researcher information

If you have any questions about the study please contact me on 084 XXX XXXX or andie.XXXXXX@gmail.com. Alternatively you may contact my supervisor Adri Prinsloo at 012 XXX XXXX.

SECTION C
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read and understood the information provided in the "Research Information" section. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details will be kept confidential but anonymity cannot be protected from the researcher and that the interviews will be audio-recorded to increase transcription accuracy. Furthermore, I am aware that I may withdraw at any time and this will not affect me in anyway. I am aware that data gathered and stored from this study may be used for further research.

I have received a signed copy of this informed consent agreement.

I _____ (Full name and surname of participant) hereby consent/ give assent to participate in the research study described above, voluntarily.

Date: _____ Place: _____

Participant's signature: _____

I _____ (Full name and surname of parent/ legal guardian of learner-athlete) hereby consent for my daughter _____ (Learner-athletes name and surname) to participate in the research study described above.

Date: _____ Place: _____

Parent/Guardian's signature: _____

I _____ (Full name and surname of researcher) certify that I have explained the study to the participant, and relevant parent/ guardian, and consider that they understand what is involved and freely consent to participation.

Date: _____ Place: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

APPENDIX B

PERMISSION FROM FACULTY

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities
Research Ethics Committee

31 August 2017

Dear Ms Jeremic

Project:	**Female student-athlete swimmers: Lived experiences in a South African context**
Researcher:	**A Jeremic**
Supervisor:	**Ms A Prinsloo**
Department:	**Psychology**
Reference number:	**11095840 (GW20170828HS)**

Thank you for the application that was submitted for ethical consideration.

I am pleased to inform you that the above application was **approved** by the **Research Ethics Committee** at a meeting held on 31 August 2017. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

Prof Maxi Schoeman
Deputy Dean: Postgraduate Studies and Ethics
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail:tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

CC: Ms A Prinsloo (Supervisor)
Prof C Wagner (HoD)

APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me what being a student/learner-athlete means to you.

   Prompt: Are there any differences between you and other non-athlete female students/learners?

2. How do you experience being a female swimmer?

   Prompt: How does being a female student/learner-athlete swimmer impact your relationships with your friends, romantic partners, training partners, team-mates, university peers, family, coaches and lecturers/teachers?

3. Do you think that there are specific demands placed on you specifically as a female student/learner-athlete?

   Prompt: How do you experience the demands, pressures and expectations you are faced with in your academic life and your sport life?

4. How do you experience training?

   Prompt (1): What are some of the physical and emotional challenges associated with training?

   Prompt (2): How do you think training is similar/different for male swimmers?

   Prompt (3): How does training in a mixed team work for or against you?

   Prompt (4): Would you prefer training with females more? If so, what are the specific benefits or challenges with this?

5. How does competing in South Africa compare to competing internationally?

   Prompt: How does being a woman impact on competing?

   Prompt: How have you experienced competing against younger/older female swimmers?

6. What factors or motivational drives are important for females to remain in swimming?

   Prompt (1): What factors would make, or contribute to, females leaving competitive swimming, or pack their swimming caps away for good?

   Prompt (2): What are the factors that have caused a female swimmer you know to leave competitive swimming?

   Prompt (3): What factors could contribute to yourself leaving competitive swimming?