

Running head: SELF-IDENTITY OF AUSTRALIAN ELITE ATHLETES

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

The Impact of Demographic Characteristics, Aspects of Achievement, and Retirement Status  
upon the Self-identity, Athletic Identity, and Psychological Well-being of Australian Elite  
Athletes

A Dissertation submitted by

Lisa Anne Fraser

For the award of

Doctor of Philosophy 2012

### **Abstract**

Despite the intuitive appeal of the notion of an “athletic identity”, a growing body of research and theory continues to indicate that identity is a complex multidimensional construct. The primary purpose of this dissertation was to investigate the self-identity characteristics possessed by Australian elite athletes, including athletic identity, and the impact that a range of personal and situational factors have upon both the endorsement of multiple dimensions of their self-identity, and their psychological well-being.

Study 1 aimed to investigate the impact of age, gender, aspects of achievement (perceived academic achievement and level of athletic achievement), and retirement status upon levels of athletic identity, endorsed self-identity characteristics, as well as indicators of psychological well-being (self-esteem and life satisfaction). It also aimed to determine whether a distinctive athletic profile exists in relation to the dominant dimensions of identity endorsed by elite athletes. The relationship between the athletic identity levels, life satisfaction, and self-esteem of elite athletes was also explored. A total of 917 athletes on sporting scholarships linked with the Australian Institute of Sport were surveyed using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), Self-Description Questionnaire III-summary items (SDQ III-summary items), General Esteem Questionnaire (GEQ), and Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS). Study 2 employed cross-validation techniques to investigate the findings of Study 1 using a subsequent data set ( $N = 310$ ) aiming to see if the results remained consistent over two different samples of the same population.

Results indicated that Australian elite athletes exhibit a common identity profile that is operating largely independently of the level to which they identify with the athlete role. It was also found that the passion they have for their sport is not restricting them from valuing non sports-related life roles or aspects of self, and therefore is not impacting upon the

multidimensionality of their self-identity. Athletic identity, along with the importance placed upon both sporting/physical ability and academic ability, was found to decline with age. Athletes considering retirement from sport displayed significantly lower levels of athletic identity than those athletes with no plans to retire. Athletic identity was found to be unrelated to life satisfaction; however, further investigation is required into the relationship between athletic identity and self-esteem.

Study 3 was a longitudinal study which aimed to investigate whether the retirement status of elite athletes has a role to play in the self-identity characteristics endorsed, levels of athletic identity, and psychological well-being of athletes over time. It also aimed to explore the impact of the voluntariness of retirement upon all of these factors. Participants were 62 Australian elite athletes from three different career transition phases (intending; current; retired). The same survey used in the two previous studies was administered on two occasions, five years apart. On the second administration, the survey included a qualitative retirement questionnaire.

The same identity profile reported in both Studies 1 and 2 was found to continue in this study. Athletes who retired over the five-year period reported a significant increase in life satisfaction, while retirement status was found to have no impact on athletes' levels of self-esteem. Results also indicated that the extent to which an individual identifies with the athlete role may significantly decrease before he or she actually begins to consider retirement. In light of past research in this area, these results may be interpreted as being an indication that Australian elite athletes may experience a positive transition to post-sport life. Despite this, it appears that those athletes who face an involuntary retirement continue to be at the most risk of experiencing adjustment issues.

The findings of this research can be used to guide individuals who are working with athletes. Athletes should be encouraged to broaden their sense of self while still competing in order to ensure that they are equipped with sufficient coping resources when faced with significant life events, such as injury and career termination, and their life after sport. Recommendations are made as to ways that Australian elite athletes can be supported at government, institute, and individual level.

*Keywords:* athletes, self-identity, athletic identity, life satisfaction, transition

**Certification of Thesis**

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software, and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

---

Lisa Anne Fraser

---

Date

**ENDORSEMENT**

---

Professor Gerard Fogarty (Supervisor)

---

Date

### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge a number of people for helping me traverse the rocky terrain which stood between the start and finish of this document.

To my family - Mum, Dad, and Tara - I am not sure what or who I would be without knowing that you are always there for me no matter what.

A special note to my mum – you are a unique example of the kind of person I strive to be. Thank you for all the love and laughter, which are two things which have been essential to helping me to continue to push on with this project through all the times of self-doubt. This project is about self-identity, and you have helped me to reflect and find out more about my own, while I write about that of others.

The special people who have been in my life over this substantial period of time – Jack, Lorraine, Katie, Anita, Matt, Kirralee, Theo, Colin, Chris, Fiona, Helen, John, Sally, Kurt & Kim, Barry, and Cheryl. Each of you has had a hand in helping me in some way, whether it was supporting me, laughing with me, helping me to chill out, reminding me to stretch, breathe, and have a life outside of study, holidaying with me, loving me, generally keeping me as sane as possible, and giving me perspective when I have most needed it. Some of you have done all of these things!! For this I thank you. I thank you for giving me your time, wisdom and friendship.

A special thank you to my husband, Jack, for giving me the time to put towards this project by doing *everything* for me that I could possibly think of. You definitely lightened the burden of life so I could have the space to think.

To my supervisors – Gerry and Majella. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work on this interesting project and for imparting your knowledge. Majella – I hope that you are enjoying your retirement with your grandchildren.

Thank you also to Susie and the tech staff at USQ for all the help provided throughout the years. I especially thank you for helping with printing, sending, and scanning the many surveys, as well as converting the responses to manageable files. A big job at times! I certainly would have been lost without you all!

I would also like to thank Charmayne Paul for her assistance with the editing of this dissertation towards the latter weeks. It was such a help to get a fresh set of eyes! Thank you.

To the Aussie athletes who participated in this project – your motivation and commitment to reaching your full potential in your respective sports is truly admirable. Five years of surveys is a heavy feat, and I sincerely appreciate the time and effort put forth by each of you in completing the surveys. A special thank you to those athletes who completed questionnaires over all 5 years!!

I would also like to thank the Australian Sports Commission for funding this project and the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program management for being so great to work with. A special thanks to all the ACE coordinators for your valuable feedback and support, and the time and effort you put into distributing and collecting surveys over the five-year period. It was a pleasure working with you all.

The quote that sat on my desk for the final year of this project read, “You got yourself this far—you just got to keep going” (Don Ward). I think it suffices to say that to have finally *completed* is a new and welcome feeling.

**Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my friend, Miss Katie Sutter, who left this world on 8th April 2011. The sun no longer shines quite as brightly without you here. You were both my support and my inspiration through the tougher times of the past few years. As you decided to put your own PhD aside, I completed this one for both of us.



## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Certification of Thesis .....	v
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Dedication.....	viii
Table of Contents .....	ix
List of Tables.....	xiv
List of Figures.....	xvii
List of Appendices.....	xviii
Chapter 1 – Introduction.....	1
1.1 Structure of the Dissertation.....	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem .....	1
1.3 Research Design and Broad Aims of the Studies.....	9
1.4 Context of the Research .....	13
1.4.1 The National Athlete Career and Education program.....	13
Chapter 2 – Literature Review .....	15
2.1 Introduction to the Review .....	15
2.2 The Self.....	16
2.3 What is Identity?.....	18
2.4 Identity Formation .....	20
2.4.1. Adolescence: A critical stage for human identity.....	20
2.4.1.1 Erik Erikson. ....	20
2.4.1.2 James Marcia.....	22
2.4.2 Emerging adulthood: A new stage of human development.....	23
2.4.2.1 Jeffrey Arnett. ....	23
2.5 Theories of Identity.....	25
2.5.1 Identity theory. ....	26
2.5.2 Self-complexity theory. ....	29
2.6 Measurement of Self-identity .....	31
2.6.1 Self-Description Questionnaire III. ....	33
2.6.2 Self-Description Questionnaire III-summary items. ....	34

2.7 Self-concept Research Outcomes .....	37
2.7.1 Differences in self-concept between athletes and non-athletes.....	37
2.7.2 Differences in self-concept between elite and non-elite athletes.....	39
2.7.3 Gender differences in self-concept.....	40
2.7.4 Differences in self-concept with age.....	42
2.8 Athletic Identity .....	45
2.8.1 Positive outcomes associated with a strong athletic identity.....	45
2.8.2 Negative outcomes associated with a strong athletic identity.....	46
2.8.3 Gender differences in athletic identity.....	47
2.8.4 Differences in athletic identity with age.....	50
2.8.5 Athletic identity as a malleable construct.....	52
2.8.5.1 Self-protection hypothesis.....	53
2.8.6 Athletic identity and the multi-dimensional self.....	54
2.8.6.1 Athletic identity and the student role.....	54
2.8.6.2 Athletic identity and a balanced sense of self.....	57
2.8.7 Athletic identity and retirement from sport.....	59
2.9 Relationships Between Athletic Identity and Self-identity Characteristics.....	60
2.10 Psychological Well-being .....	61
2.10.1 Self-esteem and life satisfaction.....	62
2.10.2 Differences in self-esteem and life satisfaction with age.....	63
2.10.3 Gender differences in self-esteem and life satisfaction.....	64
2.11 Self-esteem, Life Satisfaction, and Athletic Identity .....	65
2.11.1 Athletic identity and psychological well-being.....	65
2.12 Conclusion .....	67
Chapter 3 – Study 1 .....	69
3.1 Introduction.....	69
3.2 Overview of Study Aims and Hypotheses.....	69
3.3 Method.....	71
3.3.1 Participants.....	71
3.3.2 Measures .....	73
3.3.2.1 Demographic and general information.....	73

3.3.2.2 Athletic Identity Measurement Scale. ....	74
3.3.2.3 Self-Description Questionnaire III–summary items.....	75
3.3.2.4 General Esteem Questionnaire. ....	76
3.3.2.5 Satisfaction With Life Scale.....	77
3.3.3 Procedure .....	77
3.4 Results .....	77
3.4.1 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Item Rankings.....	79
3.4.1.1 Total sample. ....	79
3.4.2 Testing for Group Differences: Demographic Characteristics .....	81
3.4.2.1 Gender. ....	81
3.4.2.2 Age. ....	82
3.4.2.3 Analysis of group differences on the SDQ III accuracy scale.....	83
3.4.2.4 Analysis of group differences on the SDQ III importance scale.....	85
3.4.3 Testing for Group Differences: Aspects of Achievement .....	86
3.4.3.1 Perceived academic achievement.....	86
3.4.3.2 Level of athletic achievement.....	86
3.4.3.3 Analysis of group differences on the SDQ III accuracy scale.....	87
3.4.3.4 Analysis of group differences on the SDQ III importance scale.....	88
3.4.4 Testing for Group Differences: Retirement Status. ....	89
3.4.4.1 Retirement status. ....	89
3.4.4.2 Analysis of group differences on the SDQ III accuracy scale.....	90
3.4.4.3 Analysis of group differences on the SDQ III importance scale.....	90
3.4.5 Athletic Identity, Self-esteem, and Life Satisfaction.....	91
3.4.5.1 Analysis of group differences.....	91
3.4.5.2 Age and gender.....	92
3.4.5.3 Aspects of achievement.....	94
3.4.5.4 Retirement status. ....	95
3.4.6 Analysing Relationships .....	96
3.4.6.1 Athletic identity and self-identity characteristics. ....	96
3.4.6.2 Athletic Identity, Self-esteem and Life Satisfaction.....	97
3.5 Discussion.....	99

Chapter 4 – Study 2 .....	109
4.1 Introduction.....	109
4.2 Overview of Study Aims and Hypotheses.....	109
4.3 Method.....	112
4.3.1 Participants.....	112
4.3.2 Measures .....	113
4.3.3 Procedure .....	114
4.4 Results .....	114
4.4.1 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Item Rankings.....	114
4.4.1.1 Total sample. ....	114
4.4.2 Testing for Group Differences.....	116
4.4.2.1 Age and gender.....	116
4.4.2.2 Aspects of achievement.....	119
4.4.2.3 Retirement status. ....	121
4.4.3 Athletic Identity, Self-esteem, and Life Satisfaction.....	122
4.4.3.1 Analysis of group differences.....	123
4.4.3.2 Age and gender.....	123
4.4.3.3 Aspects of achievement.....	126
4.4.3.4 Retirement status. ....	126
4.4.4 Analysing Relationships .....	126
4.4.4.1 Athletic identity and self-identity characteristics.....	126
4.4.4.2 Athletic identity, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. ....	128
4.5 Discussion.....	129
Chapter 5 – Study 3 .....	148
5.1 Introduction.....	148
5.2 Overview of Study Aims and Hypotheses.....	153
5.3 Method.....	154
5.3.1 Participants.....	154
5.3.2 Measures .....	155
5.3.2.1 2003 Survey: Retirement intentions. ....	156
5.3.2.2 2007 Survey: Qualitative retirement questionnaire.....	156

5.3.3 Procedure .....	156
5.4 Results .....	157
5.4.1 Self-identity Characteristics.....	157
5.4.2 Athletic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction .....	161
5.4.3 Reasons for Retirement.....	166
5.5 Discussion.....	172
Chapter 6 – Overall Summary Discussion .....	183
6.1 Overview of Main Findings .....	183
6.2 Applications of Main Findings .....	188
6.3 Limitations .....	192
6.4 Future Research Directions.....	194
6.5 Conclusion .....	196
References .....	199

### List of Tables

Table 1	
<i>SDQ III Factors With Descriptions (Marsh &amp; O'Neill, 1984)</i> .....	35
Table 2	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Total Sample (N = 913)</i> .....	80
Table 3	
<i>Means and Standard Deviations for the AIMS, GEQ, and LSS for all Groups Related to Age and Gender, Aspects of Achievement, and Retirement Status.</i> .....	92
Table 4	
<i>Pearson Correlations Between AIMS and SDQ III for the Total Sample (N = 889)</i> .....	99
Table 5	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Total Sample (N = 310)</i> .....	115
Table 6	
<i>Means and Standard Deviations for the AIMS, GEQ, and LSS for all Groups Related to Age and Gender, Aspects of Achievement, and Retirement Status.</i> .....	124
Table 7	
<i>Number of Participants From Both Genders Within the Teenage, Emerging Adulthood, and Adulthood Groups</i> .....	125
Table 8	
<i>Number of Participants From Each of the Perceived Academic Achievement Groups Within the Athletic Achievement Groups</i> .....	127
Table 9	
<i>Pearson Correlations Between AIMS and SDQ III for the Total Sample (N =307)</i> .....	128
Table 10	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Total Sample (N = 62) in 2003 and 2007</i> .....	158
Table 11	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Total Sample (N = 62) in 2003 and 2007</i> .....	160
Table 12	
<i>Cronbach's Alphas for the AIMS, GEQ, and LSS for the 2003 and 2007 Surveys</i> .....	164

Table 13	
<i>Means and Standard Deviations for the AIMS, GEQ, and LSS for the Retirement Status Groups From the 2003 and 2007 Surveys</i> .....	166
Table 14	
<i>Qualitative Data of Retired Group Participants and Coding Related to Voluntariness of the Transition</i> .....	168
Table 15	
<i>Qualitative Data of Intending Group Participants and Coding Related to Voluntariness of the Transition</i> .....	169
Table 16	
<i>Summary of Main Findings Linked to Relevant Study</i> .....	186
Table E1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for Males and Females</i> .....	248
Table E2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for Males and Females</i> .....	249
Table F1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Teenage, Emerging Adulthood, and Adulthood Groups</i> .....	250
Table F2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Teenage, Emerging Adulthood, and Adulthood Groups</i> .....	251
Table G1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Perceived Academic Achievement Groups</i> .....	252
Table G2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Perceived Academic Achievement Groups</i> .....	253
Table H1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Levels of Athletic Achievement Groups</i> .....	254
Table H2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Levels of Athletic Achievement Groups</i> .....	255

Table I1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for Retirement Status Groups</i> .....	256
Table I2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for Retirement Status Groups</i> ..	257
Table J1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for Males and Females</i> .....	258
Table J2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for Males and Females</i> .....	259
Table K1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Teenage, Emerging Adulthood, and Adulthood Groups</i> .....	260
Table K2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Teenage, Emerging Adulthood, and Adulthood Groups</i> .....	261
Table L1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Perceived Academic Achievement Groups</i> .....	262
Table L2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Perceived Academic Achievement Groups</i> .....	263
Table M1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Levels of Athletic Achievement Groups</i> .....	264
Table M2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for the Levels of Athletic Achievement Groups</i> .....	265
Table N1	
<i>SDQ III Accuracy Item Means and Standard Deviations for Retirement Status Groups</i> .....	266
Table N2	
<i>SDQ III Importance Item Means and Standard Deviations for Retirement Status Groups</i> ..	267
Table O1	
<i>Pearson Correlations Between AIMS and SDQ III for Female (N =171) and Male (N =136) Athletes</i> .....	268



**List of Figures**

<i>Figure 1.</i> The research design. ....	10
<i>Figure 2.</i> AIMS means across the three age groups for Study 1.....	93
<i>Figure 3.</i> GEQ means across the three age groups for Study 1. ....	94
<i>Figure 4.</i> AIMS means for the three perceived academic achievement groups for Study 1...	96
<i>Figure 5.</i> AIMS means for the three levels of athletic achievement for Study 1.....	97
<i>Figure 6.</i> GEQ means for the three perceived academic achievement groups for Study 1. ...	98
<i>Figure 7.</i> AIMS means across the three retirement status groups for Survey 1 (2003) and Survey 2 (2007). ....	163
<i>Figure 8.</i> LSS means across the three retirement status groups for Survey 1 (2003) and Survey 2 (2007). ....	165

### List of Appendices

Appendix A	
Ethics Approval Letter .....	228
Appendix B	
Cover Letter for 2003 Survey .....	229
Appendix C	
2003 Survey Form .....	230
Appendix D	
2007 Survey Form .....	238
Appendix E	
Study 1 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Gender .....	248
Appendix F	
Study 1 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Age.....	250
Appendix G	
Study 1 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Academic Achievement.....	252
Appendix H	
Study 1 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Levels of Athletic Achievement.....	254
Appendix I	
Study 1 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Retirement Status .....	256
Appendix J	
Study 2 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Gender .....	258
Appendix K	
Study 2 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Age.....	260
Appendix L	
Study 2 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Academic Achievement.....	262
Appendix M	
Study 2 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Levels of Athletic Achievement.....	264

Appendix N

Study 2 SDQ III Accuracy and Importance Scale Descriptive Statistics for Retirement Status  
.....266

Appendix O

Pearson correlations for Study 2.....268