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Elite Female Long-Distance Runners and the Impact of Social Media on Their Lives

Professionally and Personally

A Dissertation by

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Irvine, California

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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This degree was a lifelong dream of mine. However, without the amazing team of people in my life, I would not have been able to endure this process. I am so thankful to my mentor, Dr. DeArmas, her strength and leadership is an example I hold dear to my heart. I am thankful for my wonderful Dissertation Chair, Dr. Ryder, her expertise, professionalism and desire to see others succeed is one I admire and strive to be. My Committee, Dr. Hadden and Dr. Avila, cheering me on, encouraging me and giving me wonderful feedback. My amazing cohort, friends and team: Tony, Bonnie, Melissa and Marcia without them, this research would have never been completed. Our cohort was once strangers and we are leaving as life-time friends. This program gave us skills, but it also gave us emotional intelligence to recognize and understand the beauty of relationships. I am grateful for the participants in this study, their bravery, transparency and all around outstanding female athletes representing our sport so well. Thank you to my amazing and supportive family: Dad, Mom, Sister, Brother, and all of my In-Laws. My family was the foundation of this journey and without all of them, this dream would not have come to fruition. I am so thankful for my children, they inspire me every single day to be the best version of myself, and to persevere through every challenging circumstance. I am thankful for my ever-enduring husband. Without him, I could not have perused this degree, had confidence in myself to always believe in myself. Lastly, the support he shows for women, this study and the importance of women in leadership.
ABSTRACT

Elite Female Long-Distance Runners and the Impact of Social Media on Their Lives Professionally and Personally

by Elizabeth Camy

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and discover the perceptions of elite female long-distance runners on the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brand throughout their athletic careers.

Methodology: This study was a phenomenological study that identified and described the lived experiences of 10 elite female long-distance runners and the benefits and challenges of using social media to build a personal brand. The sample of elite female long-distance runners were athletes that had qualified for the 2020 USA Olympic Trails in the marathon.

Findings: The study concluded that female athletes identify that in order to receive sponsorships, financial gain, attention, fame or acceptance that they have to often compromise their self, values or belief system, in order to build a larger following or fan base.

Conclusions: There were six conclusions drawn from this study based on the data. The conclusions focused on the data that yielded building a personal brand using social media has significant barriers for elite women athletes to properly build a name around their sport in which they can be properly recognized for their athleticism.

Recommendations: Explore and identify elite female long-distance runners that do not participate in social media and capture their experiences being an elite athlete without using social media.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .............................................................................1
BACKGROUND .................................................................................................5
Women Athletes ...............................................................................................7
Women athletes and media coverage ..........................................................7
Women in sport media ..................................................................................8
Use of social media to build personal brand ...............................................8
Long-distance runners ..................................................................................9
Women and long-distance running ...............................................................9
Problems with social media and elite runners .............................................10
Theoretical Framework ................................................................................11
Self-Preservation Theory ............................................................................12
Self-Objectification Theory ........................................................................13
Social Comparison Theory ...........................................................................14
Statement of the Research Problem ............................................................14
Purpose Statement .......................................................................................18
Central Question ..........................................................................................18
Research Questions ......................................................................................18
Significance of the Problem .........................................................................18
Definitions ....................................................................................................20
Delimitations ................................................................................................21
Organization of the Study ..............................................................................22

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ...............................................23
History of Print Media ....................................................................................23
Mass Media History ......................................................................................25
History of Women in Media ..........................................................................26
History of Sports Media ...............................................................................27
Gender and Traditional Sports Media .........................................................28
Lack of Female Athletes Represented in Media ..........................................29
Historical Depiction of Male and Female Olympic Athletes in Media .......30
History of Social Media .................................................................................30
Social Media ..................................................................................................31
Athletes and Social Media Use ....................................................................33
Perceived Benefits of Social Media Use ......................................................34
Communication with other athletes ...........................................................34
Interaction with fans ....................................................................................34
Maintaining friendships ...............................................................................35
Avenue for sponsorship ...............................................................................35
Perceived Challenges of Social Media Use .................................................35
Unwanted messages ....................................................................................36
Stalkers .........................................................................................................37
Pressure to post sexual images .................................................................37
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .................................................................53
Overview ..................................................................................................................53
Purpose Statement ......................................................................................................54
Central Question .........................................................................................................54
Research Questions .....................................................................................................54
Research Design ..........................................................................................................54
Method Rationale .........................................................................................................55
Population ..................................................................................................................56
Sampling Frame .........................................................................................................56
Sample .......................................................................................................................57
Sample Selection Process ...........................................................................................58
Participant Recruitment ..............................................................................................59
Instrumentation ...........................................................................................................60
Researcher as an Instrument of the Study .................................................................61
Artifacts ......................................................................................................................62
Validity .......................................................................................................................62
Expert Panel ...............................................................................................................63
Expert 1 .......................................................................................................................63
Expert 2 .......................................................................................................................63
Field Tests ...................................................................................................................64
Reliability .....................................................................................................................65
Inter-Coder Reliability .................................................................................................65
Data Collection ..........................................................................................................66
Qualitative Data Collection .........................................................................................67
Types of Data Collected .............................................................................................68
Data Collection Procedures .......................................................................................68
Interviews .....................................................................................................................68
Artifacts .......................................................................................................................68
Data Collection Procedures .......................................................................................69
Interview Procedure .....................................................................................................70
Data Analysis ..............................................................................................................70
Analyzing the Themes .................................................................................................73
Ethical Consideration .................................................................73
Limitations .................................................................................74
Summary .......................................................................................75

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS ..........76
Overview ......................................................................................76
Purpose Statement ........................................................................77
Central Question ...........................................................................77
Research Questions ........................................................................77
Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures ......................77
Data Collection Procedures ............................................................78
Analysis of Artifacts .......................................................................79
Population ......................................................................................80
Sample ...........................................................................................80
Demographic Data ..........................................................................81
Presentation and Analysis of Data ..................................................83
Brand Identity Theory .....................................................................83
Participants and Social Media Platforms Used ...............................84
Research Question 1 .......................................................................88
  Theme 1: Networking on Social Media ..........................................88
  Theme 2: Appeal to Social Media Audience .................................91
  Theme 3: Share Personal Experiences on Social Media ...............92
  Theme 4: Social Media as a Tool for Inspiration .........................95
  Inspiration for training ...............................................................96
  Inspiration for workouts .............................................................97
  Dietary inspiration ......................................................................97
Research Question 2 .......................................................................98
  Theme 5: Social Media Puts Unrealistic Expectations on Female Athletes ....98
    Gender comparison ..................................................................99
    Body image .............................................................................101
    Pressure to perform ..............................................................102
  Theme 6: Runners are Unable to Showcase Real Self on Social Media ....104
Summary ......................................................................................107

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS ....109
Purpose Statement ..........................................................................109
Central Question ...........................................................................109
Research Questions ........................................................................109
Methodology ..................................................................................110
Population ......................................................................................110
Major Findings ..............................................................................111
Findings Related to Research Question 1 ......................................111
  Finding 1 ....................................................................................111
  Finding 2 ....................................................................................112
List of Tables

Table 1. Artifacts Provided by Participants ................................................................. 80
Table 2. Participant ID, Social Media Used and Date of Interview ............................. 82
Table 3. Participants, Social Media Accounts & Number of Followers ...................... 85
Table 4. Themes, Frequency Counts Sources for Positive Experiences Using Social Media ......................................................................................................................................... 87
Table 5. Themes, Frequency Counts Sources for Negative Experiences Using Social Media ......................................................................................................................................... 88
List of Figures

Figure 1. Population, Target Population, Sample..............................................................59
Figure 1. Social Media Platforms used by Participants Shown in Percentages...............87
Figure 2. Networking Through Social Media.................................................................90
Figure 4. Appeal to Social Media Audience.................................................................92
Figure 5. Participants Using Social Media for Inspiration...........................................97
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*Media can have some of the greatest influences on how society views men and women.* Throughout daily life, mass media sends suggestive messages into awareness at every turn. All forms of media connect images of the different genders, many of which have an impact on having unrealistic, stereotypical, and impractical perceptions of reality (Wood, 1993).

Mass media plays a distinctive and vital role in the influencing of a society where men and women delight in equal rights (Lefkowitz, Shearer, Gillen & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2014). Mass media influences how products are sold, how news is disseminated to the public and how we have fun in life. One area directly impacted by mass media is the sports arena. Another area focuses on how society interprets beauty and sex. A third area recently surfacing in society is that of social media and its connection to women in sports. When combined, sports, women, beauty and sex have a profound influence on how we view our world.

Throughout the history of mass media discriminating stereotypes about women are replicated which exposes them in a variety of sexist ways. In advertising and magazines, women are generally portrayed as young, thin and attractive and are often identified as sex objects (Lefkowitz, 2014). This is especially prevalent in the sports community. In the early stages of development, media were managed entirely by men (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2011). Media images of men and women were designed to men’s preferences. Additionally, the literature suggests that men created images in media to portray women in a way that suited their own reality (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018).
Sports have been around for centuries and have played a major role in society. Research suggests there is a human desire to participate, to endeavor, and to accomplish (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). Sports have allowed athletes to function in a controlled and safe environment to be able to live out these desires in a protected way. Additionally, sports foster a cooperative involvement from participants and provide the opportunity for one to test their ability, skills and athleticism against other competitors. Since the athletic arena offers a place to test one’s skill and athletic ability against competitors, it also allows the individual to experience the gratification of wins and/or the distress of a loss.

During early times, female athletes were not only discouraged from partaking in sports and often were not permitted to engage in specific sports. These discouragements existed either because teams and programs did not exist, or that women were taught that engaging in sports was not a feminine endeavor as a result of mass media’s continued presentation of men in athletic roles (Bernstein & Galily, 2008).

Sports have been a major part of world and American cultures for ages. However, it was not too long ago that females were not allowed to participate in these athletic endeavors. In 1972, Title IX was adopted and became part of the Educational Amendments of 1972. These Amendments prohibit discrimination based on sex in educational programs receiving federal financial assistance. This Amendment resulted in a large increase of women participation in sports across all domains in the United States (Bernstein & Galily, 2008). Title IX has allowed women’s athletics to become a part of modern society and afford opportunities to all regardless of sex. Through Title IX, the acceptance of females in sports has been widely adopted and mandated.
The number of women participating in sports has increased with each decade. For example, the percentage of women athletes participating in the Olympics increased from about 10% in 1948 to approximately 33% in 1972 (Bernstein & Galily, 2008). Additionally, the number of events in which female athletes participated in on the National level also increased from 20% in the 1948 and 1952 Olympics to more than 30% in 1972 (Bernstein & Galily, 2008). The increase in women’s participation in athletics and the Olympics has been pivotal in increasing awareness to equality for women. The Olympics has been recognized for making a positive contribution for women in sports more recognizable in addition to helping women develop and participate in sports clubs and organizations linked around the world. This positive contribution has made women’s athletics more accessible on all levels and platforms (Bernstein & Galily, 2008).

While women are gaining access to sports opportunities more than ever before in history, they are also gaining more access to various forms of media attention. While not on par with males for media coverage, in the past decade women have become more visible on national sports channels, in media advertising and attempts to obtain sponsorships for women sports (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). However, recent studies reveal that the media can be gender biased and media outlets have shared that they do not feel that women’s sports will increase ratings (Petty & Pope, 2019).

Even with increased exposure to women’s participation in sports, an imbalance remains present with current sports media reporting which can be very unbalanced with its exposure being largely of men. Research asserts that women athletes do not attract or have the same quality of media exposure compared to male athletes (Toffoletti & Thorpe,
2018). Furthermore, when female athletes receive attention in a sport it is closely linked to being sexualized and undervalued and female athletes are presented in a subjective nature (Liang, 2011). These types of media representation continue to reinforce gender differences and imbed the opportunity for male athletes in sports, continuing to position women athletes as inferior to a male athletic standard (Liang, 2011).

Social media presence has grown in the past decade. These social media platforms have afforded both men and women athletes the opportunity to create their own brand or presence in the sports arena. While male athlete’s use social media to some extend to promote their brand, recent evidence suggests that women use it more than men (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Several researchers theorize the increase in female use of social media to promote themselves may be linked to the lack of media coverage from more traditional mass media (Wood, Bukowski & Lis, Adolescent Res Rev, 2016)

As a result, many female athletes have decided to take on their own media coverage by participating in social media. Many women feel they can control their professional and personal careers by overseeing personal media promotions (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Current research on the representation of female athletes in the media indicates that while women remain underrepresented across traditional and online media outlets, social media has been a potential tool for them to match this lack of coverage, and even change and modify gender norms and sexual identities in sports (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Existing examinations into professional female athletes and their use of social media tend to come from a sports marketing approach (Liang, 2011). However, findings conclude that women athletes not only use social media to showcase their professional careers but also to emphasize their personal lives (Liang, 2011).
athletes are beginning to advertise sexuality on their social media accounts and seem to place a limited focus on gender actions and expectations shaping the production of self and representation of feminism (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

**Background**

Research on mass media suggests that the sexual media exploitation of women has had a multitude of consequences over time (Gruber & Grube, 2000). These exploits have caused women to have a poor body image, tolerate sexual violence and be at greater risk of allowing more generalized sexism (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2019). Social media as a new vehicle to self-promote has created a vast array of unexpected problems specifically for women. These problems are compounded for women athletes who engage in social media. Current literature reports that many female athletes are portraying themselves in a sexual and provocative manner using personal accounts on social media outlets such as Instagram, and Facebook (Davis, 2018).

Why is this occurring? Social theorists suggest that women view themselves from a different perspective, and sexually objectify themselves while valuing primarily their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). According to Fredrickson & Roberts, (1997) self-objectification can increase through sexualization and tolerance toward this type of media objectification. Most people respond openly to physical beauty or to a pretty face or a desirable physical body. Many researchers suggest the awareness of physical attractiveness or beauty is mainly determined by an individual’s facial attractiveness, while sexual attractiveness is about a sexy body (Kiefer & Scharfenkamp, 2018).
In more recent years, social media has become popular throughout the entire world and people of all cultures and locations are using social media outlets. People are using social media networks such as blogging, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Tumblr, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, Vine, and Snapchat to create their own identities, connect with other people, share viewpoints, ideas, and general feelings (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010).

Beginning in the 2000s social networks eventually became mass media. These media outlets are platforms in which anyone can interact with one another regardless of location. Social media allows individuals to share publicly, personal insights, videos, images, contents and opinions. Moving forward, social media has become a major communication tool for the current world population. There is anticipation this will only increase as more and more people begin to use social networking (Sheet, 2018).

Social media outlets allow women to create and brand their own self-image. Women can now construct their individualized ideas of self and represent this online in any way that they want. The literature reveals that the role of sexuality in these online environments holds a major influence in this self-constructed identity. Some women using social media have discovered that when sexuality is involved, it can impact their views and opinions of themselves (Young & Jordan, 2013). These opinions have found to have huge effects on women’s educational and career choices and goals (Davis, 2018).

There is large amount of evidence revealing that athletes use social media for a range of reasons. Athletes prefer to use social media because they enjoy self-promotion, interacting fans, self-presentation, endorsement opportunities, and for personal use (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Athletes who use social media have a greater
opportunity to present themselves online in variety of ways to allow for visibility that they may not have under other circumstances. Social media allows the user to post their own creative and engaging profile photograph to help capture initial viewers to their site. If the photo is engaging and/or stimulating it can encourage greater exploration from followers to visit a person’s site thus increasing brand awareness (Scott, 2014).

**Women Athletes**

While a rapid increase in the number of women participating in sports has occurred over the past two decades, female athletes are still underrepresented in all media settings (Sherry, Osborne & Nicholson, 2016). In 2012, this began to change when the London Olympic Games when women were heavily showcased. During these Olympic Games most countries sent a female athlete to compete in the games, and close to 45% of all athletes were women (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). Women are delivering extraordinary sport performances, and participation among females is at an all-time high. However, regardless of performance and impressive athletic performances, female athletes are still not afforded the same sport media coverage or attention compared to their male counterparts leading women to seek out their own methods for gaining coverage in social media (Fink, 2015).

**Women athletes and media coverage.** There is a lack of coverage in general for female athletes. However, when women are represented in media they are often portrayed in sexual or objectifying ways. Considering 40-50% of all athletes are women and most elite and professional women’s leagues do not offer lucrative endorsements opportunities. Thus, social media has emerged as a way for women athletes to make a name for themselves (Crawford, 2014).
Research reveals there are two reoccurring themes for female athletes in media. First, women receive dramatically less media coverage than men. Secondly, female athletes that do receive media coverage, are often portrayed in ways that emphasize them as females rather than showcasing them as athletes (Darvin & Sagas, 2017).

**Women in sport media.** Positive images of women in sports demonstrates to society that our nation values women as athletes in our culture. Valuing women in sports is not only good for our stature as a nation but also has positive social results for young girls. According to the Women in Sport Foundation, there are tremendous social, psychological, and health benefits when girls participate in sports. These benefits do not just stop when these girls become young women (Ware, 2011). Additional research supports that 96% of women in CEO or CFO positions had some sort of sport background with 52% of them having participated in sports at the collegiate level. Furthermore, 74% of executive women surveyed agreed that having a background in sports, helped them acquire the skills learned in sports help with their leadership and career abilities. While there is a common belief that viewers are just given what they want to see, and viewers are not interested in women’s sports, the fact remains that women continue to gain ground in their pursuit of media coverage and acknowledgment as women athletes (A Subtler Sexism Now Frames TV Coverage of Women in Sports, 2017).

**Use of social media to build personal brand.** Research has sought to understand how female athletes use social media to build a brand for themselves. Literature has identified that in order to understand how female athletes employ social media that it is first necessary to understand the experiences that female athletes have in and out of the
athletic arena. These understandings reveal that the experiences female athletes have shape and influence their personal and professional lives. Researchers have identified that female athletes are struggling to understand their identity. Female athletes share that in order to build a media brand for themselves they must create and identity what society will accept. This identity is related to feminism characteristics and gender stereotypes. These stereotypes reveal that for a female athlete to be considered in her sport, she must possess masculine traits thus furthering the deep rooted opinions that female athletes must present themselves in a way that their audiences will receive them (Shaller, 2006).

**Long-distance runners.** Long-distance running has been a long-practiced sport by humans since early history. Running has provided humans a way to exercise and maintain health, along with proven physiological and psychological effects. These effects have a lifelong positive impact on human health (Shipway & Holloway, 2010). Positive human health behaviors contribute to living a long and healthy life, and physical exercise is necessary to maintain an active lifestyle. Thus, long-distance running remains a way in which people can overcome health problems such as obesity, unhappiness and other preventable diseases (Shipway & Holloway, 2010).

**Women and long-distance running.** In the sport of long-distance running, a specific category exists called the elite runner. An elite marathon long-distance runner is defined as, an athlete that has run the USA Olympic Trials “B” standard marathon time (2:45:00) or faster (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017). An elite runner is someone who trains almost, if not as much, as a professional, but does not support themselves full-time by running. As a result, elite runners often try to gain attention and sponsorship through the media to gain
financial resources to continue their sport. Thus, many elite runners have turned to social media for this purpose (David & Lehecka, 2019).

**Problems with social media and elite runners.** Research affirms there is a conflict between an ideal runner’s build and the ideal women’s figure from the media’s perspective (Anderson, Reilly, Gorrell & Anderson, 2016). According to recent literature the ideal runner’s body consists of an overall muscular build coupled with having an overall skinny physique conducive to running fast (Sperlich, Achtzehn, de Marées, von Papen & Mester, 2016). Within the endurance sports community it has been thought, the thinner and leaner the build, the faster the runner (Kosteli, Van Raalte, Brewer & Cornelius, 2014). However, the ideal female body stereotype, gathered from society, is having large breasts, a thin waistline, nice hair and face and is overall physically attractive (Matelski, 2011). Runners typically do not typically have bulky or muscular frames causing many runners to be more self-conscious about their bodies because they look and feel like a distance runner and not necessarily what society wants them to be (Hull, 2018).

Media attention has brought light to the great risk of eating disorders among athletes and their sport specific ideals. Previous research reveals there may be a far greater risk for disordered eating in collegiate long-distance running, than in any other population (Coelho, Gomes, Ribeiro & Soares, 2014). A great majority of the runners dressed to compete are grossly underweight and occasionally even lose consciousness before finishing races (Coelho, Gomes, Ribeiro & Soares, 2014). This type of visual representation has had an adverse effect on competitors and peers.
Literature reports that there are implications for women participating in social media in relation to body image (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Additional investigation indicates that long distance runners are prone to distorted body image related problems due to the visual features of their sport and personality characteristic traits, thus, revealing that in a sport such as long-distance running, male and female runners are highly susceptible to developing eating disorders (Jelvehård, Timpka, Bargoria, Gauffin & Jacobsson, 2016).

**Theoretical Framework**

An understanding of social theory helps explain how females perceive themselves in the world and especially as high-profile women athletes. The various theories related to branding and gender theory will help explain how female athletes have been able to exist and thrive in a male dominated sports arena. The four theories presented will provide an understanding of the interactions between female athletes and their association with social media.

**Brand Identity Theory**

Brand Identity Theory (Aaker, 1996) was chosen for this study as a way to focus on how female athletes have been underrepresented in sports media since its inception. There has been little gain in better coverage of women’s athletics over decades, despite its popularity and increase of participation. Brand Identity Theory roots itself in Identity Theory (Stryker, 1987) which is the distinctiveness in which a person classifies themselves. These distinct characteristics in which a person identifies develop over a person’s life and shape their personal image or brand. This theoretical framework attempts to unravel the complicated societal norms of suppressing and objectifying
women in sports media. Brand Identity is important to female athletes because unlike male athletes, women athletes feel that they must create a personal brand and have other means of making money that is not tied to their performance in their sport (Lobpries, Bennett & Brison, 2018). Understanding Brand Identity Theory will help explain and explore the role that identity has played in elite female athletes attempting to make a brand for themselves using social media. Utilizing the Brand Identity Theory, affords female athletes the opportunity to use social media to create a personal brand for themselves to portray and communicate a preferred identity and image to followers and consumers. Research presented by Hardin & Greer (2009) states that despite major changes in sports history with the adoption of Title IV, and increased women’s participation in sports, women still report they feel that sports are primarily for the masculine.

**Self-Preservation Theory**

The social self-preservation theory (SSPT) proposes that humans evaluate their social risk (Rohleder, Chen, Wolf & Miller, 2008). Social self-preservation theory suggests that when a person is faced with what they perceive as a social threat both a psychological and physiological response are triggered by something internal (Kemeny, Gruenewald, & Dickerson, 2004). Decreases in one's self-worth can cause a person to feel shame and these feelings are closely linked to the way that someone views their social self. Self-preservation is a direct instinct of survival. This means that a person aspires for achieving, maintaining, and improving their own life. In the most primitive part of a person one must feel that they are safe from harm and damage. Self-preservation
theorizes that a basic human instinct in order to protect oneself, one must fight against anything that would threaten it (Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1997).

**Self-Objectification Theory**

The objectification theory states that when a person has repeated experiences to sexually objectified material, one can become desensitized to its impact, and therefore, begin to approve self-objectification as a societal norm (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2019). Women then learn to view their bodies from the exterior person's perspective and to offer their own bodies as self-objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification theory states that girls and women are characteristically culturized to assume the observer's viewpoint as a prime view of their physical self (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This perception of self often causes women to frequently monitor their physical body, which can lead to an excess of issues such as body shame, anxiety, and a lessened sense of internal self. (Szymanski, 2019). Reports of these occurrences may help explain many of the risks impacting women. Women are struggling with depression, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders.

Objectification theory goes on to state that the perceptions can be natural experiences that happen in the course of a person’s life (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2019). Current literature suggests that there is a direct experience of sexual objectification, and the second is through the internalization of the sexual experience (Fredrickson & Roberts, 2011). When a female begins to objectify themselves and constantly monitor their appearance, they can develop anxiety around their physical appearance that begins to consume their internal state and in return increase anxiety about their physical appearance (Szymanski, 2011, pp. 16). Researchers suggest that these
challenges can lead to issues such as eating disorders, depression, and anxiety (Riebeck & Bae, 2013).

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals will engage in comparisons with who are like others to gain knowledge of oneself when they are not certain about their position of their appearance to others (Wood, 1989). The social comparison theory asserts that individuals create their own comparisons in hopes to gain more individual success and to improve self-worth (Wood, 1989).

One social cognitive theory provides information for attempting to understand how humans form internal opinions of themselves and how this impacts their behavior (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison theory maintains that humans have the capacity to self-assess and understand how they measure up in comparison to society's standards (Festinger, 1959). When self-objective criteria are not present, people look to their social environments and compare themselves in these situations (Corning, Krumm & Smitham, 2006). Essentially, social comparison is a deeply rooted in human behavior and people seem to come by comparing themselves to others naturally (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002, p. 159).

Statement of the Research Problem

Media in the current era has changed dramatically over the years. However, certain aspects have not changed. For example, women in the media are still unrepresented, and portrayed in ways that are more physical appealing in nature than men, and often represented as sex objects (Wood, 1994). Mass media has become a major part of everyday modern life. Reports state that the average American spends more than
four hours per day watching television and upwards of eight hours using media holistically (Sheet, 2018). Statistics are even higher among emerging adults, those aged 18–25, who report spending upwards of 12 hours per day using social media (Sheet, 2018).

Sports affiliated by the National Governing Bodies (NGB) are usually not for profit and include organizations such as; Team United States of America (USA) and The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). These sports usually receive less media coverage than other USA Professional organization such as; Major League Baseball and the National Football League. The sports affiliated with NGB have reduced marketing opportunities and resources than larger professional sport organizations. These reduced opportunities usually result in the need to seek alternative ways for athletes to gain significance and reach audiences. Social media has become a way for all sport organizations to benefit and specifically, NGB sports seem to uniquely capitalize from social media (Bell, 2011).

An examination of the sports arena reveals there is a common belief that female athletes are inferior and have less athletic abilities in comparison to men (Scheidler, & Wagstaff, 2018). The media has played a large role in reinforcing this stereotype. Throughout the years, there has been improvements toward gender equity in sports, however, women still face tremendous barriers, compared to their male counterparts (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). The media, for example, present sports as if there are masculine sports and feminine sports, and this is reiterated in the traditional roles of male and female athletes (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). Since the inception of mass media, female athletes have been misrepresented and marginalized (Martin & McDonald, 2012).
There is a substantial difference in media coverage of male athletes versus female athletes. Male athletes are typically portrayed in media for their athleticism: strong, toned, highly fit body, and women depicted to the public as a sexual object (Riebock & Bae, 2013).

Mass media has morphed into many different outlets over the years. One of the main ways that fans interact with their favorite athletes and sports teams is through social media. Social media has become a way for individuals to personalize their brand and use it for their professional and personal use. People now have the freedom to market and monitor themselves through personal social media accounts on platforms such as Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Blogs, and other account platforms. The research is clear; social media platforms are particularly popular among women (Sumter, Cingel & Antonis, 2018).

Since the increase of social media users and the global popularity, there has been a significant switch in the way that media is now accessed. What was once traditional media has been supplemented with new media platforms (Vann, 2014). Traditional media is still relevant in our current generation however individuals are also involved in their own types of media coverage. These new forms of media platforms allow for consumers to form opinions, produce content and comment in conversation and have dialogue with almost anyone. The Internet is appealing to users because it is much more personalized that television or traditional media. Fans can choose what they want to look at and explore media posts by other outlets that may not be shown on mainstream media or television. This way fans can direct their passion to other platforms that are catered to their specific social media handle or presences (Vann, 2014). These type of media
platforms have become essential and vital for sports that are not as popular as some of the other professional sport past times. Specialty sports and other interests’ groups can create their own sense of community and cohesiveness that was once not available before the Internet and social media (Vann, 2014).

Literature identifies that regarding their personal lives’ women athletes often emphasize their sexuality on social media yet place limited focus on the expectations that may inspire one to their sport (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). Researchers have wrestled with the best way to effectively explain the complex self-presentation of female athletes that appeals to both male and female athletes, or how the portrayal of female inspiration is used by women competitors and still present women in the correct light of (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Currently, women remain underrepresented in all media forms. Thus, social media has become an essential and vital tool for female athletes to use to create their own identities in sports and to make up for this lack of coverage (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Research has shown that when women are portrayed in the media it is often for their physical attractiveness of professional athletes rather than their athletic talent (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). It is strongly related to stereotypes that might impact the popularity of female professional athletes. It has been increasingly challenging for women athletes to market themselves and gain sponsorships, personal brands and financial stability through social media like much of their male counterparts. In what way can female athletes have access to these opportunities without compromising their athletic physique, talents or femininity without posting photos that will gain more attention, likes, shares, sponsorships, and endorsements? How can women gain more notoriety, appreciation for
their athleticism and endorsement opportunities without objectifying self? Women athletes report pressure to post self-sexualizing photos on social media to gain a following and improve sponsorships. Literature suggests it is important to understand women athletes and their desires for attention and notoriety (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and discover the perceptions of elite female long-distance runners on the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brand throughout their athletic careers.

**Central Question**

What do elite female long-distance runners perceive as the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brands?

**Research Questions**

1. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits of using social media on their personal brand?

2. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the challenges of using social media on their personal brand?

**Significance of the Problem**

Social media continues to grow all over the world. Currently, over three billion people use social media and these statistics continue to climb each year (Smith, 2018). Every second, 11 new users are accessing social media for the first time (Smith, 2018). Furthermore, social media is allowing access to a generation of users that were once less likely to access certain brands and advertisements of traditional mainstream media (Smith, 2018). Over 75% of marketers noticed that social marketing increased their
traffic (Wilson, 2019). In 2016, social media saw upwards of $40 billion spent on advertising on these media platforms (Smith, 2018) and 63% of marketers found social media to be useful for building a loyal fan base (McLeod, 2017). Furthermore, this has changed the landscape of how the world interacts with sports media, and receive updates, and input from their favorite pastimes.

Equally, women continue to grow in their encouragement to participate in athletics, and these numbers will only increase. There is overwhelming inspiration for athletes to use and engage in social media to better market themselves, gain sponsorships, receive financial support, and build a brand (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Existing literature has attempted to understand what these athletes experience professionally and personally using social media. Female athletes use social media for the same purposes as male athletes however, females experience conflicting messages on how to build a brand for themselves and use social marketing as an athlete (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Media has marketed women’s physical attractiveness over their athleticism, and thus devaluing their accomplishments (2018, States Sports Academy Exposure to Women’s Sports). Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016, p. 142) caution that, “athletes should be careful when posting such photos, while the posting of sexually suggestive photos may increase awareness and audience interactivity, this places more emphasis on the media persona component of person brand equity at the expense of professional image.” These examples only further the need to know and understand how social media effects and influences the personal and professional careers of female athletes in their attempt to build a name for themselves, without devaluing their athletic talents, undermining femininity, and jeopardizing their professional image (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).
Most elite athletes who use social media for publicity and marketing rely heavily on this tool to receive notoriety and attention. This in turn, they believe will hopefully lead to sponsorships and endorsement opportunities (Geurin, 2017). To generate publicity, increase promotional opportunities, sponsorships, and endorsements these elite athletes need social media to promote themselves and strive to build a personal brand (Geurin, 2017). It is predicted that the number of athletes using social media will only increase in the future. The number of female athletes participating in sports will only surge and the need to recognize and understand, how to mentor and support elite female athletes using social media for their personal and professional careers expands (Fink, Kane & LaVoi, 2014).

This research would contribute literature to benefitting athletic programs, schools, coaches, mentors and parents to better help and support athletes in their use of social media. This research would also provide insight and experience into the elite female athletes’ perspective of what female athletes are experiencing in their attempt to build a name and brand for themselves in a climate that encourages self-promotion (Shipway, 2010).

**Definitions**

The following are a list of terms that are used throughout this study. These definitions are provided to help bring clarity and understanding to the research.

*Elite female marathon runner.* Defined in this study as a woman that has run 2:45 minutes or below in a marathon race.

*Elite distance runner.* Defined as a long-distance runner that competes at the National level.
Long distance runner. A runner who participates in a running event longer than 3,000 meters.

Personal best. Personal best time in a running event is defined as a time that an individual athlete obtains that is better than any of their previously recorded times.

Selfie. For the purposes of this study a selfie is defined as a photo that an athlete takes of oneself.

Social networking sites. Websites dedicated for people to network with other people. These websites include applications such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Social media. Websites where people can interact with social networking. These websites include applications such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Self-objectification. For the purposes of this study self-objectification is when athletes view themselves as objects, rather than human beings.

Self-presentation. Communication that a person tries to communicate information about oneself to others.

Personal Branding. Personal Branding is the practice of marketing people and their careers as brands. It is an ongoing process of developing and maintaining a reputation and impression of an individual, group, or organization (Lobries, 2014).

Delimitations

According to Patton (2015) delimitations are established to set boundaries for a study. This study was delimited to elite female long-distance runners from California who have social media accounts.
Organization of the Study

This qualitative, phenomenological study was prepared into five chapters with supplementing references and appendices. Chapter I, provided an introduction and background of the study. Additionally, Chapter I showed a glimpse into practices female athletes use to build a social media brand, theoretical framework, impacts of social media on their professional and personal lives. Chapter II provided a literature review and framework of the study. Chapter III describes the methods used in this research, population, sample and interview questions. Chapter IV analyzes the results of the research. Lastly, Chapter V concludes the study with a discussion of the researcher’s findings, conclusions and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides literature that surrounds the purpose of this study. The literature addresses the history of women in the media, the lack of coverage of women in sport media, history of social media, impact of social media on women, and lastly the impact of social media elite female athletes. The literature review begins with a brief introduction to female objectification and leads more specifically to the objectification of women in the media. The review also focuses on how women are viewed as sexual objects. They are highlighted and showcased for their bodies and not for their athleticism. In this review, an additional focus is placed on the lack of coverage for female athletes in media and how social media serves as a tool for female athletes to potentially showcase their sport and athleticism. Finally, the literature review addresses the recent landscape of female athletes using social media to build a media presence and personal brand.

**History of Print Media**

In media, ads have been using women to make a statement in culture or print media dating back to the very beginning of media in print itself. Women are being portrayed in ads in many different forms. We see women advertised in magazines, billboards, bus stops and even in restaurants. Over the past five decades, women in media and sports media has portrayed images of women in ways that it wants women to be viewed (Killbourne, 1994). These images are most often positions of the way that media thinks that women should look. Additionally, media has continuously portrayed the ideal beauty in society through women in all media outlets (Szymanski, & Henning, 2007). Typically, print media has photo-shopped images to showcase the ideal person and it is rarely the actual image of the person (Armstrong, 2013). Most often print images and
commercial images are digitally created and enhanced. These are images are not actual images of people, they are enhanced and created using technology. However, women and girls continue to compare themselves against these enhanced and modified images every day, even though it is impossible for women to naturally look the way the image portrays (Kilbourne, 1994).

When consumers have been studied, participants are not aware of how much of what they are seeing is being processed subconsciously (Kilbourne, 1994). Ads sell and advertise much more than beauty products and consumers are not conscious of how much they are influenced by this (Kilbourne, 1994). These ads are selling people that the ideal image is through physical attractiveness and sexuality.

The research is clear that these images have long lasting impacts on women’s self-esteem and influences how men feel about the women that they are with (Seabrook, Ward & Giaccardi, 2019). When men are shown photographs or see images of women in media, they criticize actual women much more harshly. Women’s bodies are constantly displayed in an objectified manner in media. When women are consistently portrayed as objects in media diminishes and continues to desensitize viewers to the idea that these images are normalized in society (Shaller, 2006). Often in media, women’s bodies are shown only in ways that draw attention to certain body parts, furthering the way that women are objectified in media.

In mass media men’s bodies are infrequently displayed in the same objectified manner as women, but this objectification of men’s bodies has also increased. Typically, men in media are presented as masculine, strong and skilled (Beschara, 2013). Consequently, females learn early on in their youth that they will be viewed and analyzed
for how they look (Szymanski & Henning, 2007). Additionally, females are repeatedly flooded with media that tells them that they will only be accepted in society if they fit into a certain body type image that is perfect and acceptable (Armstrong, 2013). Moreover, modern culture and media ads constantly put out in magazines, billboards and visual media and emphasizes need for women to be thin. Additionally, implying if one is struggling with weight there is always something a person can do or take to modify their appearance (Seabrook, Ward & Giaccardi, 2019).

The way that women are presented in mass media regarding body language, varies dramatically from the way that men are portrayed. Women in media are typically posed in a submissive or cowed way, where men are shown in a distinguished and strong way. Young women very early on in their development learn from media that their sexual appearance is acknowledged and will gain attention in society (Szymanski, & Henning, 2007). Through media, these young women learn that being an object, being sexy and being passive is what will get them accepted and recognized by society (Perloff, 2014).

**Mass Media History**

The main source in which most people receive their information is considered mass media (Easton, Morton, Tappy, Francis & Dennison, 2018). Mass media includes all media forms from newspapers, magazines, television, and Internet. Mass media additionally refers to what is now called, new mass media, such as: social media. Mass media is largely defined because its intent is to reach a massive or large audience. Traditionally, this mass media is the primary means by which the public receives its information. The general population relies on this type of media for their updates regarding political issues, social issues, entertainment, and pop culture (DeFleur, 1994).
Throughout the years, mass media has changed significantly. Historically, before radio, Internet, television, or social media there was the newspaper. For decades, the main way that the public received its information was solely through receiving the newspaper. The radio came after the newspaper and once the radio was recognized in mainstream society, this significantly changed the way the public received news (DeFleur, 1994). Once the radio was accessible to most, news was delivered much faster and much more intensely. After the radio, television was introduced, this changed the way people were able to access media. The radio allowed consumers to now hear their media, where before they had to wait long periods of time and only read about it (Perloff, 2014). Television had a long history in America for delivering the news, entertainment and advertising, however, by the early 2000s the Internet became widely available to most users. With this exciting new communication platform, people could now have control of how they received their news and information. Now, instead of seeking out media and news the general population could access it, manipulate it and create media. This was also a period in history that the early forms of social media began to emerge. Social Media or Social Networking Sites (SNS), have now become one of the primary sources that the public receives and uses mass media (Perloff, 2014).

**History of Women in Media**

Since the beginning of media, women have often been displayed as sexual objects. These images convey messages to viewers that women are not worthy in society, which impacts society’s perception of female worth (Perloff, 2014). Women are historically marginalized and there has been little progress in recent years. In the film
industry, women are often displayed through typical gender stereotypes and hyper-sexualized much more than men (Kumari & Himani, 2015). As viewers intake such gender stereotypes, biases are formed and then classified as normal. Throughout mass media such as: television and print media, women are and have consistently been portrayed in roles in which are typically sexually objective (Beschara, 2013). In early television and print media, women were usually portrayed in traditional homemaker roles and submissive in comparison to men. As media evolved, women were still represented in traditional and passive roles but also objectified in print media, commercials and television. Women were constantly portrayed in media as inferior to men, and softer (Murray, 2016). Consequently, when women are presented more powerful or confident in media, are more commonly have roles of being hard or aggressive in nature. Women have been misrepresented and underrepresented in all media platforms throughout history. Even with the evolution of technology and a seemingly large movement to support women, large discrepancy between women and men in media continues to exist (Lont, 2005).

**History of Sports Media**

There are large promoters and advocates for the support of women’s sports in the media. There have been long discussions in media organizations and throughout the sports arena that women deserve more coverage than they currently receive or have had in the past (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). These advocates propose that the reason women do not have the same coverage as men is largely in part due to money. Mainstream media argues that they do not televise or advertise women’s sports equally to men because it does not bring in high level ratings and viewers when compared with men’s sports (A
Subtler Sexism Now Frames TV Coverage of Women in Sports, 2017). There is conflicting research that conveys consumers feel women athletes do not receive the same coverage as men in media simply because viewers would rather see men over women in sports media (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Shine (2019) states that if women had more sport coverage in the media, their popularity would increase. Furthermore, the lack of coverage in women’s sports compared to men, is more of a cultural norm that has been created based on society’s view of women in general; men are athletic and more dominant (Daniels & LaVoii, 2013). However, the recent evolution in media allows viewers to access women’s sports in many other platforms than mainstream televised sports. For example, women’s athletics are often broadcasted or streamed on internet sites and this coverage is a step in the right direction moving women’s athletics to conventional media (Shine, 2019).

**Gender and Traditional Sports Media**

While there has been significant growth in women’s sports representation, men still receive significantly more attention (Fink, 2015). Despite prior studies dedicated to understanding the underrepresentation of female athletes in the media, little progress has been made toward ensuring that women receive equal coverage. Studies have also analyzed the commentary that is presented during the coverage of male and female sports and has found that there is also a severe discrepancy in the way that female athletes are discussed (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). These studies have revealed that commentators often comment on the level of skill and athleticism related to male athletes, thus contributing to their success and do not do the same for female sports (Fink, 2015). The
exception, however, occurs in sports such as figure skating and gymnastics, where there is much more equivalent coverage of men and women’s events (Cosentino 2017).

**Lack of Female Athletes Represented in Media**

Research supports that positive images, such as sports media have boasted that there have been a significant increase in the coverage of female athletes. However, current research shows that female athletes only receive approximately 4% of worldwide sports media coverage (Lebel & Pegoraro, 2019). In fact, a review of sport media coverage revealed that basic mundane news received more coverage than highlights from women’s sports (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). An abundance of literatures supports that it is important for females and female athletes to see other female athletes positively when represented in sports media. These images of women in sports demonstrates to society that women are more than just images for viewing pleasure and that female athletes are capable competitors (Fink, 2015). Representing female athletes as athletic and capable in media is essential and vital for the future. Presenting female athletes in their craft and in a respectable manner, presents an optimistic outlook for the future of up and coming female athletes (Kane, LaVoi & Fink, 2013). The Women in Sport Foundation identified numerous social, psychological, and health benefits when girls participate in sports; these benefits do not just stop when these girls become young women (A Subtler Sexism Now Frames TV Coverage of Women in Sports, 2017).

Research in the area of sports media claim that these mainstream media outlets are giving viewers what they want to see, and viewers are not interested in watching women’s sports or seeing photos of women in the athletic arena (Hardin & Greer, 2009). Media
outlets further claim they are only supplying the demand based on what they perceive viewers want (Billings & Young, 2015).

**Historical Depiction of Male and Female Olympic Athletes in Media**

A consistent body of evidence reveals that female athletes always have and still receive, significantly less media coverage than men (Fink, 2015). This discrepancy has caused speculation that the difference could be related to the way female athletes are portrayed and represented in sport media (Kane, LaVoï & Fink, 2013). The lack of coverage of female athletes in media does not necessarily mean that viewers are not interested in watching women’s sports. However, there is a body of evidence revealing that the absence of women’s sports coverage is much more likely to contribute to this perception in that that viewers are not interested since networks do not promote or cover women’s sports (Billings & Young, 2015). Conversely, there is little or no research or literature on whether the public would watch women’s sports on television if it were offered.

Kane & Fink (2013) state throughout media coverage of female athletes there has been a focus on the way that females interact and respond emotionally. Female athletes are classically showcased for their friendships with each other, physical appearance, and beauty rather than their athleticism. This coverage goes beyond the pictures and images displayed as female athletes also receive different verbal coverage than male athletes (Fink, 2015). For example, commentators and reporters are much more likely to use language that describe female athletes using phrases that often undermine their athletic achievements and that focus on their physical appearance (Kane & Fink, 2013).

**History of Social Media**
Beginning in the 1990s two forms of social media function became accessible. Users were able to interact with others through instant messaging and blogging technology. Six Degrees is one of the earliest forms of social networking. This was the primary source of social networking until 2001. In 2003, social networking began to change dramatically with the emergence of Myspace. Myspace was used for general social media and users found ways to connect to people from all over the world (Edosomwan, Simeon, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson & Seymour, 2011). In 2005, YouTube was formally introduced, and this became a way for users to show visual content through videos. In the years 2004 and 2006 respectively, Twitter and Instagram were introduced as the new social networking opportunities for users to interact with one another through pictures and text. Social media’s most recent and now largest platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram, have dramatically changed the way the world access various lifestyles, cultures, traditions and the daily lives of others’ (Easton, Morton, Tappy, Francis & Dennison, 2018).

Social Media

Social media has become a prime way for female athletes to showcase themselves, choose how they want to be seen and interact with followers. Female athletes can use social media to promote themselves for endorsement and further sponsorship opportunities, while also promoting their sport. Social media directly intersects the notion of unequal media representation for male and female athletes, as it allows women to advocate for themselves and seek out promotional opportunities that would otherwise be classically allocated to male athletes (Toffoletti, 2018). That said, these opportunities have proposed their own set of limitations and hindrances for female athletes. Previous
studies and literature have described female athletes and the way they are portrayed in the media, as over-sexualized thus covering their personal experiences and athletic accomplishments (Kane, 1996). However, few studies have focused on the perception that the female athlete faces when using social media to bring notoriety and media attention to women’s sports. Furthermore, few if any studies exist in the literature on the impact of using social media on their personal and professional lives (Kim, 2016). There is a need to better understand how individualized sports, such as long-distance running, necessitates athletes’ use of social media platforms to build a brand for themselves in order to create a sustainable life. However, the demand for a strong social media presence is seldom without repercussions in the athlete’s personal and professional life. Thus, this study examines how elite female runners perceive the impact of using social media on their personal and professional lives.

In media, female athletes traditionally receive significantly less media coverage than their male counterparts. Female athletes historically and still in current times receive less than 5% of sports media coverage. Some claim that women’s sports are less entertaining than men’s and is therefore the primary evidence for lack of coverage. The emergence of social media has allowed women to take to these social networks to build a name for themselves, their own personal following, and bring more attention to women’s sports (Vann, 2014).

Recently, sports media has boasted that there has been a significant increase in the coverage of female athletes. However, current research shows that female athletes only receive approximately 4% of worldwide mainstream media coverage (Hardin & Greer, 2009). The issue of unequal representation and coverage of women in media
extends beyond athletics and far beyond the national level. Worldwide, women are underrepresented in all media outlets in comparison to men. Women globally, are less likely to appear on television, radio and in print media (Hardin & Greer, 2009).

Furthermore, when women have been examined in the workforce, there is literature that supports that women are also lacking coverage there too. Additional investigation into this lack of coverage, has revealed that this large discrepancy of women in media can also contribute to continue to put labels on women that are damaging to their image in society (Billings & Young, 2015).

**Athletes and Social Media Use**

Social media is having a great impact on athletes. Social media is allowing athletes to represent themselves in ways that they wish to be portrayed (Toffoletti, & Thorpe, 2018). Additionally, athletes that use social media can now bypass traditional media altogether and access their own fans and create their own personal image. In women’s sports specifically, social media affords female athletes the chance to increase their visibility and change the language used to describe female athletes and women's athletics altogether (Toffoletti, & Thorpe, 2018). This gives female athletes the opportunity to emphasize their athletic competence and abilities. Previous studies have revealed that athletes are using social media for a variety of reasons. For example, athletes engage in social media to interact with fans, self-promote and to communicate with friends and family (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Additionally, elite athletes have shared that they feel social media has benefits, as well as challenges. These perceived benefits and challenges are described in the paragraphs below (Toffoletti, & Thorpe, 2018).
Perceived Benefits of Social Media Use

Guerin (2017) found that elite athletes classify social media as a benefit to their careers. Athletes report that they like using social media to interact with fans they have never met. Social media also allows athletes to communicate with other athletes and stay in contact with competitors. Additionally, athletes report they enjoy staying in contact with other athletes and maintaining friendship despite geographic separation (Geurin, 2017). Social media is also an avenue for potential sponsors to contact athletes. Athletes have also acknowledged that they enjoy the fact that social media allows for followers to see a glimpse into their personal lives (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

Communication with other athletes. One area of benefit that athletes acknowledge is that using social media allows them to communicate and share with other elite or professional athletes (Toffoletti, & Thorpe, 2018). Athletes state that their experiences with social media allows them to both observe and enjoy what their peers are doing on social media. Athletes also suggest that through this combination they can stay current and up to date with competitors. Social media allows athletes to see what other athletes are doing regarding training and athletes state that they are often inspired through social media by other athletes (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

Interaction with fans. Athletes have shared that they desire and enjoy interacting with their fans and followers on social media. Athletes disclose that using social media allows them to share personal information that affords them the opportunity to show follows that the athlete is a lot like the viewer. These interactions also allow the athlete to connect with their fans or followers and have personal interactions or conversations with them via social media. It is well known throughout the popular literature that
building a large fan base for an athlete can also contribute to potential sponsorships and increased visibility in the media (Kang Sun J., Rice Jason A., Hambrick Marion E., & Choi Chulhwan, 2019).

**Maintaining friendships.** Athletes affirm that they enjoy communicating with people from all over the globe. Social media has allowed athletes with busy schedules to maintain relationships and friendships with other athletes and non-athletes alike (Hadley, 2015).

**Avenue for sponsorship.** Using social media gives elite athletes the opportunities to build a brand for themselves Geurin (2017). Studies show that athletes that can successfully build a personal brand for oneself has greater access to endorsement deals and can further their career after their athletic career is over. Further examination done with cross-fit athletes revealed that having social media afforded for self-marketing opportunities and promotion of their sport (Kang, Rice, Hambrick & Choi, 2019).

**Perceived Challenges of Social Media Use**

Elite athletes also experience several challenges through their engagement on the social media platforms. One of the primary challenges is the presence of unwanted, rude, or inappropriate messages from followers. Some athletes have reported that they often respond harshly or inappropriately to dialogue that is directed to them online (Hadley, 2015). Athletes report loss of sleep and unwanted psychological side-affects because of social media interactions (David, Powless, Hyman, Purnell, Steinfeldt & Fisher, 2018). Specifically, female athletes frequently receive hyper-sexualized feedback from followers and even experience obsessive followers that demonstrate behavior that most would classify as stalking. Female elite athletes have shared that they have had followers send
unwanted messages as well as images to their inboxes. Elite female athletes acknowledge that social media can be challenging when others post comments or photos about them on open forums or public comments where they can be seen by anyone (Geurin, 2017).

According to Geurin (2017), elite female athletes feel pressured to post sexual or revealing photos of themselves. These athletes are conflicted with what type of photos to choose, and what is appropriate for their audience. Furthermore, the literature reveals that these elite athletes recognize that athletes that post images with sexual content receive more attention on social media. However, research has revealed that female women athletes feel that when they post sexual objectifying images, these are the images that will be most viewed, and liked by their audience (Geurin, 2017). Examination of athletes using social media revealed that athletes also can make detrimental errors and mistakes when using social media. These mistakes can result in fan loss, upset coaches and even suspension from leagues depending on the content that was shared. Geurin (2017) presents that these challenges are not just easily ignored by female athletes. Many of these challenges persist for long periods of time and cause the athlete a lot of pressure. Furthermore, these challenges are not only just through virtual messaging but can become a risk to the athlete’s well-being. These messages can often be critical of the athlete or interpreted by the athlete as threatening (Castellano, Khelladi, Chipaux & Kupfermine, 2014). These challenges are described below.

**Unwanted messages.** One the perceived challenges shared by athletes is that they receive messages that are either unwanted or inappropriate. Athletes maintain that many times followers will comment directly on photos where everyone can see them. These comments are often harsh or critical of their appearance or of the image in general
(Hadley, 2015). Also, many athletes report they receive private messages with inappropriate content or messages. Additional private messages are often paired with negative comments on photos or public opinions that are opposing something the athlete has done or said (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

**Stalkers.** Athletes have also reported that many times followers become obsessed or fanatic about them and begin to stalk or constantly try and talk or contact them. This type of following makes the athlete feel uncomfortable and often violated (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

**Pressure to post sexual images.** Elite athletes, primarily female athletes have stated that they feel they should post sexual or self-objectifying images. Many female athletes claim that they feel these images will gain them the largest following and ultimately lead to more financial success and opportunities (Guerin, 2017). Research has revealed that media is more sexually suggestive when females are the focus. Female athletes also have followed this trend by posting more sexually revealing photographs of themselves. Females are apt to engage in this practice more than their male counterparts. Additionally, female athletes are more inclined to post photos that glamorized themselves. Guerin (2017) declares that these types of personal postings may bring the athletes more ‘likes’ or ‘views’ on their media accounts, but may have lasting impacts on their personal brand, sponsorships, and other opportunities. Studies have demonstrated that if female athletes continue to self-objectify, it will be hard to give female athletes the respect and credit that they deserve (Castellano, Khelladi, Chipaux & Kupferminc, 2014). Guerin (2017) highlights that there still appears to be a societal problem with women and sport equity that still exists today.
Elite Athletes and Social Media

More than ever elite athletes are using social media for personal use, increase their visibility and share their experiences with followers (Antonucci, Della Porta & Venditti, 2019). Elite athletes are athletes that are defined by the level in which they compete. An athlete is considered elite, when they are competing in their sport at the national level (Swann, Moran & Piggott, 2014). In today’s media driven environment, an increased demand exists for elite athletes to build a strong online presence. Athletes are expected to showcase themselves and maintain a following that is pleasing to their endorsements or sponsors. These athletes are constantly providing numerous updates on social media that are both personal and professional. Athletes are using social media platforms such as: Facebook, Twitter, Strava, Snapchat and Instagram whereby they engage with fans and other followers (Shank & Lyberger, 2014).

As stated throughout this literature review, there is an indication that social media is a way for athletes to advertise and showcase themselves as brands (Geurin, 2017). These elite athletes feel increased pressure to build their name through social media posts that gain attention through hashtags, likes, and shares. Female athletes report that many of the photos most frequently liked and shared are images that are sexually revealing and self-objective in nature (Davis, 2018).

Athletes of all levels are encouraged to use social media when it will benefit their visibility, sponsorship, and prominence of their sport (Thompson, Martin, Gee & Eagleman, 2014). Athletes have found benefit in their personal and professional careers by using social media to build an online presence (Antonucci, Della Porta & Venditti, 2019). However, when developing an online presence Vendemia, and DeAndra (2018, p.
state, “Wanting attention on social media was the strongest predictor of posting self-sexualized photos, and indeed, more sexualized photos garnered more likes on Instagram than less sexualized photos, and women who post more sexualized photos tend to get more likes in general and gain more friends or followers on both Instagram and Facebook.” Women athletes report pressure to post self-sexualizing photos on social media to gain a following and improve sponsorships (Karsay, 2018). Tovares (2010) described athletes having a variety of competing voices and one that cause internal conflict. These narratives often represent conflicting views of the athlete, the athlete’s performance, and how others view the athlete. Athletes often use social platforms to amplify personal status. Building status brings more followers and more notoriety; thus, users with a strong social media presence become much more recognized (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2019).

In order to effectively manage their public image, users must present themselves as friendly and pleasing to their followers. Through online networking sites, fans can share and express their affection for their favorite team or athlete, which builds passion, hope, and connection (Eagleman, 2013).

Using Social Media to Build a Personal Brand

A human personal brand is defined as a person that is well recognized and they are used to communicate or represent themselves as a marketing subject (Lobpries, Bennet & Brison, 2018). Researchers have sought to understand how female athletes use social media to build a brand for themselves (Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia & Agyemang,
2018). Literature has identified it is necessary to understand the experiences that female athletes have in and out of the athletic arena. This understanding reveals that the experiences that female athletes have shape and influence their personal and professional lives. Researchers have identified that female athletes are struggling to understand their identity (Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia & Agyemang, 2018). Female athletes share that in order to build a media brand for themselves they must create an identity that society will accept. This identity is related to feminist characteristics and gender stereotypes revealing that for a female athlete to be considered in her sport, she must possess masculine traits (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). This furthers the perspective that female athletes must present themselves in a way that their audiences will receive them in a positive way.

Sports has always had a focus on masculine appearances. This focus on masculine characteristics has had implication in the way that society views women in sports (Sobal & Milgrim, 2019). When female athletes do not follow hyper-feminine characteristics, they run the risk of being defamed (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). There is often a combination of athletic success and sex appeal that come together to create a profile that creates the persona of what consumers want to see in order to market the athlete to the media. These successful female athletes are not recognized for their athletic achievements alone; but rather for their image (Lobpries, 2014). The research is clear; social media has allowed women to receive sponsorship deals. Thus, having these media accounts affords the female athlete by using social media to promote the sponsoring brand. Athletes have expressed that using social media to advertise for their sponsors can be a very natural and way to give back. Usually, endorsements come with social media contracts in which the athletes must abide by (Filo, Kevin & Lock, Daniel & Karg, Adam, 2015). Companies
sponsoring athletes have specific guidelines in which athletes must abide by contractually or are at risk having their contract terminated. These guidelines range from appearance fees, basic ethical expectations, obligations on and off sport and social media guidelines. Social media guidelines for elite athletes vary from the sport the athlete is involved in to the level in which they compete at (Bireline, 2014).

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) protecting American consumers has its own set of rules that cover marketing and endorsement agencies regarding social media contracts for professional athletes. Each individual company can have its own contract with athletes regarding specifics of what should be shared on social media. However, the FTC has specific guidelines and ethical principles that must be followed by all parties (McKelvey & Masteralexis, 2011). More specifically the FTC, protects consumers from marketers or endorsees from potential harm that may be caused through advertisement. These guidelines are in place to ensure that the athlete that is endorsing a product, brand or company is honest about what they are representing.

**Female Athletes and Media**

There is conflicting qualitative evidence from female athletes and their perception of media coverage (Fink, 2015). Some female athletes do not feel they are misrepresented in media and feel that they are acknowledged for their athletic achievements. There is also a significant amount of quantitative and qualitative research that span over decades addressing the inadequacy of media coverage for women athletes (Fink, 2015). Furthermore, the findings yield that women are not only underreported but objectified and not properly displayed for their athleticism (Linder & Daniels, 2018).
Regarding building a personal brand, female athletes have shared that it is critical to obtain and maintain sponsorship deals as a professional athlete. In one study (Guerin, 2017) a female athlete shared that she felt it was a not just important to have a personal brand but a positive personal brand on social media outlets that is unique and authentic. Additionally, athletes have shared that building a personal brand on social media takes time and can take time outside of training and competition. Social media can be demanding, and athletes must think carefully about what they post and what they say. These self-portrayals on social media can take a lot of thought and time for the athletes to properly represent themselves (Guerin, 2017).

Often female athletes are role models for other women and younger girls. It is important that these athletes portray themselves in a way that is equal to male athletes and be perceived as positive. Social media is a way for these female athletes to create an image that is healthy and representative of females in sport media that can motivate and inspire the future generations (Perotti, 2009).

**Female Athletes and Social Media**

In western society, there is consistent research that overwhelmingly supports the existence of a strong male bias in sports media. Across all sports, men’s athletics draws significantly more coverage than women’s sports. Further investigations into coverage of women’s sports has uncovered that not only are women significantly unrepresented in media, but when they are in media they are glorified for visual reasons. Throughout history, female athletes have been marginalized and underrecognized for their athleticism. Consequently, when interviewed and questioned, female athletes have shared that image is very important for their careers. The more popularity an athlete has, the
more endorsements and financial opportunities they will have after they are no longer participating in their sport (Kiefer & Scharfenkamp, 2018).

Such findings have showed that social media has provided a way for female athletes to represent themselves in the way that they would like to be seen. These opportunities have led female athletes to gain more media coverage, promote women’s athletics and advertise themselves in their sport. Female athletes have identified that they like to use social media for professional and personal reasons. Female athletes feel that they can personalize their athletic brand, build followers and share personal preferences through social media as well.

Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016) found that male and female athletes both used social media for personal branding. However, their approach to building a personal brand was different. Findings yielded that female athletes posted more photos of themselves than did male athletes. Female athletes also posted more photos in which they were in the photos than male athletes. Secondly, female athletes more commonly posted photos of themselves in non-sport related activities and sexually suggestive images (Kiefer & Scharfenkamp, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

An understanding of various theories related to branding and gender theory will help explain how female athletes have been able to exist and thrive in a male dominated sports arena. The four theories presented will provide an understanding of the interactions between female athletes and their association with social media.
Brand Identity Theory

Brand Identity Theory (Aaker, 1996) was chosen for this study to focus on how female athletes have been underrepresented in sports media since its inception. There has been little gain in better coverage of women’s athletics over decades, despite its popularity and increase of participation. Brand Identity Theory roots itself in Identity Theory (Stryker, 1987) which is the distinctiveness in which a person classifies themselves. These distinct characteristics in which a person identifies develop over a person’s life and shape their personal image or brand. This theoretical framework attempts to unravel the complicated societal norms of suppressing and objectifying women in sports media.

Brand Identity is potentially important to all athletes. Athletes have reported they feel they must create a personal brand and have other means of making money that is not tied to their performance in their sport (Lobpries, Bennett & Brison, 2018). Understanding Brand Identity Theory will help explain and explore the role that identity has played in elite female athletes attempting to make a brand for themselves using social media. Utilizing the Brand Identity Theory, affords female athletes the opportunity to use social media to create a personal brand for themselves to portray and communicate a preferred identity and image to followers and consumers. Research presented by Hardin & Greer (2009) states that despite major changes in sports history with the adoption of Title IX, and increased women’s participation in sports, women still report they feel that sports are primarily for the masculine. Title IX is a law under The Educational Amendment of 1972, that prohibits any university, school, college or educational system
that profits from federal compensation to discriminate anyone because of their sex (Brice & Palmer, 2017).

**Self-Presentation Theory**

Self-presentation theory describes the way people behave, thus impacting the way they are perceived. Furthermore, this behavior can strategically strive to meet the audiences’ expectations of a person that is trying to self-present which a specific goal in mind. Baumeister (1987) defines self-presentation in two different ways: 1) to match an audience’s expectations or preferences, 2) under self-construction, and to match ones’ expectations of their own self. These two primary self-presentation categories can be identified as front-stage and back-stage. In front-stage behavior people tend to follow rules and norms in order to perform. In back-stage behavior, people are much more candid and relaxed with their audiences. Self-presentational motivations come from a basic human desire of wanting status and popularity. These self-presentation motivations stem from important needs of human social life (Baumesiter,1987). Goffman (1959) states that people want to have control over their images and interactions. It is through controlling these images and presentations that people can guarantee the presentation of only the self-presentation they want to portray (Young-Lee, 2018).

The Self-presentation theory is functional in both the academic and sport related fields. Through Internet use, people have access to new media. Goffman (1959) suggests that self-presentation is more than understanding oneself. Self-presentation is the way a person presents oneself to others. This presentation of self is for the self-presenter to attempt to control or manipulate in which the way that they are viewed by others. Therefore, one of the key principles in self-presentation is how a person wants to be seen
or viewed. In self-presentation a person has characteristics that they want to portray themselves. These behaviors in presentation could be related to how a person wants to be idealized and are often multifaceted, depending on the audience that the person is presenting to. Goffman (1959) further introduces a deeper part of self-presentation referred to as front-stage presentation. In front-stage, a person wants to be viewed in a situation where maybe they are not as comfortable with the audience and want to be viewed in a positive way or less authentic to oneself. Goffman (1959) also introduced the idea of back-stage where a person may feel that they do not have to perform or can be more candid with their audience. Additionally, in self-presentation a person may use techniques which they use to present themselves to others. A person may use flattery or words in order to influence the person that he or she is talking to. Through self-promotion, a person may want to seem successful or competent and through wanting this success a person may brag or appear arrogant (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

**Self-Objectification Theory**

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) claim that a society accustomed to sexual objectification often also practices self-objectification. This translates into a cultural normalization that can eventually lead to health risks for the victims. Furthermore, women are sexual objects in society and seen for pleasure instead of being viewed as figures who add true value to society (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). There are two specific areas that are identified: objectification through interpersonal or social encounters and through media exposure (McKay, Tanjare', 2013). Self-objectification is referred to when a person uses themselves or views themselves as an object instead of a human being. Typically, self-objectifying terms are used when discussing sexual objectification and
gender. Generally, women and men struggle with self-objectification. However, self-objectification is more common among women. Toffoletti & Thorpe (2018) report findings of their participants of Instagram posts were self-objectifying. In these posts, self-objectification related to posting objectified photos and receiving more feedback from viewers is motivating for women to continue to post self-objectifying images (Toffoletti, & Thorpe, 2018). Society perpetuates the objectification of people and especially women. Objectification often appears in media when a body of a person is shown but not the face. These types of images cause one to have unrealistic expectations of what one’s body should look like, and self-objectification is a manifestation of this (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Women begin to internalize these messages and create a cycle of objectification to self-objectification. Both general media and social media factor into these cycles as well. Studies conducted have revealed that media has tendencies to over-sexualize images. These overly sexualized images have profound impact on females and the way that they view their bodies. The more women are exposed to these types of images, the more that it normalizes the behavior of objectification and then are more inclined to self-objectify (Mu & Lennon, 2018).

Social media is abundant in images of women self-objectifying. People on social media can portray an image that is different than their real lives. On social media, people can put out images that are edited, flawless, and controlled. This contributes to people viewing themselves as objects and thus internalizing these behaviors and planting the lies in their subconscious (Mu & Lennon, 2018). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), described the self-objectification theory as a theory that is closely linked to sexual objectification. The practice of self-objectification can perpetuate a cycle of sexual objectification and
can have a lasting impression on women. Current culture continues to identify women as sex objects and thus creates or normalizes the idea that these images are objects for male viewing (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Conventional social comparison is a person comparing oneself to an immediate network such as: friends, co-workers or family. In media culture, this social comparison may refer to individuals comparing themselves to a celebrity, influencer or online person. Again, these comparisons may have positive impact on a person causing them to be inspired and, more productive, or have negative consequences based on how the person perceives themselves in comparison (Vogel, Rose, Roberts & Eckles, 2014).

**Social Comparison Theory**

People compare themselves to those they believe are like them. This allows people to evaluate themselves. Festinger (1957) believes that we compare ourselves to others because there is not another way for humans to compare themselves to something. Social comparison can either boost one’s self-image or harm it. There are two types of social comparison: downward and upward comparison. Downward comparison states that a person usually elevates themselves above another person. Upward comparison refers to comparing oneself with someone who is superior. Festinger (1957) goes on to explain that humans put themselves into categories to strategically practice downward and upward comparison. The most common categories are: gender, age and race.

There is something instinctive in humans that causes them to compare themselves with others. These comparisons can have positive or negative outcomes. Social comparison can have various outcomes that fulfill different human needs. Humans compare themselves to others when making decisions, to find inspiration, and to conduct
meaningful self-evaluations. Social comparison can have a positive impact on a person when the comparisons are constructive, and the person feels adequate. However, when an individual is comparing oneself to a person that he or she desires to be like, one may begin to feel inadequate; thus, a person may begin to have lower self-esteem, self-image, and begin to question their own identity (Vogel, Rose, Roberts & Eckles, 2014).

**Mentorship and Coaching**

A review of the surrounding research supports that one reason women’s sports are under-represented in media is that women’s athletics are of less interest than men’s athletics (Schultz, 2018). There is a notion that has become pervasive throughout media communities that permits the idea that female athletes are not equal to men. When women’s athletics are reported on, it is much more likely that the female athletes are highlighted for their bodies and physical appearance rather than their sport (Shaller, 2006). This media attention extends from amateur sports to professional sports and into youth sports as well. Reviewing the studies and examining how female athletes are represented in online media suggest that there are traditional patterns in which way female athletes have been portrayed in media. These portrayals suggest that male athletes continue to receive most of the media attention and highly impact the way that society views female athletes (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Geurin (2016) makes strong recommendations on how athletes could potentially approach using social media to market themselves, converse with friends and connect with fans. This marketing approach is done through recommendations that athletes establishes clear goals in what they are trying to accomplish using social media (Geurin, 2016). Using goals to establish motivations, can help athletes professionally and
personally handle their social media interactions. These guidelines that the athlete establishes for themselves can align with NGB, endorsement commitments and help the athlete use social media in a way that will be the most beneficial for themselves for their sport and personally.

In recent years, social media has become a way for amateur and professional athletes, with varying abilities, to engage in social networking with other athletes and gain opportunities at levels, which were previously only afforded to the top male athletes. Additionally, social media has allowed young student athletes to join in on a media platform participation that was once reserved for only professional athletes. There are many avenues in which an athlete can participate in social media. Athletes of varying ages are using social media to build their brand, converse socially and advertise their sponsorships and teams (Eagleman, 2013). However, many organizations are limiting the capabilities that their athletes have with accessing social media.

Most institutions have social media policies, and professional organizations are encouraging athletes to seek advisement, and mentorship before posting on their social media accounts. This support system is in place to help athletes monitor content and promote the prevention of irreversible implications that come from posting public messages and photos. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), is very explicit and strict about the content that it tolerates athletes participating under their jurisdiction to post. The NCAA does not allow any content that is sexually explicit, nor any content that is racially or ethnically insensitive. These types of posts are in direct violation of the NCAA rules, professional sport leagues, and other contractual obligations that athletes sign in relation to their sport organization. As a result, athletes need more
support and guidance for appropriate interactions and brand building on social media. Similarly, to being coached in a sport, athletes need coaching and mentorship on the most effective and productive ways to market themselves, their team and their brand in a way that is respectable, and reputable to their sport and gender (Han, Dodds, Mahoney, Schoepfer & Lovich, 2015). This research would further suggest that coaches, mentors, teachers, and parents need to also educate athletes regarding healthy weight management due to the high volume of concerns around media and concerned with the portrayal of self-image online (Salafia, Jones, Haugen, & Schaefer, 2015).

**Summary**

Chapter II summarized and described the history of media, social media, the gender discrepancy of female athletes represented in media and the objectification of women in media. Considering that 40% of all athletes are women, and only 2-4% of women athletes are represented in the media raises a concern for women athletes desiring to promote their brand (Lebel, Pegoraro & Harman, 2019). This huge discrepancy spans over decades and thus furthers the need for better promotion of female athletes in the media. However, objectifying and showcasing women in sexual ways, does not increase interest or respect for women and girls nor female sports; in fact, the primary fans of women’s sports react negatively to this type of promotion (Sheadler & Wagstaff, 2018).

More in depth research has exposed that men and female athletes alike prefer to see media exposure, and photos of women depicted in their sport rather than in ways that sexually objectify them (Shaller, 2006). Women athletes continue to take to social media and post pictures of themselves in sexually objectifying ways and have shared that when
they post sexually objectifying images that they receive more likes and feel they are more likely to receive endorsements and notoriety.

**Synthesis Matrix**

The researcher created a synthesis matrix to organize and support the literature provided in this study. The synthesis matrix offered specifies the organized framework that allowed the researcher to follow and gain oversight to the data related to the existing research. The synthesis matrix was additionally designed and used to help provide nonbiased connections. Furthermore, the synthesis matrix provides support and connection between elite female athletes and social media. The matrix is specified in Appendix A.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

“The emergence of social media has allowed women to take to these social networks to not only build a name for themselves but also bring more attention to women’s sports (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018)”

Overview

This study focused on elite women distance runners and the impact that social media has on their professional and personal lives. This study sought to better understand and describe the experiences that elite female athletes have using social media.

Chapters I and II of this dissertation, covered the initial overview of the topic and provided background support for recognizing how media has become a huge part of society. More in depth details were provided on how traditional media evolved to new type of media that incorporates social media. Furthermore, how social media impacts the professional and personal lives of female athletes was explored. The literature reports that many female athletes have decided to take on media coverage on their own by participating in social media. These female athletes feel they can control their professional and personal careers by overseeing their own media promotions.

Previous literature looks at the lives of professional female athletes and their use of social media. Studies have usually focused more on the way that an athlete is marketed in sports (Liang, 2011). Studies have focused on the perceived benefits and challenges of elite female athletes and social media. Consequently, findings conclude that women athletes not only use social media to showcase their professional careers but to also emphasize their personal lives (Liang, 2011). The purpose of this study sought to use qualitative interviews to gather stories from elite female long-distance runners of their
lived experiences as an elite athlete and using social media. Additionally, this study aims to describe how social media impacts their professional and personal lives.

Chapter III describes the methodology used in this phenomenological study. The phenomenological research is explained in this chapter, including the method and approach used to identify the population and sample, as well as the instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and discover the perceptions of elite female long-distance runners on the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brand throughout their athletic careers.

**Central Question**

What do elite female long-distance runners perceive as the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brands?

**Research Questions**

1. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits of using social media on their personal brand?
2. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the challenges of using social media on their personal brand?

**Research Design**

This qualitative study will explore the experiences of elite female long-distance runners and attempt to capture their stories and how social media influences and impacts their personal brand. This phenomenological method was selected to capture the stories of elite female athletes and their attempt to market themselves, and the use social media
for their personal brand. This methodology allowed the participants to tell their own stories and attempted to understand how elite female long-distance runners use social media platforms to acquire endorsements, sponsorships, followers and fans for their professional and personal use. Using a phenomenological framework, the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of elite female long-distance runners and how they are impacted by social media not just professionally, but also personally.

Qualitative research provides the opportunity for deep inquiry and rich descriptions with a focus on the perceptions of the study participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) state that qualitative studies explore the process in examining insights followers to provide explanation for that behavior. This is further explained by Patton (2015), in that qualitative studies are appropriate for capturing the lived experiences of female runners, and how social media impacts their professional and personal lives.

Method Rationale

Qualitative research method was chosen based on its way of extracting deep meaningful stories to help represent an experience being held by an individual. Qualitative research in phenomenological studies is used when the researcher is looking to extract meaning from a phenomenon experienced by a person or group of people (Patton, 2015). Due to the nature of the experiences of elite athletes using social media to interact with their stakeholders it is important that the researcher use qualitative methods to allow each participant to share their individual story to yield the best results.
Population

A population is a group that “conforms to specific criteria” in which the research results can be generalized (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 129). The population for this study is all female long-distance runners that have run United States Olympic Qualifying Standard in the marathon with a time of two hours and forty-five minutes or less and reside in The Unites States. The population of this study was 350 elite female long-distance runners according to The United States Track and Field Olympic Marathon Committee press release (15 October 2019).

Sampling Frame

Denscombe (2014) defined the target population as a small percentage of a total population. This percentage is then narrowed to specifically define a small sampling frame of participants that fit the criteria of the study. A sampling frame refers to the participants carefully chosen from the overall population. The sampling frame is then used from which the researcher can study, and a further sample can be drawn (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Interviewing all the elite female long-distance runners in The United States is not attainable due to the large range of the country, number of runners and time that would be needed. The sampling frame for this study was female long-distance runners with a two hour and forty-five-minute marathon or less, 18 years of age or older living in California and with an active social media account. According to The United States Track and Field Olympic Marathon Committee press release there were approximately 99 elite female long-distance runners in California (15 October 2019) and of those approximately 90% participate in social media. Therefore,
the target population for this study included approximately 90 elite female long-distance runners.

**Sample**

The group of participants from whom the study data is collected is the sample (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sample is a representation of the larger population and is selected to meet specific criteria allowing the researcher to generalize the results of the study to a larger population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The reason behind qualitative sampling is one of the ways to receive a wide, and deep range of information. This data provides in many cases large amounts of information (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sample for this study consisted of 10 elite female long-distance runners that have run two hour and forty-five minutes or less in the marathon. Each participant of the study has run the standard, is 18 years of age or older, resides in California and is a current user of social media.

McMillian and Schumacher (2010) states that “there are only guidelines for qualitative sample size, not quantitative; Qualitative samples can range from 1 to 40 or more” (p. 328). Patton (2015) agrees with the former authors in they acknowledge that in qualitative research “the sample should depend on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the inquiry and what can be done with the available time and resources” (p.310).
Figure 3. Population, Target Population, Sample

Sample Selection Process

Purposive criterion sampling method was used for efficiency and accessibility of subjects to collect the data in order to answer the research questions. The sample for this study was 10 participants and is an “expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 2015, p. 314). Criterion sampling uses a list of criteria which respondents must meet in order to be included in the study (Patton, 2015). This sampling method narrowed the number of individuals that would be considered for this study. The criterion used to define the subjects was:

1. Female elite long-distance runners
2. 18 years of age and over.
3. Currently reside in California, USA.
4. Current active user of social media.
5. Marathon time of 2-hour 45 min. or less in the marathon.
6. American Citizen

For the purposes of this study 10 female elite long-distance runners were selected purposive sampling method (Patton, 2015). This sampling procedure allows for the researcher to recruit participants that met the sampling criteria. The researcher then chose the first respondents to interview for the study. These runners were selected through a process by which a letter was created asking female participants to partake in the study (see Appendix B). This letter was sent over social media networking sites, email or direct inbox on Instagram messenger. Participants for the study were located using the following measures:

1. The researcher used the Olympic Trials website dedicated to participants in the marathon to locate qualifiers in California and access their social media information.

2. Using this information from the website, the researcher sent a letter (Appendix B) to potential participants asking them to participant in the study.

**Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through a series of communications over social media. First, potential athletes meeting the criteria of the sample were selected and sent online communication to see if the potential participant was interested in participating in the study. All participants were located through social networking sites. After participants were identified and confirmed for interviews, the researcher set up times to interview them.
Instrumentation

Patton (2002) refers to three techniques used in collecting qualitative data, interviews, observations, and artifacts. The researcher determined that interviews and collected artifacts would best capture the themes and patterns of the perceptions of elite female runners on the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brand throughout their athletic careers.

Instrument

Semi-structured interviews are designed to allow the participants and the researcher to have dialogue rather than strict interview questions (Leech, 2002). This study used qualitative data analysis, and a qualitative interview instrument was designed based on previous literature presented in the review. The instrument utilized a combination of open-ended questions with follow up probes to enable the researcher to conduct more of a conversation rather than a rigid interview (Appendix F). The researcher also created an interview script for each interview to ensure quality (Appendix G). The interview instrument included the exact question that would be asked, along with directions on how to proceed with the interview. The literature review, synthesis matrix, and scripted interviews all signify the reliability of this study.

Prior to beginning the actual study and before the field test interview, the researcher asked an academic professional to review the interview questions, process and protocol. The expert used in this phase of the instrument development has an earned doctorate degree and has participated in many qualitative research studies. The expert reviewed and provided feedback on the content and organization of the interview
questions. The researcher then met with the faculty advisor to review the expert’s feedback and finalize the interview instrument.

**Researcher as an Instrument of the Study**

The researcher is a critical part of qualitative research and this level of connection to the study makes the researcher an instrument within the study itself. This also suggests that the researcher’s features have the probability to influence data collection (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). The reality-based orientation of qualitative research makes it especially vulnerable to this bias. The bias suggests that there possibly could be intentional and unintentional influence of the researcher on the conclusions of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Considering that having unintentional bias is impossible, precautions have been in place to protect the validity of the study (Patton, 2015).

**Possible Bias**

One possible area of bias arose due to the researcher’s involvement in the long-distance running community and her association as an elite female marathon runner. Prior to conducting the research, precautions were assembled into the study to limit the impact of the researchers’ possible bias on the research. Therefore, procedures have been intentionally calculated to properly address to some of the probable biases related to this study. Through carefully crafted and conducted open-ended interview questions these biases will be reduced. Furthermore, this information can be found in the validity and reliability section of Chapter III. The researcher also currently participates in the frequent competition with many other elite long-distance runners and uses social media to help build a brand for herself as well. Although, none of the study participants are personal
friends of the researcher, they were all connected in one way or another in the running community through social media. The researcher brought bias to the study from her own running experiences using social media, however, prior recognition of this bias allows the researcher to take steps to alleviate its influence.

**Artifacts**

Artifacts are tangible manifestations that describe people experiences, knowledge, actions and values (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 361). After the interviews were completed the researcher requested each participant in the study to provide any artifacts that could help or better explain the information shared during the interviews. Artifacts requested included copies of photos posted online, copies of number of followers, numbers of ‘likes’ for postings and sample comments both positive and negative generated from various postings. Additionally, the researcher reviewed the participants’ social media sites to identify artifacts that could confirm information expressed in the interviews.

**Validity**

The validity relates to the credibility demonstrated in this study; whether represented elements to this study are trustworthy. Validity in qualitative research primarily refers to whether the measurement is measuring what it is supposed to measure (Patton, 2015). The validity of this study heavily depends on the careful and appropriate formation of the instruments (Patton, 2015). The perspective of this study and the acknowledgement of the researcher being the primary instrument, the validity of this study, is also dependent on the skill of the researcher. The researcher had the opportunity to practice interviewing skills and make revisions during field testing. The researcher was also able to determine
if the interview questions and prompts allowed participants to describe their experiences in depth in order to gain rich data. Feedback received from field test participants enabled the researcher to determine if the questions and prompts and/or length of the interviews needed to be modified.

**Expert Panel**

An expert panel comprised of two people was established to further review and refine the interview questions to ensure alignment with the research questions. The two experts were chosen based on their knowledge of qualitative research methods. In addition, one expert also possessed a qualitative research background in the subject matter of women’s studies. This process helped guarantee the implementation process of interviewing, and the supporting process of understanding how the participants may feel responding to the research questions.

**Expert 1.** The first expert holds a doctorate from Brandeis University and is well versed in women studies. This expert is currently holding a faculty position at California State University, Sacramento. This expert has experience with phenomenological studies and qualitative research.

**Expert 2.** The second expert holds a doctorate from California Lutheran University and has extensive experience with qualitative research. This expert has worked in education for over 20 years and has done her own personal and professional scholarly research.
Field Tests

A field test interview was performed prior to the actual procedure of the research study. The object of this field test interview was to achieve responses regarding both interview questions, and to analyze the procedures that the researcher used during the interview. During this pilot interview there was an expert and observer present. These additional people were to provide validation to the interview process and to also analyze the process that the researcher was using during the interview procedure.

The researcher conducted the interview field test with an elite female long-distance runner from Los Angeles, California that met the study criteria. It is recommended to conduct a field test like the one that will be done to the actual study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The observer that was used in the trial interview process is an expert in the research field. This expert researcher was able to provide feedback to the researcher regarding pacing, questioning and roper interviewing techniques. This is important feedback for when the researcher meets with participants for the actual study.

After the field test interview was completed, the data was transcribed and given to the field test participant for future input. The researcher also requested feedback on how the interview was conducted and if the participant was comfortable and felt free to answer questions in depth. A feedback form was delivered to the field test participant (Appendix D) and the observer. Information received from the participants included feedback regarding interview style and delivery and adherence to the interview protocol.

In review, the researcher prepared the following to ensure proper validity:
1. Researcher performed the trial interviews with the volunteer participant, prior to the actual data collection, and recorded on video. This video was then reviewed by the chosen expert panel. The panel provided feedback on the researchers’ delivery, pacing and framing of questions. Panel also provided additional interview strategies and techniques. This process assisted in the validation of the interview skills of the researcher.

2. The researcher developed and refined the interview questions through a process with the expert panel. This process was done collaboratively and helped ensure the instruments that were being used for the study was appropriate and for the purpose of answering the research questions.

3. Sought out feedback from participants.

4. Field test interview with expert panel feedback.

5. This procedure facilitated to help validate the interview questions.

**Reliability**

Reliability refers to how an assessment probe of data can produce consistent and constant results (Patton, 2015). For example, in reliability the researcher would use the same set of data and test it multiple times and arrive at the same conclusions. Reliability has further been defined as finding the same results if the researcher were to test the same subject or concept again (Roberts, 2010). The goal is for the researcher to produce a study that if it were to be replicated the same results would be found. For this study, the researcher used two types of reliability; inter-coder reliability and field testing.

**Inter-Coder Reliability**

Inter-coder reliability is referred to as the consistency in which the data is
interpreted and the careful consideration of the analysis of the data. Inter-coder reliability only measures “the ratings of different judges tend to assign exactly the same rating to each object” (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000 p.98). This process is vital to the internal reliability of the data. In this study, the researcher used techniques to triangulate the data. The researcher, triangulated data using interview and artifacts that were collected. These techniques and strategies strengthen the internal reliability of the study data collection strategies to strengthen the internal reliability (Creswell, 2013). Inter-coder reliability is defined as two or more interdependent coders evaluate characteristics pertaining to interviews or artifacts and arrive at the same conclusions. It is because of this, that inter-coder reliability is often and frequently used. In conjunction with pilot testing the interview questions, the researcher submitted the data to the two expert panel members to examine the data for reliability in the field test. These experts reviewed a sample of the transcribed interview data to add inter-rater reliability to the study. Patton (2015) stated that the inter-coder reliability is when expert evaluators read and compare the data and come to the same conclusions in coding the themes as the researcher. Coding is the process of sorting, labeling, and organizing themes in a qualitative study. This was to ensure that the researcher did not employ any biases in coding the data.

**Data Collection**

The data gathering process was designed in a way where all the elements were included to develop quality data collection. This was vital to the study because it was important that the participants feel comfortable and that interviews were conducted at the best time and place for them. In phenomenological studies, the researcher is gathering data from interviews related to experiences.
Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected through a set of interview questions designed by the researcher and a Brandman University faculty member. Participants who agreed to participate in this study were sent an email confirmation and then were informed of the depth of the study. Data was collected in the following ways:

1. Participant interviews were scheduled at the most convenient time for the interviewees.

2. All interviews were conducted face to face or through a Zoom conference using scripted questions by the researcher.

3. Each interview was conducted in a place chosen by the participant to ensure convenience. Prior to the interview, each participant was informed of their consent to participate in the study (Appendix C) and asked to sign that they read and understand the process and agreement to participate.

4. Each participant was given Brandman University’s Bill of Rights and this was read to each participant prior to the interview (Appendix I). During the interviews, the participants were audio recorded and these interviews were then transcribed and coded to identify and develop themes.

In order to obtain meaningful qualitative data, the interview questions were open-ended. Additionally, there were additional questions and probing questions. Post interviews, the interviews were transcribed using the following steps: a) interviews were transcribed using REV Software b) interviews were coded using NVIVO Software c) and themes were identified based on transcriptions by the researcher.
Types of Data Collected

Data Collection Procedures

The following section of this document will outline the data collection procedures for this study. It discussed the manner in which interviews were conducted. Additionally, manner in which artifacts were collected is also disclosed.

Interviews. This section outlines how the researcher followed specific protocols in this study. For these interviews to be easily replicated each time, the researcher employed specific interview criteria. The primary purpose of conducting interviews is not to evaluate or test a hypothesis. The purpose of interviews is to develop a deep understating of the lived experiences and sense connected to it by the interviewee (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research observations and artifacts are important, but the interview itself is the most vital.

Artifacts. The researcher collected artifacts related to the impacts of social media on elite female long-distance runners, invitation emails to participants, meeting materials, and media images (Appendix H). Additional artifacts include personal and demographic information about the participants: age, place of residence, educational background, ethnicity, years participated in running and social media statistics (Patton, 2015).

After the interview, the researcher requested each participant to provide artifacts that could help address the research questions. This included requests for copies of photos posted on line, number of followers, numbers of ‘likes’ for postings and sample comments generated from various postings both positive and negative.

The following steps were used to collect artifacts.

1. After the interview, the participant was asked if she could generate any
artifacts.

2. If an artifact was not given, the researcher asked if the participant could email any artifacts to the researcher within 48 hours.

3. If nothing was provided within 48 hours, the researcher assumed the founder had nothing to provide and no follow-up was conducted.

4. If an artifact was provided, the researcher clarified if the photos or postings were public information and if it was private, permission was requested for its use in the study.

5. The researcher reviewed the artifacts collected.

6. The researcher created secured folders within her computer and named the artifacts collected according to pseudonyms and prepared them for data analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

The following procedures that are outlined and constructed were to understand and seek meaning from qualitative interviews. These procedures outlined how the interviews were constructed and carried out. Additional information was provided in this section to describe the way the artifacts were obtained.

Designed for the purposes of providing authentic and real data to examine the lived experience of elite female long-distance runners, the researcher used two different methods to collect data; artifacts and interviews. Before requesting interviews through social media and email, the researcher used the application for research involving human or animal participants was submitted to the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB). This application was submitted for review, recommendations and
approval. Following BUIRB approval (Appendix I) an email was sent to the researcher formally requesting to perform the study and schedule data collection during a visit with the researcher.

**Interview Procedure**

1. Met in a place chosen by the interviewee
2. Explain the scope of the study
3. Explain how the study will be used.
4. Provide the Participant’s Bill of Rights (Appendix H)
5. Offer opportunity to ask questions about the study
6. Provide the informed consent to sign (Appendix C)
7. Begin interview questions (Appendix F)

**Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data that was collected from the interviews the researcher used a model that was three-stepped to evaluate the information that was collected from the data. The researcher used a model by Creswell (2013) to carefully define the steps of 1) organizing and preparing the data, 2) reading and reviewing all the data, and 3) coding the data.

First, the researcher downloaded audio recordings from the interviews and had them transcribed by a third-party transcription service, REV. Once these transcribed interviews were downloaded, they were shared with the interviewees to review accuracy. Sharing these transcriptions with the participants allowed them to provide feedback to the researcher to ensure accuracy. Once the transcriptions were reviewed by participants for accuracy and clarity, the researcher personally read and reviewed all the data. This
A comprehensive review of the interviews allowed for reflection and elements of the data to memorialize. Concluding this reflection of the data, the researcher began to scan the data for themes. Artifacts were also scanned and uploaded into NVivo for coding. For analyzing the artifacts of the study’s participants, a matrix was devised for theme analysis. According to McMillan & Schumacher (2010), when collecting and analyzing artifacts there are five strategies to use that will also be incorporated into this study. These strategies and how the researcher will ensure they are followed, are as follows:

1. *Locating the artifacts* – Each artifact will be retrieved from each participant prior or before the interview to ensure they are collected.

2. *Identifying the artifacts* – The researcher will record, scan, and load the artifacts in NVivo to be analyzed.

3. *Analysis of artifacts* – The researcher will read and draw themes out of the artifacts collected.

4. *Criticism of artifacts* – The researcher will compare the artifacts using the matrix to see if they match any of the elements that the literature deems should be incorporated.

5. *Interpretation of artifact meanings* – The researcher will draw connections between participants’ interviews and the themes found in the artifacts to add meaning to the qualitative data.

The following steps outline the coding process: Once the themes were identified, the researcher then began to categorize the themes. Once the data was officially coded, formal patterns, themes, categories and subcategories were developed (Creswell, 2013).
Once all the data was reviewed numerous times, the process of developing codes and themes began. The coding process was done through grouping and dividing the data to help categorize similarities. In addition to the interviews, the researcher took notes and observations during the interviews that were then coded.

Additionally, the data analysis procedure for this qualitative research, included the researcher’s use of NVivo software. NVivo is a data collection software that is widely used for coding. NVivo also is commonly used in qualitative research for surveys, interviews, audio, video recordings and field notes. NVivo supports the researcher in developing themes and codes for purposes of analyzing the qualitative data. Saldana (2012) refers to a code as “a short word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2012, p. 3). Coding allows the researcher to divide the data into manageable parts through coding. This coding procedure also allows the data to be quickly accessed and practicably relevant.

The data coding process for this study involved three primary steps:

1. The codes were scanned for themes. More specifically, given to the perceptions of the athletes on how social media impacts their professional and personal lives.
2. Coding for frequencies. NVivo allows the researcher to identifying the frequency of themes and codes more easily and accurately. When there are frequencies in the codes, there is a strengthening of the themes that emerge.
3. Analyzing themes and frequencies. The researcher used codes, themes and frequencies to analyze and bring new meaning to the data. This data process affords the researcher to create new meaning and understanding of the data with
respect to the lived experience of elite female long-distance runners are impacted using social media.

**Analyzing the Themes**

The primary goal of qualitative research is to analyze the data to identify patterns that lead to relationships. Through this coding process, categories of data were analyzed, and themes were recognized. (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In analyzing the codes to then develop themes, the researcher developed tables and charts to better assist in the analysis of emerging themes developing from the participants. In this study, potential patterns were identified, and the researcher used triangulation of data to verify these patterns. The themes that emerge from the patterns will be used to better understand the commonalities that these female athletes share when using social media. Additionally, the research will look to identify how social media impacts the personal brands of these athletes.

**Ethical Consideration**

These interviews were approved by the Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board’s (BUIRB). Additional ethical considerations included that the researcher is careful during the interview process to be conscious of the participants and their feelings. Additionally, the researcher needs to be aware to respect any boundaries of the participants and clearly let the participants know what the interview is about and how the research will be used. The participants signed informed consent and gave the researcher permission to record the interviews. The interviews were primed and stated with an overview, purpose and explanation of procedural safeguards. These guidelines can be found in the Appendix C.
Limitations

All research studies are faced with limitations. “A limitation of a study design or instrument is the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriate affect the results (Patton, 2015). There were three limitations in this research study.

This study was limited with having a small sample size that was not randomly selected. Additionally, the sample size is an additional limitation of this study. Fourteen female elite runners were interviewed for this study. If there were more participants, there might be a better chance of having a larger portion of feedback, and increased data, however due to the small sample size it does limit the ability of the researcher to generalize the findings.

Additional limitations may be that the interviews were conducted using both computer technology and face to face. In order to provide proper validity to this study, the researcher provided transcripts of the interviews to the participants to review for accuracy (Patton, 2015).

Further limitations of this qualitative study may be that the researcher is not objective in conducting the research. In order to better ensure objectivity, the researcher will be using the pilot interviews and expert panel feedback to address any concerns in this area. Prior to the pilot interview the researcher asked the expert panel to review the interview questions to ensure that they do not include leading comments and include accurate subject matter content. During the pilot interview the expert observer shared feedback with the researcher to assist with questioning techniques.
Summary

Chapter III details the methodology used in this study and the process used to facilitate the research to better understand how social media impacts the lives of elite female long-distance runners. An overview introduced the chapter with the purpose statement and research questions being restated. The research design explained the selection of qualitative research for the basis of the study. The population of the study was described and the sample that would be extrapolated through the selection process was examined. Reviewed in this study was the use of instrumentation, validity and reliability. The data collections process and procedures were outlined and the process for gathering data from interviews were also carefully defined. Additionally, descriptions of how artifacts were obtained, and the limitations of this study were discussed and clarified. Additional data analysis and discussion of findings will be presented in Chapter IV. This study sought to investigate how elite female distance runners used social media to build a personal brand for themselves, and how this impacts their professional and personal lives. These in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to help explore this brand building process and its impact personally and professionally.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Chapter IV presents an analysis of the data collected from the phenomenological study which examines the experiences of elite female long-distance runners using social media. It further examines how these elite runners use social media to build a personal brand. This chapter reviews the purpose of the study, research questions, research methods, data collection methods, population, and sample. Chapter IV concludes with a presentation of the data, organized by research question through the conceptual framework presented in Chapter II. The chapter will conclude with a summary of findings.

Overview

Chapter IV explains the findings from interviews conducted with 10 elite long-distance runners with active social media accounts with the purpose of examining the lived experiences of these long-distance runners to better understand how they use social media to build a personal brand. Furthermore, the benefits and challenges of having social media accounts as female athletes is also determined. In addition, the interviews sought to understand the experiences that elite female long-distance runners have when using social media to develop a personal brand. With continued underrepresentation and objectification of women athletes in media, the researcher designed the study to seek to understand what impact social media is having on the personal and professional lives of elite female long-distance runners as they use social media to build a personal brand.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and discover the perceptions of elite female long-distance runners on the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brand throughout their athletic careers.

Central Question

What do elite female long-distance runners perceive as the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brands?

Research Questions

1. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits of using social media on their personal brand?
2. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the challenges of using social media on their personal brand?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

The data gathering process was designed in a way where all the elements were included to develop quality data collection. This was vital to the study because it was important that the participants felt comfortable and that interviews were conducted at the best time and place for them. In phenomenological studies, the researcher is gathering data from interviews related to experiences.

Qualitative data was collected through a set of interview questions designed by the researcher and a Brandman University faculty member. Participants who agreed to participate in this study were sent an email confirmation and then were informed of the depth of the study. Data was collected in the following ways:
1. Participant interviews were scheduled at the most convenient time for the interviewees.

2. All interviews were conducted face to face conference using scripted questions by the researcher.

3. Each interview was conducted in a place chosen by the participant to ensure convenience. Prior to the interview, each participant was informed of their consent to participate in the study (Appendix C) and asked to sign that they read and understood the process and agreement to participate.

4. Each participant was given Brandman University’s Bill of Rights and this was read to each participant prior to the interview (Appendix I). During the interviews, the participants were audio recorded and these interviews were then transcribed and coded to identify and develop themes.

In order to obtain meaningful qualitative data, the interview questions were open-ended. Additionally, there were supplemental questions and probing questions. Post interviews, the interviews were transcribed using the following steps: a) interviews were transcribed using REV Software b) interviews were coded using NVIVO Software c) and themes were identified based on transcriptions by the researcher.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The following procedures that are outlined and constructed were to understand and seek meaning from qualitative interviews. These procedures outlined how the interviews were constructed and carried out. Additional information was provided in this section to describe the way the artifacts were obtained.
Designed for the purposes of providing authentic and real data to examine the lived experience of elite female long-distance runners, the researcher used two different methods to collect data: artifacts and interviews. Before requesting interviews through social media and email, the researcher used the application for research involving human or animal participants was submitted to the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB). This application was submitted for review, recommendations, and approval. Following BUIRB approval (Appendix I) an email was sent to the researcher formally requesting to perform the study and schedule data collection during a visit with the researcher.

**Analysis of Artifacts**

All of the participants were asked to provide artifacts related to their social media accounts. Artifacts that were included and collected from participants were: images from social media accounts, messages over social media, and examples of posts and content that participants mentioned in interviews. After the conclusion of the interview, the researcher asked the participants if they would show examples of images, content, and messages that were mentioned during the interview. These artifacts were collected to better explain what participants had shared throughout their interviews. Table 1 illustrates the artifacts that were presented in this study by the participants.
Table 1

Table 1. Artifacts Provided by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifacts Related to Elite Female Distance Runners Using Social Media for Building a Personal Brand</th>
<th>Number of Runners that Shared Samples, N=10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Images from social media</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct messages over social media</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of content discussed on social media</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Population

A population is a group that “conforms to specific criteria” in which the research results can be generalized (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 129). The population for this study is all female long-distance runners that have run United States Olympic Qualifying Standard in the marathon with a time of two hours and forty-five minutes or less and reside in The United States. The population of this study was 350 elite female long-distance runners according to The United States Track and Field Olympic Marathon Committee press release (15 October 2019).

Sample

The group of participants from whom the study data is collected is the sample (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sample is a representation of the larger population and is selected to meet specific criteria allowing the researcher to generalize the results of the study to a larger population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Qualitative sampling is one of the ways to receive a wide and deep range of information. This data provides, in
many cases, large amounts of information (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sample for this study consisted of 10 elite female long-distance runners that have run two hour and forty-five minutes or less in the marathon. The researcher used the Olympic Trials 2020 Marathon website (Atlanta 2020 Trials, 2019) to locate participants and to validate United States Citizenship. Through social media, the researcher sent a letter (see Appendix B) to 50 potential participants. The researcher chose the first 10 respondents to participate in the study. Each participant of the study has run the standard, is 18 years of age or older, resides in California, is a United States Citizen, and is a current user of social media.

McMillian and Schumacher (2010) states that “there are only guidelines for qualitative sample size, not quantitative; Qualitative samples can range from 1 to 40 or more” (p. 328). Patton (2015) agrees with the former authors in their acknowledgement that in qualitative research “the sample should depend on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the inquiry and what can be done with the available time and resources” (p.310).

**Demographic Data**

All female participants currently reside in California. Throughout this study there was a tremendous amount of effort put forward to preserve the confidentiality of the study participants. As a result, names and additional identifying information was omitted from the findings. The 10 study participants were numerically identified from one through ten and are outlined in Table 2. This table labels the participants by number, social media accounts used, and the month and year of the interview. The sample included 10 elite female long-distance runners that all currently reside in California.
Table 2

Table 2. Participant ID, Social Media Used and Date of Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Social Media Used</th>
<th>Month and Year of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram &amp; Twitter</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram &amp; Twitter</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Facebook, Instagram &amp; Twitter</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Presentation and Analysis of Data

To answer the central research question, *what do elite female long-distance runners perceive as the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brands?* The researcher coded emergent themes from the data into six primary themes from the participant responses. The six major themes are: (1) networking on social media, (2) social media as a tool for inspiration, (3) using social media to share personal experiences, (4) appeal to social media audience, (5) unable to showcase their real self on social media, and (6) social media puts unrealistic expectations on athletes. Additionally, themes were further sorted and explained with supporting literature that emerged from personal branding conceptual framework.

**Brand Identity Theory**

The Brand Identity Theory relates to building a personal brand using social media. Data was coded into themes using the central research question: *What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits and challenges of using social media to build a personal brand?* This study addresses the perceptions of elite female long-distance runners using social media using the Brand Theory framework to structure how runners are branding themselves.

Brand Identity Theory (Aaker, 1996) was chosen for this study to focus on how female athletes have been underrepresented in sports media since its inception. There has been little gain in better coverage of women’s athletics over decades, despite its popularity and increase of participation. Brand Identity Theory roots itself in Identity Theory (Stryker, 1987) which is the distinctiveness in which people classify themselves. These distinct characteristics in which a person identifies develop over a person’s life and
shape his or her personal image or brand. This theoretical framework attempts to unravel the complicated societal norms of suppressing and objectifying women in sports media.

Brand Identity is important to female athletes because unlike male athletes, female athletes feel that they must create a personal brand and have other means of making money that is not tied to their performance in their sport (Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2018). Understanding Brand Identity Theory will help explain and explore the role that identity has played in elite female athletes attempting to make a brand for themselves using social media. Utilizing the Brand Identity Theory affords female athletes the opportunity to use social media to create a personal brand for themselves to portray and communicate a preferred identity and image to followers and consumers.

Research presented by Hardin & Greer (2009) states that despite major changes in sports history with the adoption of Title IX, and increased women’s participation in sports, women still report they feel that sports are primarily for the masculine. Title IX is a law under The Educational Amendment of 1972, that prohibits any university, school, college or educational system that profits from federal compensation to discriminate anyone because of their sex (Brice & Palmer, 2017).

**Participants and Social Media Platforms Used**

Participants shared that they primarily use Facebook and Instagram, while 30% use Twitter. 80% of participants have Facebook accounts, but all participants use Instagram as their main account for building a personal athletic brand. Table 3 illustrates the number of followers each athlete has on social media platforms.
Table 3

Table 3. Participants, Social Media Accounts & Number of Followers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Number of Instagram Followers</th>
<th>Number of Facebook Friends</th>
<th>Number of Twitter Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>3k</td>
<td>4,237</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>78k</td>
<td>2,307</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>52k</td>
<td>4,997</td>
<td>72k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>1,802</td>
<td>1,721</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>16k</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>36k</td>
<td>4,016</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>110k</td>
<td>4,899</td>
<td>68k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>56k</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>31k</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Approximate number of followers at the time of interview*
Figure 2 shows the participants by percentages in which the athletes associated with this study use social media.

**Figure 4. Social Media Platforms used by Participants Shown in Percentages**

The primary and central research question of this study pursued to answer: *What are the personal experiences of elite female long-distance runners using social media to build a personal brand?* The personal brand theory conceptual framework was explored when coding for themes in this study. The data was organized to reflect codes that emerged in response to the conceptual areas of establishing a personal brand using social media. Women historically have had to find innovative ways to overcome gender discrimination in athletics. In order to become more visible, women have been encouraged to take matters into their own hands and demonstrate competence through achievement. One key strategy that women can take in a competitive environment is to sell themselves. Social media has become center stage for women to market themselves, become more visible and essentially brand themselves (Toffolleti & Thorpe, 2018).

The researcher identified six major themes after coding participant interviews. The six themes relate directly back to the central research question. Below shown in Table 4 are the themes with the frequency count and the identification of how many of the participants associated with this study mentioned each theme in their
Response to research question 1: What are the benefits of using social media to build a personal brand?

Table 4

Table 4. Themes, Frequency Counts Sources for Positive Experiences Using Social Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Sources (N=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networking on social media</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to social media audience</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use social media to share personal experiences</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media as a tool for inspiration</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Frequency Count</strong></td>
<td><strong>235</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that almost 30% of the participants in this study share that they have had positive experiences on social media, and that over 25% appeal to their social media audience. When responding to this research question participants also noted 25% of them use social media to share personal experiences, and that almost 20% of the athletes associated with this study use social media as a tool for their own inspiration.

Additionally, Table 5 represents the frequency count of the themes that were collated based on the participant’s response to research question 2: What are the negatives of using social media to build a personal brand?
Table 5

Table 5. Themes, Frequency Counts Sources for Negative Experiences Using Social Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Sources (N=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social media puts unrealistic expectations on athletes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable showcase real self on social media</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Frequency Count</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequency count for table 5 illustrates a total frequency count of 84. Of the athletes who participated in the study over 50% shared that they believe that the media puts unrealistic expectations on athletes, and 50% of the participants shared that they are unable to showcase their real self on social media.

Research Question 1

The following section outlines the themes that were associated with the data collection of this study and are organized in order by research question. The first question that was asked to participants was: *What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits and challenges of using social media to build a personal brand?*

Theme 1: Networking on Social Media

Participants identified networking as a primary reason for wanting to use social media. Participants shared communication and collaboration with other athletes was enjoyable, informative, and motivating for using social media. Using social media to
communicate and network with other runners and communicate with other athletes was identified as entertaining and encouraging. Participants identified that they use social media to network with other athletes on social media, meet through social media and then in person. Lastly, participants shared that they enjoy meeting in person and then staying connected through social media. Social media is a revolutionary platform allowing athletes to directly connect and communicate with followers and other athletes. Athletes can use social media to network without the restrictions of traditional mainstream media (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Figure 3 shows the three different areas in which participants identified that they network using social media.

Figure 5. Networking through Social Media

Without social media, “I wouldn't have met a lot of people that I know now. Social media has allowed me to connect with a lot of professionals and athletes that I would have never been able to connect with in my daily life. I also follow a lot of people that post things that really seem helpful for my health and well-being.” (Participant 1)
Networking and getting to know new people is something that people using social media are looking to find (Rajani & Solanki, 2016). “I find that I have worked really hard to connect with a lot of big names through social media. Sometimes runners that I thought would never give me the time of day, will comment on my photos or content. I have also had a lot of professional runners follow me back, and that has been really cool!” (Participant 2)

“When reading a post or hearing information often validates some of the challenges I am having in my life or my running.” (Participant 5) Participants shared that networking can make racing and competition more enjoyable. Runners shared that networking through social media afforded them the opportunities to connect with other athletes prior and after competition.

“When you go to races it can feel really intimidating and nerve racking. I find that I enjoy meeting other runners before races and then connecting with them later at the race or after, something like that. Social media is fun for that aspect. Also, when attending one of the big events or a championship race, I like taking pictures or partying with some big names at the after-parties; that can be thrilling.” (Participant 7)

Participants also said that they used social media to network daily, and that they used a variety of ways in which they communicate with others. Runners shared that they used commenting on content and photos and direct messaging as ways that they networked with others online. “Using social media pretty much daily, I talk with athletes a lot through my Instagram. I find that through content and dialogue you can learn a lot about a person. I am motivated to talk to other runners through social media just to know
more about them and what they do in their daily life. I am not like this with everyone, but some are intriguing to me.” (Participant 10)

Athletes report they enjoy staying in contact with other athletes and maintaining friendship despite geographic separation (Geurin, 2017). Social media is also an avenue for potential sponsors to contact athletes. Athletes have also acknowledged that they enjoy the fact that social media allows for followers to see a glimpse into their personal lives (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

Theme 2: Appeal to Social Media Audience

Another theme that emerged was that participants said they use social media to try and appeal to their audience. Within their audiences on social media, users want to appeal to current sponsors, seek to gain more followers and appeal to potential sponsors. Eighty percent of participants stated that they use social media to appeal to their followers or friends. Figure 4 breaks down how the three categories fit with the theme of appealing to social media audience.

![Figure 4. Appeal to Social Media Audience](image)

One of the main criteria in many endorsement or sponsorship deals with athletes is that the athlete promote their brand or product. One way that athletes can appeal to
their endorsers and continue to gain a following is using social media. Social media has become an interactive tool for runners to show off products, promote gear, and share information about promoting brands. Participants shared the benefits of using social media to appeal to their followers. Participant 2: “I have had sponsorships where there was a lot of pressure to post, and I just don’t have agreements where I have to post. I know that when I was racing a lot, and I was trying to build a following I felt that I needed to post more. I also found that I thought a lot more about the content that I wanted to share. I think that it is exciting to try and appeal to my followers. It is not easy trying to build a brand online. There is so much that goes into that I don’t think a lot of people realize.” Participants shared their thoughts that go into how they try to appeal to their audience on social media and how this often corresponds with their sponsorships or endorsements.

Participant 7: “Using social media, I am often told that I need to share a pair of shoes that have just come out or try and take close up pictures of one of the new tops that the brand just put out. Honestly, I don’t really mind, and I really love most of the products that the company has put out over the years. I think the biggest challenge is often trying to find someone good to take a photo for me. I know a lot of athletes that have people come out and take professional photos for them.” Athletes shared that they think promoting products can be fun and that they often enjoy taking pictures and posting them online.

**Theme 3: Share Personal Experiences on Social Media**

All participants noted that using social media was a way for them to share their personal experiences. There are three ways in which the runners like to share their lives
on social media: to showcase personal journey, share personal information about self, and share information in hopes to inspire others. People are using social media to share information, personal reviews, give feedback and share content with others in hopes to inspire or encourage them. Half of all the participants shared that they like using social media to openly share information about themselves. These participants specifically cited sharing personal stories on social media was satisfying. Social media creates an open forum for people to publicly share almost anything that they would like. Runners identified that sharing personal experiences online was therapeutic and made them feel close to their fans. Sharing personal experiences on social media has become a way that modern society socializes. Previous literature asserts that social media has brought together large audiences and diverse followings on social networking sites. These types of personal experiences and stories support the engagement of followers when they can relate to stories that are found on social media.

Additionally, social media users are finding enjoyment in receiving feedback on their content and photos that they share (Rajani & Solanki, 2016). Previous literature supports that social media users identify a key motivation for using social media is to share personal experiences. There are a variety of reasons and motivations that have been identified dependent upon the type of content and social media.

Participant 5: “I would hope that my posts hopefully help people who don't always share their experiences because they are worried about what someone might think of them. I try and post things that I know are struggles for all people and that maybe they can relate to my life. I guess it is therapeutic for me to share with my followers’ experiences that are happening in my life. I think I lived a long time feeling like people
viewed me as this professional athlete that had it so easy, and that is just not the case. So, I think it is helpful for me to share real experiences on social media to be transparent.”

Literature supports that athletes share information on social networking sites to peers in a way to communicate goals. Sharing personal goals and commitments often keep the athlete themselves motivated (Stragier, Evens & Mechant, 2015).

Participant 6: “I am motivated to post online because I want to share my platform and share my story. Since I'm now sponsored, they have expectations for me to share their clothing line. I mean that's pretty much what I use it for. I don't really like to share my personal life. Right now, it's just mainly about my running. I might share something brief about my relationship or something, but for the most part that is not what my followers want to hear about. So, I have learned that I should stick to just posting about running. Plus, I think that is what my sponsors want.”

Participants shared that they like to use social media to share general experiences that they feel that other people want to hear and information that they will receive the most feedback from. Participant 8: “I would say that I do enjoy posting about my performances. I typically share both good and bad races. I would say that my followers respond much better when I share stories about how my racing is not going well. Most recently I have been sharing about how I have been injured and all the things that I am doing to try and rehab and get ready for the trials. I have received so much feedback and messages asking me about what I am doing, and if I can help them too. I would say that sharing injuries has been hard for me, but I feel that is something that is hard for other runners to share about sometimes. So, I feel like I should continue to share those stories that other runners can connect with, and hopefully this can encourage them.”
Participants shared they felt it was important to share on social media when they were injured. Participants identified that when they shared about their injuries that it usually yielded a lot of feedback and messages from followers.

Participant 10: “I just continue to share all about my running, so like if had an injury, I would post about that. I also have really opened dialogue about how I have had a lot of issues with getting pregnant and my period. That has had huge impact on my followers. I would say that I have become very open about my health as a woman. I mean, so many are ashamed or feel that it is not okay to talk about reproductive problems online, but you know it is something that is such a problem in runners. I feel that I had received a lot of attention and followers by bringing up my fertility problems and it has helped a lot of people.” Much research suggested that women using social media is an inspirational tool and creates a pathway of success of connecting with other women. Women sharing their personal success stories are motivational and inspiring to other women (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Theme 4: Social Media as a Tool for Inspiration

Participants shared that using social media to gain inspiration was a major aspect and motivation for using social networking sites. Participant 2 stated that, “Running can often be isolating and social media takes what could be a very lonely sport and makes it easier to inspire a large number of people that otherwise would never be reached in a sport like this.” Runners referenced that using social media was a tool that they used to try to inspire other people. Previous literature examining influencers and using social media, identified one of the primary motivations for engaging on social media was to inspire followers (Raggatt, Wright, Carrotte, Jenkinson, Mulgrew, Prichard & Lim,
There were three areas that were identified by participants as reasons that they use social media for daily inspiration. Participants identified ways they use social media to gain inspiration in the area of inspiration for training, inspiration for workouts and dietary inspiration. Figure 5 below shows the breakdown of participants and their responses related to using social media to gain inspiration.

![Figure 5. Participants using social media for inspiration](image)

**Inspiration for training.** Participants stated that they liked to follow athletes that shared about their long and hard workouts. Eighty percent of the runners in this study said they feel inspired when they identify with other athletes and see them accomplish hard workouts. Participant 4: “I would say that I get very motivated when I see some of the long runs that other people post. Sometimes I lack motivation for marathon training, and I will see someone’s workout and think I better get out there and get this workout done!”

One participant shared that they feel inspired when they see other runners overcoming obstacles and sharing inspiring personal stories. Participant 9: “One of my favorite type of inspiration is when someone shares about long, hard workouts that they
are completing and how challenging their training cycles are. I find this very motivating for me to continue to train through challenging circumstances.” Participants shared that they often find inspiration for intense training from social media. Runners specifically stated how lonely and isolating marathon training can be, and that participants often found support for perseverance and inspiration through stories and people they follow on social media.

**Inspiration for workouts.** Finding inspiration for workouts was mentioned by 60% of participants as one of the motivations and benefits of using social media. Participants shared that many times they find workouts for training or to mix in with training from social media. Runners shared that they found it inspiring to see other runners engaging in challenging workouts and when they viewed these workouts or related content on social media, they would adopt similar workouts or regimen. Previous studies have focused on the impact of social media on followers regarding workout and inspiration. Findings have shown that viewing workouts on social media can be very motivating for athletes in their pursuit to engage in more intense workouts after viewing such content online (Raggatt, Wright, Carrotte, Jenkinson, R., Mulgrew, Prichard & Lim, 2018).

**Dietary inspiration.** Participants identified that they enjoy following athletes that post about their workouts and what they are eating and drinking during their workouts to properly fuel themselves. Participant 5: “A lot of runners will post about what they do for fueling during runs or marathons. We all know how nutrition plays such a key role in racing. I have found a lot of really good information and inspiration for making sure I
Runners also shared that they enjoy engaging and following runners that are also dietitians who frequently post recipe ideas, information on what they eat, and current research on healthy diets for athletes. “I follow some dietitians on social media, and I get some great information and ideas on nutrition. I am not always the best cook, or even healthiest eater and I find that there are some great nutritional tips on social media.” (Participant 7)

Runners also shared that social media was a great tool for staying motivated during training cycles to eat a healthy diet. Participant 10: “I really like social media for the fact that I get a lot of ideas for what I should be eating and fueling my body with. I follow a lot of elite runners, and I see what they eat and what kind of workouts that they are doing. This really has helped me stay motivated. I see pictures of some of the professionals and think, ‘if that is working for them, maybe I should try that too.’”

Research Question 2

What are the negative experiences with using social media to build a personal brand online?

Theme 5: Social Media Puts Unrealistic Expectations on Female Athletes

Lastly, participants shared that they feel that social media often puts pressure on them to always be at their best. All ten participants noted that they feel that using social media adds stress and pressure to perform as a runner. When competing at high athletic levels, it is challenging to always maintain peak performance and often athletes face challenges with injuries, training cycles, psychological well-being, and other trials that
athletes face when trying to maintain top fitness. Participants identified three areas where social media puts unrealistic expectations on runners. These identified areas are gender comparison, body image and pressure to perform.

Participants shared that one of the challenging parts of having a social media account as an athlete is that there is overwhelming pressure to always perform. Half of participants shared that they feel that they are not allowed to have hard or bad days, and if they do, they need to just push through. Additionally, runners shared that it is challenging to use social media when training for a race because so many other runners might be training for the same race or something similar and they feel intimidated. Lastly, 30% of participants shared that they are bothered by a lot of the movement online to “run like a girl.”

**Gender comparison.** Gender discrepancy is a big part of sports in general and there is a long history of women not receiving adequate media attention. Forty percent of participants in this study referenced gender comparison as a negative aspect to social media. Participants shared that many times when records are broken, even in the same race by both men and women, the men are mentioned first. Additionally, 70% participants identified that when browsing social media, men are often shown in favorable ways looking strong and fast, where often social media sites dedicated to runners, women are shown much more scandalously. Participants also mentioned specific social media accounts where women are often just shown in very little clothing, posed in sexual ways, and men are not present in the photos or on the account. Participant 9: “One thing that bothers me a lot in not just in running but sports in general, is that I always feel compared to men. I would think with time that this would have gotten better and maybe it
Participating, participants shared that using social media as female is particularly complicated and rather confusing at times. “I still hear people compare women’s and men’s times and I think using social media to talk about it is a good place to start. However, you still see these media sites talk about how fast the men are, and I would like to see more about the women.”

(Participant 10) “There seems to always be an ongoing competition to compete with men, and that females are constantly having to prove that they are equally as strong if not better in some way.” Across all sports, men’s athletics draws significantly more coverage than women’s sports. Further investigations into coverage of women’s sports has uncovered that not only are women significantly unrepresented in media, but when they are in media they are glorified for visual reasons. Throughout history, female athletes have been marginalized and underrecognized for their athleticism.

Participant 1: “One movement that I feel has really taken off is this ‘run like a girl’. At first, I really liked this idea on social media, but then I realized that it was making me feel that somehow, we are less than men that run. I don’t know if people would agree with me or even relate to what I am saying but I think it goes without saying. We know that men dominate sports, and in media men control this as well. In order to gain attention women, must brand themselves with slogans like ‘run like a girl’. That just seems wrong. You certainly would never see anyone saying, ‘run like a boy’ see, that sounds ridiculous! “It is important that these athletes portray themselves in a way that is equal to male athletes and be perceived as positive. Social media is a way for these female athletes to create an image that is healthy and representative of females in sport media that can motivate and inspire the future generations (Perotti, 2009).
Participant 2 shared, “It is not like we are superhuman. I think of the downsides in my opinion is this ‘strong woman’ mentality that we all have tried to adopt. Yes, we are strong, but we are also human.” Our culture has always put a tremendous amount of pressure on women at any age to appear perfect and in immaculate condition. This pressure spans across all cultures, ages and backgrounds. As women age, there is a myth that they should be stronger and more resilient to these pressures, and that is just not the case (Maine & Kelly, 2005). Moreover, in recent years, social media has become a way for women, amateur and professional athletes, with varying abilities, to engage in social networking with other athletes and gain opportunities at levels which were previously only afforded to the top male athletes (Eagleman, 2013).

**Body image.** Running is a sport that puts a tremendous amount of pressure on athletes to be in their best shape and physical condition. Generally, because like all sports, and in order to run fast and participate at high levels, an athlete must be a phenomenal athletic condition. Athletes shared that Instagram, since it largely consists of photographs, can be deflating to one’s body image. Athletes discussed everything from weight, muscle mass, and height as reasons that viewing runners’ bodies on social media can be extremely negative. Furthermore, participants also felt that social media puts a lot of pressure to look a certain way. Runners in this study shared that there seems to be a conventional runner image or look, and 40% of participants shared they feel they do not fit into the stereotypical runner image category. Supported by previous research, understanding the large number of women that are using and relying on social media has become vital. It has become even more significant to understand the ways that social
media is impacting and influencing the discernments of body image (Williams & Ricciardelli, 2014).

Participant 7: “I was always aware of what the more typical runner looked like, and I do not feel like I am her. However, since entering the elite fields, I see a lot of more fit runners, and then I see them online too. I won't even run in my sports bra! So, when I am looking at these images of people posting when they always look so great becomes very challenging for me. It makes me upset a lot.” Athletes shared that social media can subconsciously put a lot of pressure on them to look at certain way. These experiences described by participants align with previous studies and literature have described female athletes and the way they are portrayed in the media (Kane, 1996).

Participant 10: “I feel like I am not a tiny runner. I'm 5’9” so I kind of tower above people starting lines and it is not like I have a muscular body type, and you know all these running accounts show women with like super ripped abs and like very lean and I don't feel like I look that way. It really was not until in the past year and a half, like I had never worn a crop top in a race. I would always wear long shorts and a t-shirt. I already felt insecure before a race even started. I do not think I would be as aware of this if I didn’t see so much on social media.”

**Pressure to perform.** Participants shared that using social media can be daunting, especially when viewing posts about the constant success of other athletes. Participants shared that social media is particularly challenging to use when an athlete is injured or not performing well. Runners shared that viewing posts on social media about races, workouts, and other success athletes are having are most distressing when the athlete themselves is not in a positive place in their own training.
Participant 2: “I think a lot of the time people just want to post things that are relatively only happy of good in their life. But a lot of the times all of us are all struggling, and I think that it is important to share the hard times too. I think that social media is not necessarily good for people’s mental health when they are not doing well, when all they see is how well everyone is doing. Even though we all know that life is hard, training is hard, I think it becomes challenging to always see how well others are doing.” Participants shared during these down times is when they wanted to be the least active on social media and even shutdown or deactivate their accounts, so they did not feel sad or depressed. Participants also shared that often-seeing posts on social media about upcoming races or events added extra pressure to place higher in competition or even do an extra workout that was not on the training schedule.

Participant 1 shared, “Every so often I see a workout that someone will post, and I will think to myself, I better go out and run faster in my next workout if that is what another person is doing that, I know is going to race at the same time I am. I know that this may not be accurate but it’s strange you cannot really get that out of your head.” Specifically, participants have identified that when they are injured or not running well, there is added pressure to get healthy and or to begin performing at high levels again.

Participant 9: “I have been injured on and off for about a year now and well, I keep on getting injured. So, when I go on social media and see other people getting ready for big races or posting how they are preparing for the trials, I think, Oh, I want to do that too. It's not like jealousy. It's more like you want to do what they're doing. I don't want to say depressed, but just like you wanted, you want to be able to perform to that level, but you can't, and that is very frustrating. If someone goes on vacation or seems
like they have these picture-perfect lives and can train, have a family, and hold a job. I start thinking something is wrong with me, or maybe I should be doing more.”

Participants discussed that they often set up limits or boundaries with social media. These limits included not following people that they felt had a negative influence on them and their thoughts. Additionally, participants discussed how they were bothered by certain posts on content that they felt were not reflective of real life.

Additionally, Participant 7 stated, “I have set up some strong boundaries for dealing with the downside to social media. Well, right now, I don't follow people that are constantly posting about how great their life is. I have had to learn that people say and post things that maybe I do not like, and I must be okay with that. I used to be really bothered by certain posts or images, and I have had to develop better strategies to learn how to deal with those negative feelings.”

**Theme 6: Runners are Unable to Showcase Real Self on Social Media**

Elite female long-distance runners feel they must often portray an image online that is not true to themselves in order to have influence and collect followers on social media. There are components that emerged under theme five regarding that participants feel bothered by images and posts that seem unreal or lack authenticity. One, is that athletes feel that they cannot portray a true image of themselves on social media and secondly, that posts from others are often unauthentic.

Participant 2: “I think one of the most challenging parts of using social media is when I scroll through Instagram and I see pictures of people working out, but they are clearly trying to send a different message through their photos. I think most people can see through the post and know that maybe what we see is not reality, but it is still
bothersome that part of our sport is about what people look like in their uniforms.”

Building a brand online can be particularly challenging because there are so many different audiences to try to appeal to. Previous literature has revealed that personal online branding is challenging and when trying to appeal to a variety of followers can be particularly tough (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011). Participants shared that they feel there are a lot of mixed messages that athletes are sending through their photos and content. Consequently, runners shared that they feel the same ambiguousness when contemplating about what they should post.

Participant 3: “I am motivated to post what I feel will get the most likes or followers. When creating a brand, it has become essential that the athlete know what population they are going to target in order to properly brand themselves. Often, I am not really acting as myself; I am acting as an athlete or the ‘brand’. This person really cannot be me, because I wouldn’t be able to get the following that I have. I guess you could say, I really don’t like it, but it is what it is.”

Athletes shared that targeting their followers was important when trying to build a following online. Runners shared that they had to understand their constituents and stakeholders to get the most from their accounts.

Participant 6: “Most of my followers on my social media account are men. Men do not want to see pictures of my family, or whom I am in a relationship with. They want to see me in my running clothes and posting photos of myself, and with other female runners. That is what gets me followers and likes on my Instagram.”

In a previous study, (Guerin, 2017) a female athlete shared that she felt it was not just important to have a personal brand but a positive personal brand on social media.
outlets that is unique and authentic. Additionally, athletes have shared that building a personal brand on social media takes time and can take time outside of training and competition. Social media can be demanding, and athletes must think carefully about what they post and what they say. These self-portrayals on social media can take a lot of thought and time for the athletes to properly represent themselves.

Participant 7: “I feel I have unfollowed accounts; I am not even sure they are real people, but accounts that are dedicated to running. Some of these accounts that I think people submit photos to, I am not sure. I can tell a lot of them are doctored images and I really, that really bothers me because not everybody realizes that these images are probably not real, or it is not what the image originally was intended for.” Women athletes report pressure to post self-sexualizing photos on social media to gain a following and improve sponsorships (Karsay, 2018). Tovares (2010) described athletes having a variety of competing voices and one that cause internal conflict. These narratives often represent conflicting views of the athlete, the athlete’s performance, and how others view the athlete.

Participant 8: “I am genuinely enthusiastic, but I am not one of those influencers where I feel that I must post every day and every message is this happy and perfect image. There are a lot of aspects of social media that I do not like. I try not to spend too much time thinking about the parts of social media that are negative. However, I do think a lot of people do though, or at least that is what it feels like sometimes. I guess when I am going through social media and I see content or pictures that I can tell do not portray reality, I usually will just skip over it, or unfollow that person. I don’t need that kind of negativity in my life.” Athletes are using social media platforms to amplify personal
status. Building status brings more followers and more notoriety; thus, users with a strong social media presence must create a successful identity. In order to properly manage their public image, users must present themselves as friendly and pleasing to their followers. Through these pictures and content, the athlete can shape a connection with their followers (Eagleman, 2013).

Participant 9: “I am pretty sure that people use different apps on their phones or computers to achieve a certain look. I am not even sure how or why, but those are the type of images that I will see and think to myself that I really do not like to see pictures like that. I’d say more I have unfollowed people that I think are trying to portray a false image, or maybe it is not helpful for me or to anyone in our sport to see images like that.” Studies have demonstrated that if female athletes continue to self-objectify, it will be hard to give female athletes the respect and credit that they deserve (Castellano, Khelladi, Chipaux & Kupferminc, 2014).

**Summary**

Chapter IV presented the data collected and findings of this qualitative study. This study sought to examine the lived experiences of elite female long-distance runners using social media to build a personal brand. The study was intended to illuminate what these female athletes were experiencing, both positives and negatives, when using social media to build a personal brand. This study differed from Geurin (2017) in that the findings were more related to athletes wanting to connect and network with followers. This study did not reveal significant findings that athletes felt pressure to post images that were self-objecting or images that were sexually suggestive. However, like Geurin’s previous
work, athletes did want to develop sponsorships and have financial opportunities arise from using social media.

Furthermore, the study sought to capture the in depth lived experiences that these elite athletes are having when using social media. These experiences regarding female athletes are vital to understanding gender differences and perceptions of female runners. Additionally, how female athletes are using digital technology to promote and brand themselves as athletes was reviewed. The population for this study was elite female long-distance runners that have run the 2020 USA Olympic Trials standard in the marathon, and the target population was runners that have run the standard and currently reside in California. A total of 10 female long-distance runners participated in the study.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“I am often been asked whether I am a woman or an athlete. The question is absurd. Men are not asked that. I am an athlete. I am a woman.”

-Billie Jean King

Chapter V presents the major findings, conclusions, and implications for action based on this phenomenological study. Conclusions and implications were drawn from the key findings of the research of literature and the study. The chapter closes with recommendations for future research and concluding remarks on the topic.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and discover the perceptions of elite female long-distance runners on the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brand throughout their athletic careers.

Central Question

What do elite female long-distance runners perceive as the benefits and challenges of using social media to build their personal brands?

Research Questions

1. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits of using social media on their personal brand?
2. What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the challenges of using social media on their personal brand?
Methodology

This study focused on elite women distance runners and the impact that social media has on their professional and personal lives. This study sought to better understand and describe the experiences that elite female athletes have using social media. This qualitative study will explore the experiences of elite female long-distance runners and attempt to capture their stories and how social media influences and impacts their personal brand. This phenomenological method was selected to capture the stories of elite female athletes and their attempt to market themselves and use social media for their personal brand. This methodology allowed the participants to tell their own stories and attempted to understand how elite female long-distance runners use social media platforms to acquire endorsements, sponsorships, followers, and fans for their professional and personal use. Using a phenomenological framework, the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of elite female long-distance runners and how they are impacted by social media not just professionally, but also personally.

Population

The population for this study is all female long-distance runners that have run United States Olympic Qualifying Standard in the marathon with a time of two hours and forty-five minutes or less and reside in The United States. The population of this study was 350 elite female long-distance runners, according to The United States Track and Field Olympic Marathon Committee press release (15 October 2019).

The sample for this study consisted of 10 elite female long-distance runners that have run two hours and forty-five minutes or less in the marathon. Each participant of the
study has run the standard, is 18 years of age or older, resides in California and is a current user of social media.

**Major Findings**

There were nine major findings that are associated with this research. The major findings from this research allowed for the researcher to analyze and draw conclusions. The following are findings, conclusions and implications. First are findings that are related to research question 1, *What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits of using social media on their personal brand?* Second, are the findings related to research question 2, *What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the challenges of using social media on their personal brand?* Lastly, are the unexpected findings uncovered from the study.

**Findings Related to Research Question 1**

Research question 1 asked: *What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the benefits of using social media on their personal brand?* Elite female long-distance runners in this study identified four different themes associated with the perceived benefits and challenges of using social media to build a personal brand.

**Finding 1: Using Social Media for Financial Gain**

Eighty percent of participants said that they currently receive products or financial assistance from one or more companies. All participants receiving assistance or products credited social media as being one of the tools that has allowed them access to these resources. Social media has been a critical tool for runners to communicate with brands and seek out opportunities from smaller companies that are looking for runners to sponsor.
Finding 2: Inspiration for Personal Brand from Other Influencers

Participants shared that they found inspiration for building a personal brand from other athletes and users with large followings on social media. Sixty percent of the participants shared that they mimicked other athletes or influencers accounts either with photographs, posts, content, or other imitational strategizing in order to try to appeal to more followers. Gaining inspiration from other influencers can be a helpful tool for building a personal brand. Guerin (2017) found that elite athletes classify social media as a benefit to their careers.

Finding 3: Connecting with Other Runners

One finding that was shared by all participants is they felt one of the main benefits of using social media was to specifically connect with other runners. All the study’s participants referenced that they, in one way or another, use social media to network with other users that run. One of the primary reasons for networking was to connect to other runners. Athletes report that they like using social media to interact with fans they have never met. Social media also allows athletes to communicate with other runners and stay in contact with competitors. Additionally, athletes report they enjoy staying in contact with other runners and maintaining friendship despite geographic separation (Guerin, 2017).

Finding 4: Support for Motherhood

Throughout interviews, participants shared that they find it inspiring when they see posts of pictures of women that have had children, and they show their postpartum belly that maybe has a lot of loose skin. Participants identified with posts and content that were directed toward women that have had children and felt that they could relate to what the
influencer was sharing. Often, elite athletes put off having children because they are worried that it may hinder their athletic performance, miss or lose endorsements, or chances to receive sponsorships (Darroch, Giles, Hillsburg & McGettigan-Dumas, 2019). Participants of the study also referenced that they found comfort when moms posted challenges of having children and training. These types of posts, transparency and authenticity made participants feel inspired through feeling that what they are experiencing is being normalized through social media.

“We all know that not every runner has a six-pack abdomen, so I like inspirational posts by athletes that have had children and are showing off their post-partum stomachs.” (Participant 10)

**Findings Related to Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked: *What do elite female long-distance runners perceive to be the challenges of using social media on their personal brand?*

In this study, participants shared that they feel that using social media can be habit forming. Participants also shared that they sometimes wish that social media was not available to use at all, and that in some ways athletes, and society, might be better off without it. These responses are all aligned to Research Question 2. The findings are concluded from the participant responses to the perceived challenges of using social media.

**Finding 5: Challenging to Appeal to a Variety of Followers**

When asked about motivations for posting on social media, 40% of participants identified that it was satisfying to receive comments and likes on photos. However, this type of feedback is not always consistent with followers. Participants share that
developing a following to properly brand themselves is very challenging. These participants identified that just sharing information about workouts or running was often not what got the most attention on their accounts. This potentially becomes a way to better promote themselves as athletes, but also helps bring attention to the athletes and gives them feedback on their photos or content. Studies have revealed that personal online branding is challenging and trying to appeal to a variety of followers can be particularly tough (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011). Moreover, participants identified that they received more followers when they posted images that were targeted for their audience; through monitoring their following, these images and content were often photos that were not images that the athlete always felt comfortable sharing. One participant explicitly shared that she felt many runners share information on social media that has nothing to do with sport, partly because she stated that social media seems to be a place where people want to discuss challenging topics such as a mental health.

Participant 4: “I find it interesting how so many runners now have become experts in all sorts of fields. I get that social media is a place where people can share whatever they want but, I am not getting what all these other issues have to do with people trying to promote their sport or promote their brand. I guess people just post whatever they think will get them followers, or traction on their accounts. I think the topics on mental health, depression, what to eat, what not to eat, all those things seem to be what people want to talk about. I just don’t get it.”

Finding 6: Social Media is Habit Forming

One of the findings was that 80% of the participants referenced that using social media was something they just did daily. Using social media to look at other athletes,
check up on what is going on in their networks was part of daily life. One of the participants shared that using social media was something she felt everyone in her personal life was a part of, and before, it just seems normal and natural. She later added that made her “feel sad, and it seems like a strange world that we live in, where so much of our lives is spent online.” Thirty percent of the participants said that they wished that social media did not exist altogether.

**Finding 7: Social Media Branding Does Not Permit Runners to Share What They Want**

Lastly, participants shared that they often feel forced or are required to share, promote, and encourage followers to use or purchase products that they are sponsored by. In this study, 90% of the participants shared that they feel they are not able to showcase who they really are online. One participant shared, “no one wants to see pictures of my everyday life or the moments that make me the happiest, simply because I believe that my followers aren’t following me as a person, they are following my product.” Two participants openly shared that if they were to share too much personal information about themselves, they might not only lose followers, but receive pushback from their sponsors. “Some sponsors are very particular about our content.” One participant shared, “I know about one brand and they do not want me posting pictures of anything outside of my athletics.” Further articulated through a more detailed response, “This is hard for me sometimes because I love my family and would love to share some of the wonderful moments I get to have with them. I think one of my sponsors feels that it may hurt my image if I post photos of myself with my friends or family. I know that my image of being tough is highly valued by sponsor.” (Participant 6) Participants referenced that posting
outside of what sponsors want could have huge negative implications. These findings validate one of the negatives that athletes feel when using social media for building a personal brand.

**Unexpected Findings**

Through analyzing the data of this qualitative research study, two unexpected findings were uncovered. These two unexpected findings are explained explicitly below.

**Finding 8: Majority of Participants did not Specialize in Distance Running Prior to High School Age.**

One unexpected finding is that 80% of the female participants interviewed stated when asked how long they had been running, that they did not solely run until high school. Two of the participants did not start running until after college and were college athletes, but in a different sport than running. It is a common belief that in order to compete at the National level in athletics, an athlete must start very young in their athletic career in order to be successful (Malina, 2010). It is commonly believed that young athletes must start early in their athletic careers, self-promoting, and working to be recognized in order to have the greatest athletic opportunities (Merkel, 2013). Moreover, this study demonstrated that one does not need to specialize in running starting at a young age in order to compete at a high level as an adult.

**Finding 9: Elite Female Long-Distance Runner Participants Chose Running Because They Felt They Could be a Successful Athlete Through Distance Running.**

Another unexpected finding is that participants said that they ended up becoming a long-distance runner because they felt it was something that they thought they could be successful at. Forty percent of participants shared that they became
passionate about running after trying a lot of other sports that didn’t work out. Interestingly, participants shared that when choosing to run competitively they considered that there were opportunities in college and beyond in distance running. Participants referenced that other sports require a team or did not have as many post-high school opportunities. Literature also has shown the potential role that distance running can provide a person supporting a healthy lifestyle. Running that is built into a runner’s daily life has a lot of physical and psychological benefits (Shipway & Holloway, 2010).

**Conclusions**

Based on the findings of this study, as supported by previous literature, the following conclusions can be made. The conclusions were derived from experiences that elite female long-distance runners have when building a personal brand through social media.

**Conclusion 1: Elite Runners Need to Manage Their Professional Brand**

A conclusion supported by the major findings is that elite female long-distance runners find it challenging to appeal to a variety of followers, should consider their professional brand and manage their brand in a way that they would like to be portrayed in the media. Social media is a way for all athletes to build a personal brand that can provide personal and professional benefits. Once an athlete has determined what type of audience they are going to create as a goal, they then must have specific and targeted strategies to appropriately brand themselves (Lobpries, Bennett & Brison, 2018).

Over half of the participants in the study stated that they did not receive any type of advice or management when developing an online brand. When asked the question, what recommendations or strategies would you give other female athletes regarding
building a personal brand? participants stated that they feel that athletes need guidance in using social media. Furthermore, understanding the implications of using social media to build a brand can be more work than anticipated. As a result, female athletes need to be informed of the risks, time, and implications of working to build an online brand. Furthermore, athletes should be given useful and sports-related strategies that provide a way for an athlete to build a personal brand that is long-lasting and reflects well on the athlete and portraying the image the athlete is striving for. Female athletes should be mentored on ways to build a media brand that fits their desires regarding how they would like to be portrayed (Freitas, 2017).

**Conclusion 2: Elite Female Long-Distance Runners Need to Know Their “Why” for Using Social media to Build a Personal Brand on Social Media**

A conclusion made based on the findings, and supported by literature, is when building a brand that others want to take part in, you must know your *why*. Based on responses from participants, it was clear that the athletes who were specific in what online brand they wanted to create understood why they wanted to create an online image. Based on the finding that participants felt that building a social media following is challenging to appeal to a variety of followers, knowing they why behind the motivations will help the athlete better navigate their personal passion and can lead to inspiration (Sinek, 2009).

**Conclusion 3: Elite Female Long-Distance Runners Need to Have a Plan They Follow in Order to Build an Accurate Online Image**

Based on the findings that participants share that building a brand online is challenging, athletes need to have a plan in which and how they build a brand. In order to
properly build an online brand, athletes should have an image in mind that they are trying to portray and understand how to successfully work to build an effective online following. Geurin (2016) makes strong recommendations on how athletes could potentially approach using social media to market themselves. This marketing approach is done through recommendations that athletes establishes clear goals in what they are trying to accomplish using social media.

**Conclusion 4: Elite Female Long-Distance Runners Must Self-Promote Online in Order to Build a Personal Brand**

Another conclusion based on findings from the study, is that women participants shared that they feel they do not have the same opportunities in running that many other sports provide to other athletes that provide support to athletes that are part of large governing sport agencies. Findings from the study revealed that the participants that have dedicated themselves to self-promotion and brand building gain much more from social media regarding sponsorship and financial gain. Conclusions drawn from brand identity theory, points to opportunities that imply that athletes that brand themselves properly, should in theory have impartial opportunities. However, based on the findings of this study, participants do not feel they have the same access to brand building of those as other athletes. Furthermore, personal branding affords athletes the possibilities to discover and create their own personal preferences in order to create an equitable brand (Lobpries, Bennett & Brison, 2018).
Conclusion 5: Building a Personal Brand Using Social Media is Personally Challenging and Confusing

Findings from the study revealed that female athletes feel that there are several nuances when working to build a brand on social media. This finding uncovered that participants specified that using social media to build a personal brand is very challenging. These challenges and the obstacles that runners are facing to build a brand online should be recognized and understood by runners to help alleviate frustration. Athletes don’t learn how to properly manage their brand identity. Creating a brand allows an athlete to create, connect, promote, and influence. However, this should be done appropriately and done to target a specific audience (Lobpries, Bennett & Brison, 2018). Additionally, participants acknowledged that there is tremendous pressure to post images and content that will get the most followers, which can be challenging to know what type of photos and or content to share. In the current age of social media, social media users receive the best benefits when they have many followers on social media. The more followers the athlete has, the more likely he or she is to receive support, regardless of athletic performance, which runners said was confusing.

Conclusion 6: Social Media Supports Elite Female Runners That are Expectant Mothers and Post-Partum

Findings yielded that participants use social media to follow and network with other runners that are moms and that are expectant mothers. One of the reasons participants stated that they like following the stories of elite runners that have children, is that they feel that it gives them inspiration to become a parent, and support if they are already are a parent.
Implications for Action

Based on the results of the study and a thorough review of literature, the following implications for action are recommended for athletes that wish to use social media to build a personal and professional brand.

Implication 1: Establish a Formal Mentoring and Sponsor Program

Based on the findings and the conclusions that participants share that building an online brand is challenging on multiple levels, professional sport brands should establish a formal mentor and sponsor program. These support programs should seek to support elite athletes wishing to use social media to develop a brand online. Athletes should make sure that they share photographs and content that align to their brand and belief system; this is something that is not always known to athletes prior to the start in working to build a brand (Guerin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Additionally, women are continuously faced with barriers to try to market themselves to gain followers on social media. Athletes need mentors to support them in content that they post online, provide support for safety, and help mitigate tough situations that may trigger emotional or troubling thoughts.

Implication 2: Schools Need to Develop Better Ways to Support Athletes

Based on the findings that eight of the participants did not start specializing in the sport until high school, grade school athletic programs should highlight that concentrating in long-distance running does not translate into post high school or collegiate success. Additionally, high schools need to develop ways to support athletes using social media to market themselves and mentor athletes on the implications of using social media that are both positive and negative.
Implication 3: Sponsorship Brands Need to be Accountable for What They Demand of Athletes

Based on the findings that athletes share that they feel they cannot promote their true self, sponsoring brands need to be accountable for what they demand of their athletes. These brands need to be held accountable for the requirements for posts, promotions and expectations of the presence that an athlete must hold online. There is tremendous pressure that is put on athletes to post or promote products that athletes might not feel they want to share about or is not part of the personal brand in which they would like to create online.

Implication 4: Sponsoring Brands Need to be Held Accountable for what They Expect Their Athletes to Share on Social Media

The findings and conclusions that depict that participants share that they feel pressure to post what they feel their stakeholders and followers want to see. Often, these posts do not align with the elite athlete’s intentions or what they personally would want to share. Sponsoring brands should be held accountable for what they expect their athletes to share or post, and if they are profiting from such marketing from an athlete, there should be adequate financial and brand support for the athlete that is promoting the brand.

Implication 5: Sponsoring Brands Need to Look for Reputable Athlete, Proper Representation, and Images to Promote Females in Sports.

Based on findings and conclusions that participant’s share that they feel pressure to post images that do not align to their value system. Participants identified that there is tremendous pressure to post images and content that will get the most followers. Bearing
in mind that social media has been a critical tool for runners to communicate with brands and seek out opportunities from smaller companies that are looking for runners to sponsor. Sponsoring brands should be looking for reputable athletes and proper representation, and images that promote females in sports.

**Implication 6: Sponsoring Brands Need to have More Support for Elite Female Runners During Pregnancy and Post-Partum**

Based on the findings and the conclusions that participants felt that using social media was a tool to connect with other elite runners that were expecting and or were post-partum was important for inspiring other athletes to become mothers or support current mothers, regardless of the possible backlash that they may experience from sponsors. Secondly, participants identified that seeing elite runners sharing pictures of their post-partum bodies often was encouraging for the participant to not be afraid to become a mother themselves.

Sponsoring brands need to have more support for elite female runners during pregnancy and post-partum. Prior research by asserts that athletic governing bodies and other sponsoring brands need to be cooperative with athletes when it comes to their practices with female athletes and motherhood. Additionally, governing bodies need to improve upon their current policies and their practices to have more impartial opportunities for women (Darroch, Giles, Hillsburg & McGettigan-Dumas, 2019).

**Implication 7: Support Programs Properly Support Young Athletes Wishing to use Social Media to Develop a Brand Online, and Self-Promote.**

Based on the findings and the conclusions that participants share that building an online brand is challenging on multiple levels, high school athletic programs should
establish a formal mentorship programs to support young athletes wishing to seek opportunities using social media. These support programs should seek out to support young athletes wishing to use social media to develop a brand online and or self-promote. Young athletes should make sure that they share photographs and content that align to their brand and belief system; this program should support athletes with understanding the implications of using social media on their personal and professional lives.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The following recommendations were made for further research based on the findings and conclusions of the study:

1. A replication study needs to be conducted that focuses on elite male distance runners and examine the experiences of elite male athletes and how they use social media to build a personal brand. A study that looks at elite male distance runners, in a comparison study, could lead to understand the experiences of using social media of elite male distance runners. Furthermore, explore the similarities and differences between elite men and female distance-runners when building a personal brand on social media.

2. Since this was the first study that was done with elite female long-distance runners that have qualified for the 2020 USA Olympic Trials in the marathon, there should be replicated study with contracted professional female distance-runners. Compare the experiences of professional contracted athletes with those of professional non-contracted female distance runners with similar running personal bests. This comparison study could help better understand the differences and similarities between female
distance runners that have sponsorships and those whom do not.

3. A replication study be conducted with additional elite female distance runners from outside of The United States of America (USA) and compare the experiences of those within the USA.

4. A replication study be conducted that focuses on elite runners that identify themselves as gender fluid. Examine the experiences of gender fluid athletes and seek to understand how they experience brand building on social media.

5. A replication study be conducted with female athletes from other sports to compare their experiences using social media and brand building in comparison to elite female long-distance runners.

6. A replication study be conducted with non-elite female long-distance runners to compare their experiences using social media and brand building in comparison to elite female long-distance runners.

7. Explore the experiences that athletes with mentorship in social media usage have when building a personal social media brand.

8. Explore the impact of using social media and the influence of social comparison to other athletes.

9. Explore and identify elite female long-distance runners that do not participate in social media and capture their experiences being an elite athlete without using social media.

**Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

As a female long-distance runner, myself, I too have worked to build a brand that monetizes my social media accounts. I personally have been involved in using social
media to connect with other athletes and have seen many of the benefits and challenges that are presented. With the opportunities that social media affords athletes, women have a tremendous opportunity to build a brand that portrays women as athletes and as women. As female athletes, we should be proud to represent our sport as an athlete and as a woman. Social media should not be a place where women are afraid to be their authentic self; they can portray an image that is appealing but not compromising, nor conforming to the historically underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female athletes.

There is literature that continues to show that women athletes are poorly represented in media, and social media is a way for women athletes to build a brand in which to draw attention to women’s sports and provide financial means and branding for a female athlete. However, there continues to be significant barriers for elite women athletes to properly build a name around their sport in which they can be properly recognized for their athleticism.

I sought to study something that would give insight to the experiences in which elite female long-distance runners were having in their quest to build a brand for themselves. I wanted to share the stories of elite female long-distance runners that are running and competing at the National level and give them a voice to share what it is like to use social media as a tool. I wanted to provide information that would allow athletic brands to recognize female athletes as elite athletes that can bring value to a brand because of their athletic work-ethic and abilities. In addition, I wanted to provide elite female long-distance runners with information that would empower them to create a personal brand that is not compromising to themselves or their sport. This study and
literature surrounding it, already has a strong influence and has impacted my own personal life, and I have already modified the way I portray myself online.

Interviewing these 10 extraordinary women athletes was a pleasure. I appreciate how genuine and authentic each participant was with me. I was able to learn a new perspective of the lives of athletes that are working so hard, not just in their sport but in their lives and careers to build a name for themselves. I admire the determination, grit, and perseverance that each one of my participants possessed. This process allowed me to see some of my participants sincerely think and ponder why they use social media and the impacts that social media has on their lives. I know for several of the participants, it was not easy to disclose and be vulnerable when sharing that they often feel that they are not true to themselves nor their values when posting on social media in order to create a brand and gain a following. The 10 participants provided great insight and feedback to contribute to the literature on social media and athletes. These implications are both positive and negative but can be used to benefit the future.

Geurin (2017) described many of the benefits and challenges that were shared by athletes using social media. Guerin’s study, looking at athletes and their experiences using social media, was focused on the demands that elite athletes faced when trying to build a personal media brand. This study looked at elite female athletes and their perceptions of using new media in relation to their careers. Throughout this study, Guerin (2017) describes ways athletes are faced with pressure to impress brands and build a personal sport brand.

This study is reflective of what I hope for the future of women in sports. Women should not feel that in order to receive sponsorships, financial gain, attention, fame or
acceptance that they should have to compromise their self, values or belief system, in
order to build a larger following or fan base. It would be my hope that brands will look at
athletes for their athletic ability and their positive influence rather than for looks, likes,
and ability to build followers on social media.
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129


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APPENDICES
**APPENDIX A**

**Synthesis Matrix**

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APPENDIX B

Participant Recruitment Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Elizabeth Camy and I’m a current marathon runner and Olympic Trials Qualifier in the marathon for the United States of America. I’m a doctoral candidate at Brandman University in the area of Organizational Leadership. I’m conducting research to explore the personal and professional experiences of elite female long-distance runners and their use of social media.

I would like to ask you to participate in my study. To participate in this study, I would be asking to interview you and this process should take about 30 minutes.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Camy
APPENDIX C

Informed Consent and Audio Recording Release

INFORMATION ABOUT: The professional and personal experiences of elite female long-distance runners using social media.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Elizabeth Camy

PURPOSE OF STUDY:
You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Elizabeth Camy, a doctoral student from the School of Education at Brandman University. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to identify and describe the professional and personal experiences of elite female long-distance runners using social media.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and will include an interview with the identified student investigator. The one-to-one interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete conducted via telephone and will be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience. The interview questions will pertain to your perceptions and your responses will be confidential. Each participant will have an identifying code and names will not be used in data analysis. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only.

I understand that:

a) The researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials safe-guarded in a locked file drawer or password...
protected digital file to which the researcher will have sole access.

b) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide not to participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer questions during the interview if I so choose. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

c) I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings, transcripts and notes taken by the researcher and transcriptionist from the interview will be destroyed.

d) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Elizabeth Camy (805)210-0896 or ecamy@mail.brandman.edu or; or Dr. Marilou Ryder (Committee Chair) at ryder@brandman.edu.

e) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and consent re-obtained. There are minimal risks associated with participating in
this research.

f) If I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

e) No information

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

_________________________________________ Date: ____________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party

_________________________________________ Date: ____________
Signature of Principal Investigator
Field Test Participant Feedback Questions

While conducting the interview you should take notes of their clarification request or comments about not being clear about the question. After you complete the interview ask your field test interviewee the following clarifying questions. **Try not to make it another interview; just have a friendly conversation.** Either script or record their feedback so you can compare with the other two members of your team to develop your feedback report on how to improve the interview questions.

*Before the brief post interview discussion, give the interviewee a copy of the interview protocol as you review the following feedback questions. If their answers imply that improvement is necessary, seek their clarification.*

1. How did you feel about the interview? Do you think you had ample opportunities to describe the social and educational factors that may have motivated you to peruse aviation?

2. Did you feel the amount of time for the interview was ok?

3. Were the questions by and large clear or were there places where you were uncertain what was being asked? *If the interviewee indicates some uncertainty, be sure to find out where in the interview it occurred.*

4. Can you recall any words or terms being asked about during the interview that were confusing?

5. And finally, did I appear comfortable during the interview… (I’m pretty new at this)? *Remember, the key is to use common, conversational language and very user friendly approach. Put that Emotional Intelligence to work😊*

*NOTE: Red font is for your eyes and support info only. Field test participant only receives or is asked questions 1-5.*
APPENDIX E

Interview Feedback Reflection Questions

Conducting interviews is a learned skill set/experience. Gaining valuable insight about your interview skills and affect with the interview will support your data gathering when interviewing the actual participants. As the researcher you should reflect on the questions below after completing the interview. You should also discuss the following reflection questions with your ‘observer’ after completing the interview field test. The questions are written from your perspective as the interviewer. Provide your observer with a copy of these reflective questions prior to the field test interview. Then you can verbalize your thoughts with the observer, and they can add valuable insight from their observation. After completing this process, you may have edits or changes to recommend for the interview protocol before finalizing.

1. How long did the interview take? Did the time seem to be appropriate?
2. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous?
3. Did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared?
4. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?
5. Are there parts of the interview that seemed to be awkward and why do you think that was the case?
6. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would it be and how would you change it?
7. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?
APPENDIX F

Interview Script and Informed Consent

My name is Elizabeth Camy and I’m a current marathon runner and Olympic Trials Qualifier in the marathon for the United States of America. I’m a doctoral candidate at Brandman University in the area of Organizational Leadership. I’m conducting research to explore the personal and professional experiences of elite female long-distance runners and their use of social media.

I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The information you give, along with the others, hopefully will provide a better understanding of how social media impacts and influences women athletes.

The questions I will be asking are the same for everyone participating in the study. The reason for this is to try and guarantee, as much as possible, that my interviews with all participating female runners will be conducted pretty much in the same manner.

Informed Consent

I would like to remind you any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). For ease of our discussion and accuracy I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent sent to you via email. I will have the recording transcribed to a Word document and will send it to you via e-mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas. The digital recording will be erased when this study is completed.

Did you receive the Informed Consent and Brandman Bill of Rights I sent you via email?
Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document?

If so, would you be so kind as to sign the hard copy of the IRB requirements, and email it to me?

We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point during the interview you may ask that I skip a question or stop the interview altogether.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Okay, let’s get started, and thanks so much for your time.
APPENDIX G

Interview Script

Participant: ________________________________
Date: _____________________________________

INTERVIEWER SAYS:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today in order to interview you on your lived experience as an elite runner and your use of social media. I am currently working on a dissertation to complete a Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership and this interview will be a part of the research I will use to complete the dissertation.

The objective of this research is this: to produce qualitative insights into elite long-distance runner female-athletes and their use social media site using semi-structured interviews. What is needed, however, are a greater number and variety of qualitative studies regarding individual use of social media by elite female athletes, in order to go beyond broad generalizations and instead explore the variety of attitudes and opinions and impacts on their professional and personal lives held by individuals. This study aims to fill this gap by studying how female athletes view, and use the social media websites, and therefore, hopes to contribute to media and communications studies’ understandings of this type of media, and athletes personal and professional experiences.

Your participation is completely voluntary and will greatly strengthen the study. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or would like to end the interview or not respond to a question, please let me know. Your information will be kept confidential and your name will be changed to protect your identity. In addition, I have provided a copy of the questions that I will ask for your reference; however, I may have follow-up questions if clarity is needed. The duration of this interview will take approximately: 30 minutes. Do you have any questions about the interview process?
CONSENT FORM:

The document I am providing is an informed consent form. It explains much of the information I have shared as well as outlines the benefits and risks of your participation. Please take a moment to read through the form and sign showing your consent.

INTERVIEWER SAYS:

As we get started, I would like to record this interview for transcribing purposes so that I can access it later. I would like to be able to accurately represent you experiences, and at no time will your name be shared. I would also like to be able to video record only the last question that asks your advice to be offered to other mothers who may be considering career reentry. Your video recorded advice will be used to add depth of emotion as well as genuine sincerity in your answer. Again, I will make sure that your confidentiality is always kept. Do I have your permission to continue with this interview and record it and video record last question? (Obtain permission and turn on recording devises)
1. Background Information

   a. Can you tell me a little about how you became interested in becoming a long-distance runner?

   b. How long have you been a long-distance runner?

   c. Did you participate in running in high school?

   d. College? If so, where? For how long? Awards?

   e. Professionally? If so, what capacity?

2. Social Media Accounts

   a) What social media accounts do you currently use to promote yourself as an elite long-distance runner?

   b) Of those accounts how many approximate followers do you have for each one?

   c) Approximately how much time per day/week do you spend previewing other athlete’s social media account?

   d) Approximately how much time per day/week do you spend posting images and narratives of yourself as an athlete on social media accounts?

3. Social Media Use

   a) What motivates you as an athlete to post your photographs on social media?

   b) Do you do anything special or out of the ordinary to gain followers on your social media athletic accounts?
c) Can you give me some examples of the types of photographs that you post on your social media accounts?

d) Can you share a story of how your photographs on social media have produced positive results or experiences in your personal life?

e) Can you share a story of how your photographs on social media have produced any negative results or experiences in your personal life?

f) Can you share a story of how your photographs on social media have produced positive results or experiences in your professional life?

g) Can you share a story of how your photographs on social media have produced any negative results or experiences in your professional life?

4. Personal/Professional Advice

   a) What recommendations or words of wisdom do you have for female athletes regarding their use of social media?

   b) Can you give an example of anything you would do differently/same regarding your use of social media as a female athlete?

Possible probes that can be added to any question, for clarification:

1. “Would you expand upon that a bit?”
2. “Do you have more to add?”
3. “What did you mean by …?”
4. “Why do think that was the case?”
5. “Could you please tell me more about….”
6. “Can you give me an example of ….”
7. “How did you feel about that?”
APPENDIX I

Participants Bill of Rights

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participant’s Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.

2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.

3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.

4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.

5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.

6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.

7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.

8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.

9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.

10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

Brandman University IRB

Adopted

November 2013

169