

It's just sport... until it isn't.



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An investigation into how involvement in sport influences identity, as well as its physical and mental effects, and how these impacts extend across generations and cheerleading.

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Introduction:

My Personal Interest Project investigates how involvement in sport affects identity, alongside the physical and mental effects on individuals as they grow up through the sport and after leaving the sport. While sport can create confidence, belonging, and community, it can also cause pressure, long-term injury, and identity loss.

This project explores how these experiences and values extend across generations, and sees the ways that different age groups have been shaped through their involvement in sport. The focus of my Personal Interest Project is to investigate the mental and physical effects of sport, and how involvement in sport can influence an individual's identity, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. This project will also explore how these impacts and experiences continue to grow and extend across generations, shaping the ways different age groups experience sport through family traditions, social expectations, community involvement, and changing societal values. Since I am exploring more topic accross generations, I will see the change in the importance and awareness across mental health, inclusion and body image compared to the previous generations, where physical and mental health weren't prioritised within sport.

The topic of the cross generational concepts through me exploring the different effects of sport from each generation, for example, Generation Alpha (born 2013–2024) will be currently participating in sport compared to Gen X (born 1965–1980) that will have long term effects, mental and physical effects from their past sport.

I have incorporated the use of primary and secondary research methods, which include secondary research from multiple articles, and primary research from cross generational questionnaire, interviews from professional sport coaches, a personal reflection, and a content analysis. I chose to look through multiple articles from past research completed by professionals in the industry on mental and physical health, including in sport. I chose to do a cross-generational questionnaire to understand the different effects from generations. The interview will help understand the point of view from a coach to have different views on the different situations sport can cause. The personal reflection I chose to do because I

have my own experiences included within the area focusing on my personal mental and physical health, as well as the support surrounding the sport of cheerleading that I received.

Log

I decided to choose this topic after I had just quit cheerleading. Cheerleading had been my main focus in life for the past five years. Leaving the sport changed my life in ways I didn't expect. By the time I had quit, I was more ready than I initially realised. I had researched a point where I dreaded training due to my pain levels. When I left, I felt a sense of freedom, not only from the extra time I gained but also from the physical pain and mental pressure. About a month after quitting, I noticed a significant decrease in my pain levels, which was a significant realisation for me. I also felt less pressure to be perfect and meet expectations. Experiencing this sparked my inspiration and motivation to do further research into this topic. At the beginning of my Personal Interest Project brainstorming process, I planned to explore a completely different topic. However, I realised I wanted to focus on something I was more interested in and had a stronger personal reflection on. After discussions with others and teachers, I decided to focus on cheerleading. I then expanded my topic to explore sport as a whole, as I realised a project solely focused on cheerleading would have been too narrow. Through further reflection, I decided to investigate the positive and negative impacts of sport on mental and physical health, as my own experiences allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of how sport can influence identity, wellbeing, and personal experiences. For my secondary research, I used the State Library to access articles exploring the impact of sport on mental and physical health. I discovered that many existing studies focused on Olympic-level and elite athletes rather than everyday athletes, this did not align with my primary research the way I wanted it to. This highlighted the importance of selecting sources that were relevant to a wide range of sporting experiences. I also conducted an interview with a cheerleading coach to gain insight into how coaches view athletes and their experiences. Additionally, I completed a personal reflection to connect my own experiences to my research. At the beginning, I struggled with where to start. However, creating my questionnaire and conducting secondary research helped me develop a stronger understanding of my topic. Rather than following a strict timeline, I worked on my project when I had inspiration for ideas and motivation, which helped me gain interest and excitement for the project. I think this experience overall has improved my understanding of research, and I now recognise the importance of using effective methods to create reliable and meaningful research.

Chapter One: Shaped by Sport

Through the Generation Z (1999-2014) and Generation Alpha (2014-2024), this focuses on the mental and physical effects of sport and the ways family traditions, social expectations, community, involvement and changing societal values affect individuals.

Generations Z (1999-2014) and Generation Alpha (2014-2024), the age groups I am focusing on, range from mid-twenties down to around 13 years of age. This places them largely within adolescence and early adulthood, which is a key stage for identity formation and physical development. It is also typically the period where individuals are not actively involved in sport, whether through school, clubs, or recreational participation. Because of this, the effects of sport being both negative and positive are often experienced in real time and are still fresh in participants' memories. These effects can include changes in confidence, pressure from competition and physical wellbeing, and mental health outcomes such as stress or motivation. As a result, researching these generations provides relevant and current insights into how sport shapes identity and influences both mental and physical states during a person's formative years.

Within Generation Z and Generation Y, The Society and Culture concepts are socialisation, power, and identity. Identity is a key focus since sport often plays a major role in how adolescents view themselves. Being involved in sport can shape identity through roles such as being an athlete, teammate, or leader. These roles can build confidence and a sense of belonging, while they can also create pressure, especially when performance is linked to self-worth or comparison with others. Socialisation links to how individuals learn behaviours and values through sport. In sporting environments, young people develop teamwork, discipline, resilience, and communication skills. Coaches, peers, and school systems all contribute to the process, shaping how athletes respond to failure, success, and group expectations. For these generations, sport is often an early and consistent space for learning how to function in a structured group setting. Power is reflected through coaches, parents and other athletes. Coaches often control training, selection, and feedback, which can strongly influence confidence and motivation. Parents may also add pressure or support depending on their expectations. This power dynamic can shape adolescent experience in sport, sometimes positively by encouraging improvement, but also negatively through stress or burnout.

Continuity and change are evident through similarities and differences between Generation Z and Generation Alpha and their experiences in sport. A clear continuity is that sport continues to play an important role in young people's lives by encouraging physical activity, teamwork, discipline, and social connection. Across both generations, sport still contributes to identity formation and personal development during adolescence. However, there have also been significant changes in the sporting environment over time. Generation Alpha has grown up in a more digital and highly connected world, where social media, online pressure, and constant comparison can influence sporting experiences more intensely than for earlier generations. Expectations surrounding performance and success have also increased, with greater pressure from schools, clubs, parents, and competitive pathways. In addition, awareness surrounding mental health in sport has become more openly discussed within younger generations, changing the way athletes respond to stress, burnout, and pressure. These continuities and changes demonstrate how sport remains influential across generations while evolving alongside social and cultural developments.

My cross-cultural component focus is on comparing different generations rather than directly contrasting them against each other. My primary research defines clear differences in responses between generations, which highlights varying experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of sport. These differences help demonstrate cross-cultural variation across Generation Y and Generation Alpha, particularly in how sports influence identity, mental health, and social development. By analysing these contrasting responses, I can explore how social expectations, sporting environments, and cultural influences have shifted over time, shaping each generation's unique experience of sport.

My primary research was conducted through a questionnaire targeting Generation Z and Generation Alpha participants currently involved in sport. The questionnaire aimed to investigate the physical, mental and social effects sport has on adolescents and young adults. The findings showed that sport had both positive and negative impacts, particularly during adolescence when identity and personal development are still forming.

One major finding was the amount of time adolescents dedicate to sport, with 56% of participants spending around 12 hours per week participating in sporting activities.¹ This

¹ Questionair Question 1 under Generation Z, Questionair Question 1 under Generation Alpha (used may 7th 2026)

level of involvement suggest sport plays a major role in adolescents' lives, however, it may also impact schoolwork and mental wellbeing. Supporting this, 44.1% of respondents stated that sport negatively affected their ability to manage schoolwork², while 35.3% answered “sometimes”. In addition, 53% of participants reported experiencing stress, burnout, or exhaustion through sport.³

Despite these challenges, the research highlighted many positive outcomes. Participants strongly associated sport with teamwork, fitness, confidence, discipline, and resilience.⁴ within Generation Alpha response, all participants identified teamwork, leadership, confidence, and overcoming challenges as skills developed through sport.⁵ This demonstrates the strong positive role sport plays in identity formation and socialisation.

However, negative physical and mental impacts were also common. Physical injuries were experienced by 88.2% of participants⁶, while chronic pain and injury were also highly reported.⁷ Some respondents also identified body image issues, depression, and loss of identity connected to sport⁸. Additionally, many participants experienced pressure from coaches, parents, or peers, showing the influence of power within the sporting environments. Overall, the research demonstrates that sport can positively shape identity and well-being while also contributing to pressure, stress, and long-term physical strain.

My secondary research focused on academic articles and studies exploring how sport influences adolescent mental health, identity, and wellbeing, particularly through coaching environments and sporting culture. Overall, the research consistently shows that sport has both strong positive benefits and a significant risk depending on the environment and support systems in place.

² Questionair Question 5 under Generation Z(used may 1st 2026)

³ Questionair Question 6 under Generation Z(used may 1st 2026)

⁴ Questionair Question 2 under Generation Z (used may 1st 2026)

⁵ Questionair Question 2 under Generation Alpha (used may 1st 2026)

⁶ Questionair Question 3 under Generation Z, Questionair Question 3 under Generation Alpha (used may 9th 2026)

⁷ Questionair Question 3 under Generation Z, Questionair Question 3 under Generation Alpha (used may 1st 2026)

⁸ Questionair Question 3 under Generation Z, Questionair Question 3 under Generation Alpha (used may 11th 2026)

A key finding across multiple sources was the importance of the coach-initiated motivational climate. Research shows that athletes in a task-related clinic, like being focused on effort, teamwork, learning, and improvement, reported significantly high levels of wellbeing ($\beta = .33$), resilience ($\beta = .31$), and psychological safety ($\beta = .54$)⁹. In comparison, athletes in an ego-related climate which is focused on winning, comparison, and punishment for mistakes, seem to experience lower psychological safety ($\beta = -.23$) and higher levels of stress and burnout.¹⁰ For example, athletes in high task/low ego environments recorded psychological safety scores of 5.79, compared to only 3.81 in low task/high ego environments. This highlights how strongly coaching style can influence adolescents' mental health and confidence in sport.

The articles also show that sport participation has broad development benefits for adolescents, including physical health, social development, and psychological growth. However, it also identifies clear risks such as injury, anxiety, stress, burnout, and pressure from performance expectations. Studies highlight that elite and competitive environments are increasingly linked to mental health challenges, with more athletes openly reporting depression and emotional strain in recent years¹¹.

Historical research further supports these findings, showing that sport has long been used both as a physical and psychological outlet for stress, helping individuals cope with social change and pressure. However, modern research suggests that while sport can act as a protective factor for mental health, it can also become harmful when excessive pressure, comparison, and lack of support exist.¹²

⁹ Eather N and others, 'The Impact of Sports Participation on Mental Health and Social Outcomes in Adults: A Systematic Review and the "Mental Health through Sport" Conceptual Model' (2023) 12 Systematic Reviews 1 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10286465/>> (used may 4th 2026)

¹⁰ Eather N and others, 'The Impact of Sports Participation on Mental Health and Social Outcomes in Adults: A Systematic Review and the "Mental Health through Sport" Conceptual Model' (2023) 12 Systematic Reviews 1 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10286465/>> (used may 4th 2026)

¹¹ Merkel D, 'Youth Sport: Positive and Negative Impact on Young Athletes' (2013) 4 Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine 151 <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3871410/>> (used may 4th 2026)

¹² Merkel D, 'Youth Sport: Positive and Negative Impact on Young Athletes' (2013) 4 Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine 151 <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3871410/>> (used may 10th 2026)

Overall, the secondary research reinforces that sport is a powerful influence on adolescent identity and well-being, but its impact is heavily shaped by coaching style, environment, and the level of psychological safety provided within sporting spaces.

Through both my questionnaire research and secondary research, I have stated how the mental and physical affects adolescent individuals through the support of the community around them and the environment they are exposed to.

Chapter Two, The lasting Impact of Sport:

Through the use of cross-cultural concepts, including Generation X (born 1965–1980), and Generation Y (born 1981-1998), and researching the mental and physical effects after years of doing the sport, and on-going effects. Generation X (born 1965-1980) and Generation Y (born 1981-1998) demonstrate the long-term effects of participating in sport during adolescence, highlighting how sport can continue to create both positive and negative physical and mental impact throughout an individual's life.

Sport plays a major role in shaping identity throughout adolescence within Generation X and Generation Y. Many individuals connect their confidence, self-worth, and sense of belonging to their sporting performance and achievements. While sport often creates friendships, discipline, and purpose, leaving a sport sometimes causes identity loss and reduces self confidence, showing the long-term influence sport can have on an individual's well-being. Belief systems and values surrounding sport have changed across generations. Generation X commonly experienced sporting cultures that valued toughness and endurance, often encouraging athletes to “play through pain” In comparison, Generation Y experiences increasing awareness surrounding mental health and wellbeing. These changing attitudes reflect society's evolving values towards sport, success, and athlete welfare. The experiences of Generation X and Generation Y demonstrate continuity and change within sporting culture over time. Older generations were often exposed to stricter coaching styles and environments where mental health and athlete wellbeing were not openly discussed. In comparison, younger generations have experienced increased awareness surrounding mental health, injury prevention, and balance within sport. Despite these challenges, pressure to succeed and expectations surrounding performance continue to remain a strong aspect of sporting culture across generations.

My cross-cultural component within this chapter focuses on exploring the experiences of different generations through sport, specifically Generation X and Generation Y. Rather than directly comparing generations against one another, this chapter examines the varying long-term emotional and physical effects that sport has had on individuals throughout their lives. This includes the ways sport has influenced identity, confidence, wellbeing, relationships, and emotional values over time. By exploring these experiences across

generations, this chapter highlights how changing sporting cultures, social expectations, and attitudes towards mental health have shaped each generation's unique experience of sport.

Primary research was conducted through a cross-generational questionnaire targeting Generation X (born 1965-1980) and Generation Y (born 1981-1998) to investigate the long-term mental and physical effects of adolescent sporting involvement. Through the use of cross-cultural concepts, the questionnaire highlighted both similarities and differences in the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions surrounding sport across generations. These responses demonstrated how sport can contribute to positively and negatively impacting individuals through into adulthood.

Within Generation X, 55% of participants experienced physical injuries from sport,¹³ while 40% reported ongoing chronic pain or injury.¹⁴ However, many participants also reflected positively on the social skills developed through sport, with 85% identifying teamwork as a characteristic developed through their sporting experience.¹⁵ Additionally, 55% believed competitive sport has become more demanding over time, reflecting changing societal expectations surrounding performance and success in sport.¹⁶

Similarly, Generation Y responses highlighted the ongoing effects of sport on identity and wellbeing. 50% of participants strongly agreed that sport contributed to their sense of identity¹⁷, demonstrating the strong connection between sport and self-perception during adolescence. Furthermore, 75% of respondents experienced physical injury, while others reported long-term effects, including chronic pain, depression, and loss of identity, while in sport and after leaving sport.¹⁸ Many responses also revealed the emotional pressures associated with competition, including anxiety surrounding performance, fear of failure, and reduced self-worth when not achieving sporting success.¹⁹ Overall, the questionnaire demonstrated that sport can create lasting physical, emotional, and social impacts that continue through all stages of life.

¹³ Questionnaire, Generation X Question 3 (used May 4th 2026)

¹⁴ Questionnaire, Generation X Question 3 (used May 5th 2026)

¹⁵ Questionnaire, Generation X Question 2 (used May 3rd 2026)

¹⁶ Questionnaire, Generation X Question 7 (used May 3rd 2026)

¹⁷ Questionnaire, Generation Y Question 2 (used May 3rd 2026)

¹⁸ Questionnaire, Generation Y Question 4 (used May 3rd 2026)

¹⁹ Questionnaire, Generation Y Question 3 (used May 3rd 2026)

Secondary research was conducted to investigate the long-term mental, physical, and social effects of sport across adulthood, particularly focusing on former athletes and ongoing participation. Findings consistently show that sport participation is strongly associated with improved mental health outcomes, including lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological wellbeing.²⁰ Sport also contributes to stronger social connection and a greater sense of belonging, particularly through team-based environments.²¹

However, research also highlights more complex outcomes for elite and high-performance athletes. Approximately 1 in 3 elite athletes reported experiencing mental health symptoms²² requiring treatment, despite also reporting higher life satisfaction and self-esteem compared to non-athletes. This suggests that while sport can provide positive psychological benefits, high-performance environments may also increase pressure, stress, and emotional vulnerability.²³

Long-term studies on former athletes show mixed outcomes following retirement from sport. Many individuals experience “athlete identity loss”²⁴ particularly when sport has been central to their sense of self since a young age. This transition is often associated with depression, anxiety, grief, and reduced life satisfaction, especially when retirement is sudden due to injury or non-selection. Research also highlights physical long-term effects, including chronic pain, joint injury, and reduced mobility, which can limit on going physical activity and can impact mental health²⁵.

²⁰ Eather N and others, ‘The Impact of Sports Participation on Mental Health and Social Outcomes in Adults: A Systematic Review and the “Mental Health through Sport” Conceptual Model’ (2023) 12 Systematic Reviews 1 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10286465/>>(used may 7th 2026)

²¹ Eather N and others, ‘The Impact of Sports Participation on Mental Health and Social Outcomes in Adults: A Systematic Review and the “Mental Health through Sport” Conceptual Model’ (2023) 12 Systematic Reviews 1 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10286465/>> (used may 7th 2026)

²² Eather N and others, ‘The Impact of Sports Participation on Mental Health and Social Outcomes in Adults: A Systematic Review and the “Mental Health through Sport” Conceptual Model’ (2023) 12 Systematic Reviews 1 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10286465/>>(used may 7th 2026)

²³ Eather N and others, ‘The Impact of Sports Participation on Mental Health and Social Outcomes in Adults: A Systematic Review and the “Mental Health through Sport” Conceptual Model’ (2023) 12 Systematic Reviews 1 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10286465/>>(used may 7th 2026)

²⁴ Anderson B, ‘The Psychological Hurdle of Sports Retirement’ (www.psychiatry.org 5 October 2020) <<https://www.psychiatry.org/News-room/APA-Blogs/The-Psychological-Hurdle-of-Sports-Retirement>> (used may 5th 2026)

²⁵ Jacob John Capin and others, ‘Midlife Health Crisis of Former Competitive Athletes: Dissecting Their Experiences via Qualitative Study’ (2024) 10 BMJ open sport & exercise medicine (used may 9th 2026)

Despite these challenges, continued participation in recreational or community sport is linked to positive ageing outcomes, including improved mood, better self-rated health and reduced depressive symptoms, particularly in adults ages 65+ ²⁶. Overall, secondary research demonstrates that sport has lasting cross-generational effects, shaping identity, wellbeing, and physical health long after active participation ends.

²⁶ Jacob John Capin and others, 'Midlife Health Crisis of Former Competitive Athletes: Dissecting Their Experiences via Qualitative Study' (2024) 10 BMJ open sport & exercise medicine(used may 9th 2026)

Chapter Three: The Cheerleading Culture:

Using the Society and Culture concepts of identity, socialisation, belief systems, and continuity and change, this chapter investigates how the physical and mental effects of sport are experienced through personal involvement in cheerleading, while examining the influence of coaches, team culture, and the broader sporting community.

I started cheerleading when I was in Year Six, at the age of twelve. At this age, numerous physical and mental changes occur in the body, and the sport presents both physically and mentally demanding advantages and challenges. Growing up in a world of cheerleading, particularly within the same gym, creates lifelong friendships with teammates, strong connections with coaches, and a sense of community that becomes like a second family. Because of this, I wanted to include a chapter that focuses on both my personal experiences and the perspective of coaches, providing an insight into what life is really like on the inside of the cheerleading world.

Identity is explored through the ways participation in cheerleading contributes to an individual's sense of self and personal development. The experiences, relationships, achievements, and challenges encountered within the sport can shape confidence, self-perception, and an individual's overall identity. Socialisation is demonstrated through the influence of coaches, teammates, and the wider cheerleading environment on an individual's behaviours, attitudes, and values. Participation in the sport encourages the development of teamwork, communication, discipline, and resilience through ongoing social interactions.²⁷ Belief systems and values are reflected in the expectations and principles that underpin participation in cheerleading, including commitment, perseverance, respect, and teamwork. These shared values are reinforced through coaching practices and team culture, influencing behaviours, decision-making, and individual development both within and beyond the sporting environment.

Continuity and change are explored through the significant evolution of cheerleading from a sideline activity into a highly competitive international sport. The introduction of prestigious competitions such as the ICU World Cheerleading competition and The

²⁷ **Athlete Wellbeing and Team Environment Question one coaches interview: From your perspective as a coach, how does cheerleading positively impact athletes mentally and emotionally? (used june 30th 2026)**

Cheerleading Worlds has increased global participation, raised athletic standards, and challenged the traditional assumption²⁸ that cheerleading is solely about supporting other sports. While the sport has undergone considerable change through increased recognition, professionalism, and greater focus on athlete well-being and safety, its core values of teamwork, dedication, and perseverance have remained consistent.²⁹

The secondary research for this chapter was gathered through an expert interview with an experienced cheerleading coach who has worked with athletes across a variety of ages and competitive levels. This research provided valuable insight into the realities of competitive cheerleading from a coaching perspective, allowing the investigation to move beyond personal experiences and include the observations of someone who has supported athletes throughout their development. The responses were highly relevant to the focus of this chapter, as they explored the physical, mental, and social impacts of cheerleading, while also examining the challenges athletes face throughout their participation and after leaving the sport.

A major finding through the interview was the positive influence that cheerleading has on an athlete's confidence, resilience, and emotional development³⁰. The interviewer explained that athletes are constantly challenged to overcome fear by attempting new skills and learning to trust both themselves and their teammates. Rather than achieving success immediately, athletes often experience setbacks before mastering new skills, teaching them patience, perseverance, and the importance of hard work³¹. These qualities were identified as valuable life skills that extended beyond the gym into education, relationships, and future careers.

The interview also highlighted the importance of teamwork and belonging within cheerleading culture. The interviewer described the sport as one that depends entirely on trust, communication, and cooperation, explaining that every athlete plays an essential role

²⁸ Reflection and Broader Society Question two coaches interview: How has cheerleading culture changed over the years you have been involved in the sport?(used june 30th 2026)

²⁹ Reflection and Broader Society Question two coaches interview: How has cheerleading culture changed over the years you have been involved in the sport? (used june 30th 2026)

³⁰ Athlete Wellbeing and Team Environment, question one: From your perspective as a coach, how does cheerleading positively impact athletes mentally and emotionally? (used june 30th 2026)

³¹ Athlete Wellbeing and Team Environment, question one: From your perspective as a coach, how does cheerleading positively impact athletes mentally and emotionally? (used june 30th 2026)

in the success and safety of the team³². Long training sessions, competitions, travel, and shared experiences create close friendships and a supportive environment where many athletes feel understood and accepted. The interviewer suggested that these strong social connections are one of the most rewarding aspects of the sport and contribute significantly to athletes' confidence and overall wellbeing³³. The research also provided a detailed understanding of the physical demands of competitive cheerleading. The interviewer explained that athletes require a combination of strength, flexibility, endurance, coordination, and body awareness to safely do stunts, tumbling, jumps, and dance elements within a single routine. The interview challenged common stereotypes surrounding cheerleading by emphasising that the sport requires the same level of athleticism and commitment as other highly demanding sports³⁴. The interviewer also discussed the importance of injury prevention and rehabilitation, explaining that appropriate recovery programs, physiotherapy, and gradual return to sport plans are essential for reducing the risk of long-term injuries³⁵.

While many positive outcomes were identified, the interview also explored the pressures experienced by athletes. The interviewer acknowledged that social media, competitive culture, and unrealistic expectations can contribute to body image concerns, performance pressure, stress, anxiety, and burnout³⁶. However, the responses also demonstrated that supportive coaching, open communication, and positive team environments can reduce these pressures and encourage healthy coping strategies. This provided a balanced perspective by recognising that although competitive cheerleading presents challenges, the environment created by coaches and teammates can significantly influence and impact how athletes manage these experiences³⁷.

³² Athlete Wellbeing and Team Environment, question three: How important is teamwork and social connection within cheerleading culture? (used june 30th 2026)

³³ Athlete Wellbeing and Team Environment, question three: How important is teamwork and social connection within cheerleading culture? (used june 30th 2026)

³⁴ Physical Effects of Cheerleading, question one: What physical benefits do athletes commonly gain from cheerleading? (used june 30th 2026)

³⁵ Physical Effects of Cheerleading, question two: How physically demanding do you believe competitive cheerleading is compared to other sports? (used july 3rd 2026)

³⁶ Physical Effects of Cheerleading, question three: Have you observed anxiety, stress, or burnout within athletes involved in the sport? (used july 4th 2026)

³⁷ Physical Effects of Cheerleading, question four: How does social media and competition culture affect athletes' mental health? (used july 4th 2026)

One of the most significant findings from the interview was the lasting impact cheerleading has after athletes leave the sport. The interviewer explained that many athletes struggle with the transition because cheerleading becomes part of their daily routine, friendships, and identity over many years³⁸. Feelings of loss, uncertainty, and dissociation were identified as common experiences following retirement from the sport, with some athletes choosing to remain involved through coaching, judging, or choreography to maintain their connection with the cheerleading environment and community³⁹. This highlighted that the influence of cheerleading often continues well beyond active participation, helping the transition out of the sport.

Overall, the interview strengthened this investigation by providing an experienced coaching perspective that supported many of the themes identified through primary research and personal experience. The interview reinforced that cheerleading is far more than a physically demanding sport. The sport itself contributes to confidence, resiliency, discipline, teamwork, and lifelong friendships while also presenting challenges associated with pressure, injury, and transitioning out of competition. These findings contributed to a more balanced understanding of the long-term physical, mental, and social impacts of participation in competitive cheerleading.

Throughout my involvement in cheerleading, I have been supported in my passion for the sport of cheerleading, shaping my personal development. This is shown throughout my personal reflection.

Within the micro world, the greatest influence came from my family, particularly my parents, who constantly encouraged participation and supported the pursuit of sporting goals. Their ongoing commitment provided opportunities to compete at state, national, and international levels, allowing valuable experiences to be gained both within competition and through personal growth. This support established the foundation for long-term involvement in cheerleading and reinforced the confidence to pursue increasingly challenging opportunities⁴⁰.

³⁸ Identity and Life After Sport, question one: From your experience, how difficult is it for athletes to leave cheerleading after many years in the sport? (used July 4th 2026)

³⁹ Identity and Life After Sport, question one: From your experience, how difficult is it for athletes to leave cheerleading after many years in the sport? (used July 4th 2026)

⁴⁰ Question one Personal Reflection: How have people in your Micro Meso Macro world responded to your passion? Outline and describe your personal connection to the topic. (used July 5th 2026)

Within the meso world, the cheerleading gym, including coaches, teammates, and the gym owner, had a profound influence on personal development. Entering the sport at the age of twelve, confidence was limited and participating in unfamiliar situations often felt challenging. Through years of training within a supportive environment, confidence, resiliency, leadership, and communication skills gradually developed. Coaches consistently encouraged athletes to challenge themselves while promoting teamwork, discipline, and perseverance. Although these mentors supported every athlete equally rather than focusing on individual success, their guidance created a positive culture that encouraged growth both within and beyond the sport. The relationships formed throughout this environment became an important source of belonging and contributed significantly to personal development⁴¹.

Within the macro world, cheerleading organisations also played an important role by creating opportunities for athletes to compete at increasingly higher levels. Qualification for interstate, national, and international competitions strengthened motivation and reinforced long-term commitment to the sport. While interaction with these organisations remained indirect, their influence was evident through the pathways they provided for athlete development and opportunities they created to represent teams on a larger scale⁴².

If a greater number of individuals shared a passion for cheerleading, broader social perceptions of the sport could continue to change in positive ways. Cheerleading is frequently misunderstood and often reduced to outdated stereotypes that portray it as entertainment rather than recognising it as a highly skilled athletic sport⁴³. These misconceptions overlook the physical strength, technical ability, discipline, teamwork, and mental resiliency required to safely perform at competitive levels. Greater awareness of the realities of cheerleading would encourage increased respect for the athletes while promoting a more accurate understanding of the sport and the positive impact it has on athletes' confidence and personal development⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Question one Personal Reflection: How have people in your Micro Meso Macro world responded to your passion? Outline and describe your personal connection to the topic. (used July 5th 2026)

⁴² Question one Personal Reflection: How have people in your Micro Meso Macro world responded to your passion? Outline and describe your personal connection to the topic (used July 5th 2026)

⁴³ Question two Personal Reflection: How could the world change in a positive way if your passion was shared? (used July 5th 2026)

⁴⁴ Question two Personal Reflection: How could the world change in a positive way if your passion was shared? (used July 5th 2026)

However, if these misconceptions continue to remain unchallenged, the sport may continue to experience limited recognition despite its global growth⁴⁵. Competitive cheerleading has expanded significantly through international organisations such as the International Cheer Union (ICU) and prestigious events, including the ICU World Cheerleading Competition and The Cheerleading Worlds, where athletes from across the world compete at the highest level⁴⁶. Without continued discussion to add cheerleading to the Olympics and education surrounding the physical and mental benefits of cheerleading, outdated assumptions persist, limiting opportunities for athletes, reducing public understanding and preventing the sport from receiving the recognition it has increasingly earned⁴⁷.

Through both the interview with my former cheerleading coach and my personal reflection, this chapter provides a deeper understanding of the physical, mental, and social impacts of cheerleading.

⁴⁵ Question two Personal Reflection: How could the world change in a positive way if your passion was shared? (used July 5th 2026)

⁴⁶ Question three Personal Reflection: How could the world become more negative if nobody ever discussed this issue? (used July 5th 2026)

⁴⁷ Question three Personal Reflection: How could the world become more negative if nobody ever discussed this issue? (used July 6th 2026)

Concluision:

This Personal Interest Project investigated how involvement in sport influences identity, as well as the physical and mental effects experienced by individuals throughout their participation and after leaving sport. By examining these experiences across different generations and through the specific context of competitive cheerleading, this investigation demonstrated that sport has a significant and lasting influence on an individual's personal development, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. Through the use of primary and secondary research methods, including cross-generational questionnaires, academic literature, expert interview, and personal reflection, a balanced understanding of both the positive and negative impacts of sport was developed.

The findings consistently demonstrated that sport contributes significantly to confidence, resilience, discipline, teamwork, leadership, and the development of meaningful social connections. Across muliple generations, participants identified sport as an important influence on identity, providing opportunities to develop valuable life skills and extend beyond the sporting environment. Strong support networks created by families, coaches, teammates, and sporting communities were shown to play a vital role in encouraging participation while promoting both personal growth and emotional wellbeing.

At the same time, the research highlighted that involvement in sport can also present significant challenges. Competitive environments may expose athletes to performance pressure, anxiety, stress, burnout, body image concerns, and long-term physical injuries. While these challenges were evident across each chapter, the research consistently showed that supportive coaching practises, positive sporting cultures, and increased awareness of athlete wellbeing can reduce many of these negative experiences and create healthier sporting environments.

The cross-generational focus of this investigation further demonstrated that although the core benefits of sport have remained consistent over time, sporting cultures continue to evolve. Greater recognition of mental health, injury prevention, inclusion, and athlete wellbeing reflects changing societal values, while increased expectations, social media, and highly competitive pathways present new challenges for younger generations. Similarly, the investigation into competitive cheerleading highlighted the continuing

evolution of the sport, challenging outdated stereotypes and recognising it as a physically demanding and internally respected discipline.

Overall, this Personal Interest Project has reinforced that sport is far more than physical activity or competitive. It has the capacity to shape identity, influence lifelong values, strengthen communities, and impact both physical and mental wellbeing long after participation has ended. Through this investigation, a deeper understanding has been developed of the lasting influence sport has across generations and the importance of creating supportive environments that allow athletes to experience the many lifelong benefits while minimising its challenges.

SECONDARY RESEARCH Annotated References

Anderson B, 'The Psychological Hurdle of Sports Retirement' (www.psychiatry.org 5 October 2020)
 <<https://www.psychiatry.org/News-room/APA-Blogs/The-Psychological-Hurdle-of-Sports-Retirement>>
 (used May 5th 2026)

This article examines the psychological and physical effects that athletes can experience when retiring or leaving the sport. It highlights how athletes often begin participating in sport from a young age, causing their identity to become strongly connected to their role as an athlete. When retirement occurs, individuals may experience identity loss, uncertainty, and difficulty adjusting to new responsibilities, careers, or family roles. The article also discusses the physical effects of leaving sport, including changes in fitness, body image, and exercise routines, contributing to issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

This article is considered reliable as it was published by the American Psychiatric Association, a respected organisation specialising in mental health research and education. Published in 2020, the information remains relevant to current understandings of athlete wellbeing. A major strength of this source is its focus on the emotional challenges athletes face after leaving sport, which strongly connects to my topic. However, a limitation is that it mainly focuses on elite athletes and Olympic athletes, meaning some experiences may not represent community-level athletes. Despite this, the article provides valuable evidence about the long-term effects of sport involvement.

Eather N and others, 'The Impact of Sports Participation on Mental Health and Social Outcomes in Adults: A Systematic Review and the "Mental Health through Sport" Conceptual Model' (2023) 12 Systematic Reviews 1 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10286465/>> (used May 4th 2026)

The article, which focuses on children and adolescents in the United States, investigates how sport participation and the influence of parents and coaches affect the enjoyment and overall experiences young athletes have within sport. It explores the numerous benefits of sport involvement, including physical development, improved psychological wellbeing, social skills, teamwork, and confidence. However, the article also recognises that sport can have negative impacts, including risk of injury, increased stress, anxiety and pressure caused by performance expectations, competition, and social influences. I consider this article to be reliable due to the extensive research and factual evidence used to support the evidence. The

inclusion on statistical data allows for a clever understanding of the positive and negative effects sport can have on young athletes. A major strength of this source is its ability to examine multiple perspectives, including the roles of athletes, parents, and coaches, which links closely to my topic of identity, socialisation, and well-being. This article is highly valuable for my research.

Jacob John Capin and others, 'Midlife Health Crisis of Former Competitive Athletes: Dissecting Their Experiences via Qualitative Study' (2024) 10 BMJ open sport & exercise medicine (used May 9th 2026)

This study examines the long-term physical and psychological effects of competitive sport on former athletes and how they adjust to life after retirement. It involved interviews with former college athletes in their 50s, focusing on health, identity, injuries, and lifestyle changes. A key finding was that many athletes maintained a strong sense of dignity, which made retirement difficult and often led to feelings of loss, emptiness, and identity confusion. Overall, the research shows that while sport provides valuable skills, retirement can bring lasting physical challenges and identity-related psychological struggles.

Merkel D, 'Youth Sport: Positive and Negative Impact on Young Athletes' (2013) 4 Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine 151 <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3871410/>> (used May 4th 2026)

This article investigates how participation in the community and elite- level sport influences the mental health and social well-being of adults. This source is considered highly reliable as it is systematic review that makes findings from multiple studies rather than relying on a single source of evidence. It is published though peer-reviewed academic platform and includes extensive research, data analysis, and references to support its conclusions. A major strength of this article is its broad examination of both community and elite sport, allowing for a deeper understanding of how sport affects different individuals. However, a weakness is that the focus is primarily on adults, meaning some findings may not directly apply to younger generations. This article is valuable for my topic as it provides evidence of long-term effects of sport participation on identity, mental health and social development which is a key factor within my topic.

PRIMARY RESEARCH Annotated References

Personal Reflection

I have strong, in-depth knowledge in the area of cheerleading due to my own experience as an athlete who has encountered both the positive and negative aspects of sport. Through my involvement in cheerleading, I have experienced mental and physical benefits of sport, including an increase in confidence, teamwork, and resilience, as well as the challenges of injury, pressure, and the impact of sport on psychological health. The overall outcome of my personal reflection was successful. Writing this reflection encouraged me to think more deeply about my own understanding and experiences within cheerleading, allowing me to critically reflect on both the positive and negative impacts the sport has had on my life. This process helped me make meaningful connections between my personal experiences and my research findings, ultimately strengthening and enriching the content of chapter three, The Cheerleading Culture.

Interview

My interview provides the opportunity to understand the experience of sport from a coach's perspective, with a particular focus on the sport of cheerleading. Conducting this interview gave me new insight into the physical and mental impact of sport, which closely aligned with the focus of my research topic. The interview provided a highly effective primary research method, as it allowed me to ask detailed follow-up questions, adapt my reasons throughout the conversation, and gain logical, reliable, and in-depth answers. This provided a deeper understanding of the topic to be included in my Chapter Three, The Cheerleading culture.

Questionnaire

My questionnaire was easy to design and allowed for ethical research practices to be applied. The questionnaire makes it easy for many participants to answer and access quickly. It also allows my cross-cultural components research to be separated easily while focusing in generations differences in the responses. This section of my primary research was applied to my Chapter One and Chapter Two having GEN X and GEN Y in Chapter One, Shaped by Sport, then GEN Z and GEN ALPHA in Chapter Two, The Lasting Impact

of Sport. I found this section for my research to be effective and useful. I was able to separate my cross cultural compont within my questionnaire easily, allowing me to easily separate this part throughout my chapters effectively.