ACTIVISM CHALLENGES FACED BY BLACK STUDENT-ATHLETES

AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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standards for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

For decades, black athletes have used sports as a stage to spread awareness of the injustices that are overlooked in our country. Black student-athletes are treated as ambassadors of the predominantly white universities they represent in their sports. However, they still endure prejudice from students, faculty, and local community members who are supposed to be their supporters. In this study, I investigated the factors influencing black student-athletes' willingness to speak out on social issues. Through interviews with ten black student-athletes at NDSU, I found the concerning factors, identity issues, and levels of comfortability that black student-athletes experience at this predominantly white institution. I argue that inconsistencies of support from the athletic department and fan base make it harder for black student-athletes to engage in activism. I recommend that student-athletes collaborate with athletic departments and local organizations in their activism to improve their communities.

Keywords: black student-athletes, predominantly white institutions, social activism

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INTRODUCTION

The United States of America prides itself on being the land of the free, the home of the brave, and a place where everyone is created equal. However, the reality behind American history is that centuries of slavery played a crucial role in the development of this country, and the side effects of slavery are still prevalent present day. Racism, sexism, and discrimination are present in all aspects of America: education, economy, politics, occupations, housing, sports, and more. Before black athletes were seen and treated as valuable pieces of treasure, they've been raised to believe that their lives are insignificant to other races. The sports industry has been a global platform for competition and patriotism for decades, an educational and financial outlet for marginalized groups of society (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018), and a stage for black athletes to spread awareness of the injustices that are overlooked in their everyday lives (Kluch, 2020). Bringing awareness to these injustices can come in a variety of forms: kneeling during the national anthem, t-shirts, hoodies, joining or facilitating protests, social media posts, etc.

Many factors can affect the comfortability of black athletes to speak out against social injustices. These factors include racial discrimination against not only black athletes, but also black students, unfair treatment by coaches, students, faculty, and media portrayals of social justice activism in its neighboring community. The neighboring community includes people residing in the Fargo-Moorhead area, the NDSU fan base, and faculty, staff, and students of NDSU. Black student-athletes are treated as valued representatives of a university community but are also victims of prejudice from white students, faculty, and non-athletic minority students on predominantly white college campuses (Melendez, 2009). But we do not yet know how both the glorification and prejudice can affect the comfortability of black athletes on college campuses.

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This study will help us better understand the factors that influence black student-athletes experiences with speaking out on social issues. Previous research has explained how media portrayals of black athletes affect the branding and career depth for professional athletes, but this study explains how unsupportive fan bases and negative media portrayals of black athletes affect the college experience for black athletes. With the growth of the marketability and economic investment in the collegiate sports industry, black athletes are the aspired talent that institutions are looking for to add to their programs. This study addresses how black athletes are the foundation of the sports industry that fails to take measures to provide comfort and inclusivity for such athletes. However, what measures are college athletic programs making to ensure the physical and psychological safety of these black athletes to not only play for their teams, but also have a safe space for these athletes to engage in activism?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racism in the Sports Industry

Sports can be seen as a small-scale version of society, reflecting racial attitudes, and replicating our hopes and reality as a society (Davis et al., 2017). In America, the African American community has been dealing with the aftereffects of segregation and racial discrimination for decades. There is a growing number of black athletes in sports because of racial segregation, discrimination, lack of social opportunity, and economic limitations in society that's forced blacks to seek social and economic mobility in areas such as sport and entertainment (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018). A lot of people in the sports industry have particularly recruited young black men and women because of their stellar athletic abilities first, before even considering their academic abilities. This favoritism towards the black athletes creates a double-ended sword where they believe they are only appreciated for their physical abilities and are discriminated against in the classroom for not being as academically developed as the other students. We do not know how black athletes at college institutions find the balance between genuine supporters of their fan bases and racist community members who do not appreciate the contributions that athletics brings to their universities.

Professional sports organizations are making minimal progress with publicly supporting black athletes and their anthem protests. When members of sports industries (coaches, managers, commentators, staff members, etc.) are exposed for their racist, homophobic, sexist, or discriminatory comments, they're typically held accountable for bringing bad press to the organization, rather than for their lack of human decency to treat all people with kindness. Sports talk radio hosts rarely interrogate institutional racism; they merely discuss the low-hanging fruit: overt acts of racism by individuals (Spearman, 2020). In communities lacking diversity, black

athletes are dealing with psychological battles of when and where is an appropriate time to speak out against the racism that is prevalent in their lives. When media outlets fail to address institutional racism that affects the marginalized athletes of the sports, it makes it harder for those athletes to spread awareness of the injustices that they face in their sports.

Other forms of racism in sports are that blacks are excluded from certain positions in both playing positions and coaching positions because black athletes are believed to not be intellectually gifted enough to handle positions that require lots of critical thinking (Haslerig et al., 2018). Blacks are excluded from central positions because they are important decision-making positions and Blacks are not normally trusted with that much responsibility (Kopkin, 2014). Now, where do the presumptions that blacks cannot handle responsibility come from? From the media outlets who only portray black athletes for their physically gifted abilities, instead of recognizing that there must be a level of intelligence to excel in sports alongside their physical strengths.

Media Portrayals of Black Athletes

Sports talent (commentators, play-by-play, reporters) have the responsibility to illustrate a story about sporting events or characters that are engaging enough for the audience to follow. When the talent has either conscious or subconscious biases towards certain types of athletes, their comments can come out in their broadcasts and potentially taint the reputation that athletes are trying to create for themselves. Racial stereotypes in broadcasting typically describe white athletes as "smart" and "intelligent" athletes (Kobach, 2009); on the other hand, non-white were athletes were described as "natural" and "physically exuberant" (Schmidt, A. & Coe, K., 2014). The issue with these stereotypes is that they downplay non-white athletes for their mental abilities to play the game. At college institutions, black athletes are already stereotyped as being

academically challenged in the classroom based on their upbringing, so they are entering an environment where they have consistently proved to their peers that they belong, which is mentally draining for the black athletes who are trying to excel in this new stage of life. Biases toward certain races diminish the ability of minority athletes to connect with people who do not align with their ideals.

Most sports media shows have white talent members who are typically discussing sports that are predominantly populated by black athletes. In today's generation, athletes are working harder to control their own narratives through social media, personal branding, and public relations to fight back against media outlets that try to dictate what type of person they are. Media outlets have found comfortability in portraying black athletes for their athletic abilities that are trendy and newsworthy but lack showcasing the progress that they've made in both the local and national community (Johnson, R. & Romney, M., 2018). When African Americans are portrayed as physically dominating over another person, or physically frightening, racial stereotypes describe them as having a "thug-like" personality. The measures that black athletes must make to maintain a positive image and relationship in a community that already discriminates against them affect their mental and emotional stability on college campuses.

Minority athletes are overrepresented as criminals in the media compared to white athletes to maintain the "status quo" that white people are the superior race (Mastro et al., 2011). Black athletes must personify themselves to make white people comfortable with being around them even though they are the members of society that are uncomfortable in the first place. When media outlets frame their stories by highlighting black athletes' athleticism, it continues to "support the belief that 'sports' is the (sole) arena where blacks can excel" (Johnson, R. & Romney, M., 2018). Media personalities have created a dichotomy in sports media discourse

where white athletes are praised for their diligence and intellect while black players are assumed to have simply inherited the physicality necessary to compete (Haslerig et al., 2018). The hegemony of only portraying black athletes for their athletic abilities and not for the progress that they've contributed to this world (e.g., social justice, community service, activism, and mentorship) prevents the humanization and connection that the athletes are trying to create with their fan bases outside of their sports. We do not know the relationship that black collegiate athletes have with their local fan bases and media outlets.

Racial Discrimination Towards Athletes

With the growth of sports fandom, fans have felt entitled to do or say whatever they want to athletes because they see themselves as the consumers; and as the saying goes, "the customer is always right". When white fans verbally bash or physically assault athletes, and then the black athletes retaliate, the athletes are easily blamed for the encounter and portrayed as violent people (De B'beri, B. & Hogarth, P., 2009). For black athletes, even though they occupy most of the playing positions in major American professional sports (baseball, basketball, and football), their fan bases are predominantly middle-aged white men. These fan bases only value and appreciate black athletes for the success that they bring to their teams/programs. These white men are privileged and entitled to speak to athletes any way they want, because outside of the sporting lines, these men believe that they are not only better but also more valuable to society than African Americans. This study will try to find what kind of environment local fan bases and the surrounding community have created for black collegiate athletes.

The realm of sports reflects the values of the United States. The NBA has created an atmosphere of a deep-rooted system of conflict-related to the practices of racism, in which the power dynamics, player illustrations, marketability, media protection, and employment

opportunities that benefit white people over other races (De B'beri, B. & Hogarth, P., 2009). Even though the NBA is predominantly an African American-populated sport, the true power of the league lies in the white man's hands. Most of the positions of power (coaches, owners, general managers) are occupied by white males. Since the creation of the NFL in 1920, there have been 500 head coaches; only 24 of them have been black. At the time of this study, there are only two black head coaches out of 32 teams. In the NBA, where 76% of the athletes are black, half of the league has a black head coach. However, in ownership positions, there are only four black presidents of basketball operations across the 30 NBA teams. Of the three major sports leagues in the United States – the NFL, NBA, and MLB – there is only one black principal owner, who just happens to be sports legend Michael Jordan, the principal owner of the Charlotte Hornets (Benbow, H., 2022). The NBA continues to ignore how structural racism operates in its league, in which the league promotes the athleticism of black athletes but upholds its unequal power relationships and dynamics within the league (Lavelle, 2016).

It's rarely different in college athletics. Black athletes are heavily recruited in basketball and football (the most revenue-generating collegiate sports) because coaches know that they have the power to control the athletes to do, say, or play in a way that supports their coaching plan because they are inevitably their saving grace from their not-so-promising lives at home. In college athletics, the majority of FBS football student-athletes are black, but the vast majority of the head coaching jobs at FBS schools belong to white coaches (Kopkin, 2014). The lack of positions of power for black people affects the opportunities for future black people to work in college athletics. There are few minority-raced athletic directors or school presidents who are responsible for hiring head coaches, few minority head coaching candidates in the pipeline, and there may be discrimination against black head coaching candidates, which all play a role in the

lack of minority head coaches in college athletics (Kopkin, 2014). Black college athletes are placed in positions of raw athletic ability during their careers, and that affects the type of coaching positions that they obtain afterward. Most coaches were players at some point so that discrimination and prejudice from the sports industry and community carries on from their collegiate careers to their coaching careers.

Unfair Treatment at College & Universities for Black Athletes

For African Americans who come from lesser socioeconomic communities, they must find ways to provide their families with a better future. From a young age, many black male youths view sports as their personal, racial/cultural, and biological destiny (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018). Young black children typically have a small number of role models in their lives to look up to, or whose lives they aspire to have. In the black community, the number of highly successful and wealthy black male professional athletes, provides a visual reminder that sport is "the way out" of poverty (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018). For these black athletes, sports provide educational and financial opportunities they could not obtain in other parts of life.

When black athletes attend college, they are most likely going to attend a predominantly white institution (PWI). For those student-athletes who are coming from impoverished communities or diverse communities, it's a major adjustment to college environments. So how do black athletes make themselves comfortable and fit in at PWIs? The athletic identity as a moderator of race in student-athletes helps them adjust to college (Melendez, 2009). Being an athlete puts students on a pedestal over regular students because their tuition is paid for, sports are a major social event for students and they are the main entertainers, which puts a spotlight on the athletes when they are on campus. The African American community believes that society does not value them, which inherently affects their greater adjustment to college.

For young black athletes, they understand that they are predominantly recruited for their athletic abilities, however, it creates a negative image for why black athletes are given financial-educational opportunities. Institutions face an internal crisis when educational opportunities are offered to certain students based on their athletic ability despite the demanding athletic commitments that come with obtaining their intended degrees (Van Rheenen, 2012). Regular students think that being an athlete is an easy lifestyle because they do not have to pay tuition, when, it's the opposite. The label "student-athlete" is an inaccurate description of who athletes are, and the expectations and tremendous demands that come with their participation in sports-related activities (Singer, 2008). On top of the educational responsibilities of being a student: homework, exams, group assignments, deadlines, projects; student-athletes also have sports responsibilities: practice, weights, film, study hall, treatment, and more.

Racism can affect the educational experience for black athletes at PWIs. There is a psychosocial and emotional toll on black football players attending predominantly white college campuses (Melendez, 2009). Stereotypes and racial discrimination negatively affected the academic outcomes of black male college athletes (Fuller, 2017). Black athletes attending a PWI in a conservative location means that they're in an environment that most likely doesn't support their ideas, beliefs, or values. They are adjusting to an environment where everyone around them may not look like them, dress like them, or think like them, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Surrounding yourself with people who see the world from different viewpoints can help you grow your intellectual range. On the other hand, it is shocking and nerve-wracking when being exposed to a new environment where you're not comfortable enough to know if you fit in or are accepted by others. The non-support can come from the local fan base, student body, or local media. This study will aim to explain how the collegiate community is affecting black

athletes' comfortability to engage in social justice movements.

Media Portrayals of Social Justice Activism Amongst Athletes

The sports industry has always been a platform to showcase nationalism and patriotism on a local, national, and global scale. At every sporting event, countries play their national anthem before the start of the event. Nationalism and patriotism are just elements of politics that are prevalent in sports. Black athletes have been engaging in anthem protests since 2015 because they believe that the equality and justice system that America stands on, does not apply to African American citizens. For decades, athletes have used the Olympics to use sports as a platform to engage in social justice on a global scale (Bell, T. & Coche, R., 2020). With the growth of college sports, black athletes influence speaking out on their campuses; and with traditional and social media outlets broadcasting their actions, the athletes can draw regional and nationwide outreach. Athletes utilize national media outlets to connect with people that they do not have the ability to draw reach with, and that nationwide connection can help create large-scale changes and improvements for marginalized groups of society.

The framing of a black athlete with a hero narrative simply highlights the frail nature of sports as a political conduit for change. For most of an African American's life, their voices have been overshadowed, overlooked, or belittled by their superiors. Black athletes have used sports to draw national attention to the injustice they face in their communities (Smith, 2006). Ever since the 1980s, Sports Illustrated has supported the motion that black athletes use sports to bring public attention to the racial and social injustices that black athletes face, both on and off the court/field. As a regular African American citizen, their voices are ignored and dismissed by popular media outlets, but as spotlighted athletes, their voices are not only heard but headlined on major headlines. For college athletes, if they're not an ESPN top 100 ranked athlete, then they

are coming into college as regular civilians. But during those four years, they either have local, regional, or national attention on them, which allows the athletes to spread awareness on subjects that are ignored or pushed under the rug. This study will aim to illustrate the perception that black athletes have on their local media outlets and how that affects their willingness to spread light on social justice movements.

The purpose of the Black Lives Matter movement is to raise attention towards the police brutality and socioeconomic injustices that African American citizens are facing in America. Once a black athlete steps outside of those court/field lines, they are just a citizen and are also a victim of these injustices. Colin Kaepernick initiated the anthem protests in 2016, and those actions inevitability ended his career but changed the world for better and for worse. His actions exposed people who either have blatant or suppress racist thoughts towards African Americans. Disapproval of the anthem protests can either be true, reported, or hidden (Mueller, 2021). There are degrees of public approval (open, hidden, dismissive) of "anthem protests" by journalists and scholars despite the original unrest and disapproval that the protests had in 2016. For black athletes who attend PWIs, they are in an environment where they are unsure of the support that they have from local community members. Fans tell the athletes that they love them and care for them when they're on the field, but as soon as the athletes do something that the fan bases might not like, i.e. kneeling during the national anthem, then those fan members immediately turn on them. This study will aim to find personal experiences that black athletes have had when speaking out against social injustices and the potential backlash from their communities.

When it comes to protesting, it's more than the act itself, it's about the reasoning behind why the athletes are protesting which needs to be articulated and comprehended by the targeted audience. When media outlets narrate the anthem protests, they have the power to shift the

narratives of the athletes who engage in these protests (Park et al., 2020). In a sense, black athletes have minimal control of how media outlets can construct their stories about anthem protests, but that doesn't mean that they cannot do anything at all. College athletes have resources all around them to spread awareness about why they are protesting: social media, student organizations, collaborating with other varsity programs, the school newspaper, media department, or hosting rallies on their campuses.

With the growth of social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), it's provided a platform for everyone to vocalize their opinions. Through hashtags, researchers have been able to visually see social media support and negation of Kaepernick's anthem protests (Yoo et al., 2018). Supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement use the #BLM hashtag to promote the activism that communities are doing to help fight injustices in America. People who used the #boycottNFL in 2016 viewed Kaepernick's protest as anti-police, anti-military, and anti-American, in which they asked social media users to boycott the NFL and its merchandise to counteract Kaepernick's protests. Black athletes have used the #BLM hashtag to indirectly speak out against injustices through bumper stickers, flags, hats, hoodies, t-shirts, and social media posts. The use of social media doesn't mean that there won't be backlash or counter-movements, but it provides an opportunity for the athletes to not only explain themselves, but connect with other people, athletes, or supporters to join their movement through replicating protests, reposting images or tweets, or educating the people around them about the protests.

Media Portrayals of College Athlete Activism

Not only are professional athletes marketable for their athletic abilities, but so are collegiate athletes, and people are finally starting to take notice. The NCAA, which prides itself in being a non-profit organization providing academic and athletic opportunities for students, has

an existential number of rules about maintaining the amateurism of their athletes. With the growth of the marketability of these athletes, black athletes must be extra cognizant of their reputation and self-brand. A black athlete's brand includes likeability with local fan bases, community partners, and media outlets. Their reputations can be tarnished by local fanbases, media outlets, and even their own organizations reporting racial stereotypes of these athletes.

Just like professional athletes, collegiate athletes are realizing that they do not need millions of dollars to make a change. The marketability and exposure are growing in college sports, which provides another major platform for these athletes to draw nationwide attention to the issues that matter to them. College institutions inspire and educate each other on ways for their student-athletes to engage in social justice actions not only by themselves but with their student organizations as well (Spencer et al., 2016). College institutions have been making diversity and inclusion statements to claim that they support marginalized students, but a sentence doesn't eliminate the discriminatory prejudices that roam around their campuses. College athletes are creating committees, associations, and coalitions at their schools whose main purpose is to spread information and gain light on the injustices in America. This study will illustrate what measures black collegiate athletes have made to engage in social justice movements within and outside of their programs.

NCAA student-athletes now have their own platform to engage in social justice activism (Kluch, 2020). NCAA athletes have their own individual reasons as to why they feel the need to emerge in social justice activism. Black athletes believe they have a responsibility to speak on social issues that have affected black athletes of the past and create a better future for future black civilians (Agyemang et al., 2010). Their perception of activism is different from the general public's perception of activism. Most college sports fans statistically are white males,

who do not understand the injustices in America because they do not apply to them. Fan bases typically align their fanbases with the teams that align with their own personal beliefs or are geographically located in the areas where the fans live or grew up on. In college sports, their fan bases initially come from their alumni who continue to support the college upon graduation and people who live in college towns that do not have professional sports. For fan bases who are typically in conservative areas, they are strongly against the BLM movement and athletes using sports to speak out against social injustices because it makes them uncomfortable at areas that are supposed to be not only their happy place but also a place of comfort around people who not only think but look like them too. The discrepancies occur when fan bases fail to realize that most of the college athletes on these fields/courts are African Americans who do not look or think like them. They attach their love for the sport with the team mascot, not with the individual players underneath the uniforms. For the athletes, they realize that once they step outside of those lines, they are just an African American citizen that can be racially profiled, discriminated against, abused by police officers, or entitled white civilians at any moment in time.

Major sports media outlets cover college sports because of how marketable the NCAA has become. Major media outlets realize that college athletes are simply minor-league professionals in their own mind, therefore, they view the collegiate athletes the same way that they view professional athletes: non-white athletes are just physically gifted, while white athletes are intelligently gifted. Fan bases on both a professional and collegiate level scream to "keep politics out of sports" when athletes kneel during the national anthem or wear BLM t-shirts. These regionally based media outlets align with the ideals of the fan bases in their communities because that's the targeted audience they are trying to reach on their own shows. Therefore, if the fan bases are conservative, the media outlets portray the protesting, non-white athletes in a way

that the fan bases view them: un-patriotic, violent members of society, engaging in criminal-like

activity, and not playing the sport 'the right way'. Lack of support from the media, fan bases, and

campuses can affect the comfortability of black athletes to engage in social justice movements.

Theoretical Framework

Social identity theory and media framing theory serve as theoretical frameworks for this

study. Social identity is the portion of an individual's self-concept derived from perceived

membership in a relevant social group. When it comes to supporting the growth of NDSU

Athletics, both black student-athletes at NDSU and the fans of NDSU Athletics can be

considered to be part of the same social group, but there are circumstances when that social

group creates division. Tajfel and Turner (1979) address the three parts of social identity theory

in relation to inter-group conflict: social categorization, social integration, and social

comparison. Social categorization refers to the way in which we organize our surroundings in

identifiable ways: gender, race, sporting organizations, etc. Social integration is adopting and

identifying with the social category we belong to; for this study, the social category would be

being part of NDSU Athletics. Social comparison is when the social group contrasts itself with

other groups (out-groups).

In this study, social comparison occurs when the beliefs and values of the black student-

athletes do not align with the values of the fan base, which creates inter-group conflict within

NDSU Athletics. Media framing refers to how an issue's characterization in news reports can

influence how it is understood by audiences. Media priming refers to the effects of the content in

the media on people's later behavior, thoughts, or judgments (Oliver et al., 2019). The framing of

African Americans in both traditional media and sports media affect the perceptions that the

general population creates about African Americans. Black student-athletes are considered to be

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positive role models for their communities, however, the perceptions of their communities can affect cohesiveness in the relationships that black student-athletes have with their communities.

Statement of Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to address how the levels of perceived support by coaches, the athletic administration, the institution, the media, and the surrounding community and how that affects black athletes' experience with speaking out on college campuses. We do not know how black athletes at college institutions find the balance between genuine supporters of their fan bases and racist community members who do not appreciate the contributions that athletics brings to their universities, the relationship that black collegiate athletes have with their local fan bases and media outlets, what measures student-athletes have used to engage in speaking out against social injustices, and what kind of environment that local fan bases have created for black collegiate athletes. This study will aim to explain how the collegiate community is affecting black athletes' comfortability to engage in social justice movements and find personal experiences that black athletes have faced with backlash from their own fanbases regarding social justice movements. This study will illustrate what measures black collegiate athletes have made to engage in social justice movements within and outside of their programs.

> **RQ:** How does lack of diversity and media portrayal of black athletes affect their comfortability to engage in social justice movements at publicly white institutions (PWIs)?

METHOD

Participants

A qualitative approach of structured in-depth interviewing was used for this study. Qualitative interviewing draws attention to student-athlete participants' experiences by understanding their personal lives and grasping the purpose behind their activism (Kluch, 2020).

I interviewed 10 student-athletes for this study. These participants play in four of the 14 varsity programs that NDSU provides: basketball, track & field, volleyball, and football. All of the participants have spent at least two semesters at NDSU. The ages of the participants range between 20 and 23. Of the 10 participants, four of them are female and six of them are male. Eight of the ten participants are from the Midwest region of the United States. Participants were sent a recruitment message through TeamWorks online, a communication system for athletic employees and student-athletes to be able to engage and communicate with each other (see Appendix A). This allowed me to obtain the availability, schedules, and contact methods for each of the participants. Participants could be part of the study if they met the study criteria (a) be a current student-athlete at North Dakota State University, (b) have an interest in engaging in social, political, and civic causes, and (c) identify as an African American. The activism of the participants focused on issues such as inclusion, racial injustice, police brutality, health equality, mental health stigma, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ awareness. Matter of fact, all of the athletes engage in activism outside of their sport, whether that be local protests or social media activism.

Data Collection

I conducted and recorded my interviews using Zoom. Student-athletes have jam-packed schedules with limited free time. Along with being in season for this time of the year, online interviews allow them to participate in the study while still maintaining their obligations to their

sport. There was a background information survey presented to each participant to confirm that they qualify for the study (see Appendix B). The background survey asked about their demographics: age, eligibility year, race, gender, place of origin, and sport. The background survey also documented consent from the participants to engage in the study (see Appendix C). During the interview, the participants were asked about their level of support from their programs and local fan bases, the process of deciding to play for NDSU, how local media outlets cover and treat black athletes, and their comfort levels to engage in social justice movements (see Appendix D). The interviews were recorded to allow us to review the transcripts.

Data Analysis

After each interview, an analytic memo was completed to assist in the interpretive process. The memos helped with providing clarification and direction for the coding process. The first and second-level codding processes were utilized to answer the research question. Emotion, values, and versus coding were the primary first cycle coding methods that I used to explore the data (Saldaña, 2021). Multiple readings of the transcripts allowed me to understand and visualize the experiences that the black athletes have faced at NDSU. From the first cycle of coding, I found 22 codes corresponding to different emotions, attitudes, beliefs, values, and tensions. Common codes that the transcripts touched were program support, relationship with media, and psychological comfort as an African American in a predominantly white community. Once the first-cycle codes were generalized, I used pattern coding to group the codes into three categories reflecting broader tensions in the data: black student-athletes versus predominantly white population, black student-athletes versus the fan base, and black student-athletes versus the athletic department. During the multiple readings of the transcripts, I was able to make meaning and connections between the athletes' experiences at NDSU.

I intended for the themes to address (a) how the media illustrates black athletes in their local media outlets, (b) how much support do the athletes receive from their program and fan bases, and (c) what's the level of comfort for the athletes to engage in social justice movements?

Validity and Reliability

I bolstered the validity of my research by recruiting participants with relevant experience, developing questions that reflect the aims of my study, and ensuring that participants understood each question. Because of the different dynamics of the different sports: basketball, football, track & field, and volleyball, there are some similarities in their relationships and interactions with the Fargo-Moorhead community. Whether it's the success on the court/field, the marketability with businesses and organizations of North Dakota, the social interactions both on and off NDSU's campus, or the community service that each of the programs engage in around the Fargo-Moorhead area, all of the participants have enough experience to speak to these issues.

The strength of my relationship with the black student-athletes adds to the validity of this study. The athletes understand my background as a black student-athlete at my previous institution and see me as a safe ally for their time at NDSU. Validity strategies I employed during the interviews included reflecting on what I was hearing from the interviewees, asking for clarification when needed, and asking follow-up questions. I addressed reliability by cross-checking the transcripts with the audio recordings for accuracy and keeping a codebook to ensure consistency in coding.

This study only included ten participants because there is only a small number of black student-athletes that are available to interview at NDSU. Of the 14 varsity sports, only eight of them have a black student-athlete on their team. The proportions of black student-athletes to all student-athletes in each program are as follows: Baseball- 1:38, Men's Basketball- 5:14,

Women's Basketball- 3:13, Football- 30:112, Wrestling- 1:30, Men's Track and Field- 6:53,

Women's Track and Field- 5:54, and Volleyball- 3:17, which totals out to 54:396 (13%) of all

the student-athletes at NDSU. I was able to interview 18.5% of NDSU's black student-athletes.

Reflexivity Statement

For this project, I believe that I have a level of personal investment towards it. I've spent

18 years of my life as an athlete and four years as a collegiate athlete at the University of North

Carolina at Greensboro, a NCAA Division I school residing in Greensboro, NC. Greensboro,

North Carolina has historical impact towards the betterment of civil rights in the United States as

the sit-in protest of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s originated in Greensboro, NC.

As a former resident of Orlando, Florida, I've had first-hand accounts of the impact that

the Black Lives Matter movement has had on the African American community because the

murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 occurred about 20 miles from my home and the uproar that

occurred in Orlando lasted weeks and made national headlines. I've spent the last ten years doing

my part in social justice activism by joining protests, wearing BLM shirts at athletic events,

donating to protests, educating my social media followers on occurrences of racism in the United

States, reading books, and writing articles about how athletes have used their platform to spread

insight on the injustices in America.

When I moved to North Dakota, I experienced the biggest culture shock of my life. Most

of the time when I leave my house in Fargo, I was the only African American anywhere I went:

work, bars, grocery stores, gas stations, and more. I felt concerned about the collegiate

experience that black student-athletes were having at NDSU because being a collegiate athlete is

supposed to be one of the best experiences of a lifetime.

I had thoughts that the black student-athletes at NDSU felt outcasted, marginalized, and

overwhelmed because of the lack of diversity that the Fargo-Moorhead community has. As a

black, female, former student-athlete, and citizen of the United States, I know that those concerns

of safety and comfortability occur all around this country. As a graduate employee of NDSU, I

hoped that I provided a safe space for black student-athletes to come to and feel comfortable

enough to express the concerns and issues that they were having during their time at NDSU.

RESULTS

Student participants perceived the transition to attending college at a predominantly white institution as entering another dimension of what it's like being a minority in the United States. For black student-athletes, they are entering an even smaller cluster of being a minority in the United States. Everywhere black student-athletes go, there is a strong possibility that they are the only ones in the room who look like them. Therefore, there are all kinds of fears, emotions, and beliefs that they have towards their surrounding predominantly white community.

Throughout the interviews, I found commonalities in the tensions that black student-athletes face on a regular basis. Most of the tensions lie between black student-athletes dealing with the predominantly white community of the Fargo-Moorhead area, the predominantly white fan base of NDSU athletics, the NDSU Athletic administration, and the complicated relationships that they have with the individual coaching staffs of their prospective sports. The major tensions that the black student-athletes dealt with are represented in the headers below. Throughout the results section, I italicize code names and specify the number of participants representing each code.

Black Student-Athletes versus Predominantly White Population

Of the 329 million citizens in the United States, only 13.6% of the population is of African American descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Therefore, no matter where black student-athletes go in this country, they will be the minority in their surrounding area. When it comes to feeling worried (n=2), it's inevitable for student-athletes to have fears both internally and externally when it comes to their interactions with their surroundings. Just like any kid who attends college, there is always a fear of isolation (n=4), in which they are worried about not being able to fit into their new student body, community; and for student-athletes, teammates.

The primary concern with multiple athletes when they were recruited to come here was: "I just didn't feel like I would blend in very well with the team", stated by Austin. In the volleyball sphere, Maya is used to being the minority on her team but that still creates concerns with joining new teams: "being the only black person is something I've dealt with basically my whole entire life, but the political views associated with this state, made me concerned with being able to fit in and acclimate well." Black student-athletes can adjust to being a minority on a team, that's an expectation, but to join a team whose political views are strongly against civil rights for African Americans can be stressful for athletes to endure.

The Midwest region of the United States is considered to be a heavily white populated area based on American history. Of the 68 million US citizens that reside in the Midwest, only 10% of that population are African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Most of the student-athletes that I interviewed grew up in the Midwest region of the United States. The black community is very minimal in the Midwest, therefore, black people, have experienced direct or indirect encounters of racism from their peers (n=4). The saying goes "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is coming to an end. Words hurt and they are affecting black student-athletes across the world from the racist comments they receive from their classmates, "you know all the white kids are just yelling out the n word and it's normal to say that word in their eyes", said Malcolm, and "[they would say] I can jump higher, was more agile, and that I was more coordinated than everyone because I was black", said Patrick. Ashley told me a story about how one of her friends in middle school had to stop spending time with her because she was black:

> I was friends with this one girl, and we were hanging out at school, all the time. Then one day I went over her house to hang out and her mom was acting really weird and the girl never talked to me after that day. Come to find out when I saw her at school, the girl said the reason was "because my mom says I can't hang out with you because you're black."

Racism doesn't have to be done by deliberate communication but just by the change of attitudes when encountering black people. Tyson expressed that he felt a bit of a "culture shock" when moving to the Midwest and that "people would look at them differently and got stared at when walking into classes." Black people are just regular human beings like everybody else trying to get through life, yet white people in predominantly white communities look at them as if they do not belong in that community.

Other student-athletes (n=4) recounted examples of racism where they were racially profiled by a police department, which can occur anywhere in the United States because African Americans are the minority population across the country. Roger narrated a time when they were racially profiled by a police officer in their hometown in the Midwest:

> When I was 17, I was pulled over and his reasoning was like texting and driving and I told him I only have my phone open so I can see the maps. I asked the police officer if I could reach for my license in the back seat and he said that was okay. As soon as I went to grab for it, the officer unclipped his gun at me.

Because of the racial disparity across the United States, media coverage tends to favor the white population. In the local and regional outlets, our student-athletes believe that the media is biased towards the white population (n=8). Diamond explained that she feels that "black athletes do not get as much praise for their athletic successes as white athletes because [black people] dominate in their sports.". She believes that there is a distinction in the description of athletes, "[the media] refer to white athletes as more technically sound, while [the media] refer to black people as just being more athletic as if [black athletes] just have it naturally as if they do not have to work towards it… [the media] kind of downplay [black athletes'] success." Maya expressed that the media portray black people as "very violent and ignorant" and that "they are poor and come from single-parent households, as if they do not have many things and just kind of like being a second-class citizen." Wilson said that "you know anything else you see around

the news, besides sports, it's majority about white people." In both nationwide and local media, lots of headlines focus on positive storylines that typically align with white people, on the other hand, black people make major headlines mostly in times of racial unrest.

On the other side of that white populated bias, my interviewees believe that media outlets emphasize black crime (n=5) in their storylines and headlines. Our athletes believe that media outlets prefer to narrate African Americans as criminals against each other instead of as any positive influence on their communities. Austin expressed that the media seems to show a lot of "black on black killing; they see (black people) as we're killing ourselves and that we do not cooperate with the law." By creating a consistent characterization of black people as criminals, it makes it difficult for black people and black student-athletes to connect with people of other races when they are already thinking the worst of them.

In both general and sports media outlets, my interviewees believe that media outlets neglect to showcase black athletes as positive role models outside of their sports (n=3). When it comes to professional sports coverage, Roger believes that "when these black men are doing so much for their community, you do not see a lot of it." Patrick is a fan of Odell Beckham Jr., a professional football player who has an indifferent relationship with the media, in which he believes that the media neglects his contribution to society, "they do not show his interactions with his fans, the kids that look up to him, and the people who are recovering from torn ACLs that he helped and inspired." Malcolm explained that "black men are doing so much for their community outside of their sports, but you do not see a lot of that being shown."

Black student-athletes spend a lot of time in their communities trying to be good role models for the next generation, and the media can help aid that positive outlook by showcasing stories of the black athletes interacting with the fan base on their platforms.

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With the over-emphasizing of black criminals and the lack of humanization of black athletes in news outlets, my interviewees believe that the news outlets only promote positive storylines about black people in sports but rarely in other fields of work (n=4) (art, music, politics, business, etc.). Reese addressed growing up that she wasn't really exposed to successful black people in many fields of work "entertainment or sports is how a lot of black people cope and it's how a lot of black people make it out [of their circumstances], but it's not the only way"; also; "{the media is} trying to show that we're only just good for athletics, and we can't be successful in other fields outside athletics". Tyson believes that "black athletes have a stereotype to be successful at their sport but that media outlets fail to show that they can be successful in other fields of life outside of athletics." There are black success stories all over the country through sports, music, business, science, medicine, entrepreneurship, and other outlets of work that get overlooked by media platforms because they believe the stories will not bring high ratings for their shows.

Black Student-Athletes versus Fan Base

Even though most of the United States is predominantly white, there are some areas of the United States that have more racial disparity then others. Only 7% of Fargo, North Dakota's 126,000 population identifies as black, while only 5% of Moorhead, Minnesota's 43,409 population identifies as black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). All of our student-athletes engaged in social activism in their hometowns or social media platforms, however some (n=7) are hesitant about it when they step back on campus. Some (n=7) of the interviewed athletes established they are worried about the responses they will get from the neighboring community. Just the lack of racial diversity in Fargo-Moorhead puts an element of fear in black student-athletes about the surrounding community (n=5). Diamond expressed how she's "conscious that [she's] black

and that everything [she] does represents black people as a whole." Patrick broke down his concerns about speaking out at games because "you say one wrong thing [and] you might have the whole North Dakota trying to come after you." The disconnect lies in the fact that the black student-athletes know they have a strong support base for NDSU, but still concerned about the alignment of their personal beliefs with the fan bases' personal beliefs. Reese believes that despite the surrounding fan base, "being a minority in this state, I just feel like people will turn against you", for engaging in activism.

Being black in the United States can put a sort of target on their back and the athletes feel that way both on and off NDSU's campus Roger said, "certain people you know are out to get you, and there is just a time and a place that can be off, but that's really what it comes down to honestly and it's sad but that's just the environment and overall world that we live in." Tyson would check social media pages after games and see "derogatory and mean tweets about their games that really shouldn't be said about athletes, regardless of race." When it comes to sports, fan bases can be incredibly emotionally invested into their teams. However, heavy emotional investment leads to derogatory messages being said when the teams fail to win or do not play well enough for fans' liking.

It's rare that there is ever a time where black student-athletes aren't a minority in the room, therefore, they believe that they have to be a version of themselves that's suitable to the community. Some interviewed athletes expressed the fear of inauthenticity (n=5), in which they were worried of not being able to be themselves at NDSU and in Fargo. Reese stated that from the moment she stepped on campus, "[she] hasn't been able to be [her] authentic self here." The black student-athletes believe that the fan base only supports the athletes for the success they bring to the school, but not about who they truly are as individuals. Reese stated {"when I go to

the store, when I'm signing autographs after the game, when I'm taking pictures with people, I'm nice and personable, but those people will never know who I am. I do not want to say they wouldn't accept me, but their perspective of me would certainly change and so like as a student-athlete it's important to essentially do what they want."} Malcolm has spent years in the Fargo-Moorhead area and he still believes that he cannot be his natural self around others, "especially being black and an athlete here, you kind of have to say what they want you to say, you have to kind of be perfect "and that "the hardest thing to do as a black person, not only as an athlete, but also as a student, is adaptability to new surroundings." Tyson expressed that feels like he's being "put in a box" when it comes to being an athlete at NDSU:

> "People kind of treat me differently because they see that the only reason I'm here for is to play basketball. It kinds of like puts me in a box where you're an athlete and that's all that you're here to do. Nothing else."

Black student-athletes at NDSU believe that their fan base only cares about their athletic successes and could care less about who they are as a person, how they can benefit the community outside of sports, and whatever the future holds for these athletes.

Black Student-Athletes versus Athletic Department

Despite NDSU residing in North Dakota, the university has invested heavily into the enhancement of the athletic department making it a nationally competitive program. A lot of the black student-athletes chose to attend NDSU because they feel that they would be heavily supported (n=10) along their journeys. Wilson discussed his positive relationship with his program and department, "[our staff] wants to learn about our experiences as well, so they make us feel really comfortable and want us to speak out (on injustices)." According to Roger, "we always get priority for school and like choosing classes, they make sure that they get us meals and stuff like housing". Diamond talked about how it feels like being part of "an elite club"

being a student-athlete at NDSU. Being a student-athlete at any university is an honor, because less than 1% of people in the United States are collegiate athletes. Being a black student-athlete makes it not only an honor, but also an extreme privilege to have their college tuition paid for, which is an extreme rarity.

But the disconnect lies in the fact that the athletes feel supported for what they bring to the school because of their athletic abilities, but they do not support behind them for their personal beliefs. These athletes feel ignored (n=4) by the administration of the athletic department because they believe that their dedication to student protesting isn't relevant or important to the athletic administration. Before Ashley attended NDSU, she was "concerned with the lack of post about supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, which was really big in the US, but didn't see much of it at NDSU." Social media is platform that athletic departments use to connect with fans and future recruits. By posting messages in support of human rights, civil rights, women's rights, and orientation rights can make recruits feel more comfortable with coming to a particular school.

The ignorance in the chain of command leaves student-athletes feeling stagnant and indifferent (n=3) about wanting to engage in activism at NDSU. Maya expressed that she feels "shut down" because of the lack of diversity in the department and community: "it prevents you from being able to speak out and say anything because you're already under-represented." Austin expressed that "(he) doesn't really think they would either support too much of (protesting); I feel like it would be kind of looked down on a little bit." Tyson put together a t-shirt campaign to promote racial unity in the Fargo-Moorhead area that received a great response from the coaches and fan base but indifference from the athletic administration office, "there was some pushback in the higher up administration office about going through with the campaign." Diamond

believed that the athletic administration would not support athletes protesting because "we would lose some supporters and so much money. It wouldn't even be up for discussion to consider allowing the athletes to protest." The black student-athletes believe that their activism won't spark any change in their neighboring community because they simply believe that those around them do not care about change, or even want the racial circumstances to change.

On top of being a student-athlete at one of the most prestigious mid-major universities in the country, there are a lot of external stressors that come along with that. Some of the black student-athletes expressed being overwhelmed (n=4) with the pressures that come with upkeeping the winning culture at NDSU. Austin expressed that he feels "overwhelmed and stressed out from all the workload of schoolwork, lifting, practices, travel and stuff but that there are a lot of benefits that I gain from the experiences, memories, and people that I make connections with throughout the journey." Being a student-athlete is a full-time job in itself, but the pressures of having to be successful for the betterment of the program and athletic department can be stressful for young black student-athletes to have to endure.

In relation to the inconsistent relationship of support that black student-athletes receive from their athletic department, it also applies to their direct connection with their coaches. Some of my interviewees believe that they receive mixed messages (n=6) from their coaching staff about what they can and cannot do or can and cannot say. Ashley said "the coaches talked a lot about how they support BLM, but it was never shown through their actions" which left her confused about coming to NDSU. When she did arrive at NDSU, her coach asked her about the possibility of kneeling for the anthem, but "it didn't seem like she didn't want us to but it didn't seem like she did, so it was just never a true position." Diamond stated that there was "absolutely no discussion about BLM and the passing of George Floyd. It was never brought up", which

made her "feel kind of unseen like they do not really care." A simple conversation about the racial unrest in the United States can go a long way with making your black student-athletes feel more comfortable at your program. A conversation states that not only that you care about what's going on in the world, but that you're also not ignorant to the impact it has on not only the country but your community as well.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to address how the levels of perceived support by coaches, the athletic administration, the institution, the media, and the surrounding community and how these factors affect black athletes' experience with speaking out. The collegiate student-athlete experience is top-tier at most institutions and can be considered the best period of life for most student-athletes, regardless of race. Two of the black student-athletes at NDSU consistently expressed the gratitude they had for the world-class experience they are having at NDSU. They feel supported by their teammates, coaches, and athletic administration, but still cannot neglect the concerns they have when encountering a predominantly white community.

Speaking out against racism can be uncomfortable and scary for people of all ages, backgrounds, and employment. From my interviews, it seems as though it would be easier to speak out against injustices when there is some level of support to come along with it. For black collegiate student-athletes, they engage in activism by uniting with other black student-athletes at their universities and other student organizations that support activism. At an institution where the black community is extremely marginal, and the neighboring political ideals are extremely right-wing opinionated, it creates an atmosphere where black student-athletes feel like they won't be supported for their activism, most likely outcasted for their activism, and create more disconnection within their programs.

In the digital age of the 21st century, all generations are consistently consumed by media outlets through television, movies, news, sports, on multiple mediums, TVs, smart phones, computers, tablets, and more. Therefore, there are narratives about black people, the black community, and black athletes that are being created by both powerful media personalities and regular citizens on social and traditional media outlets that are detrimental to the progression of

black people, Constant narratives of black people being financially irresponsible, academically challenged, only physically gifted, and as disruptions to law enforcement make it difficult for black athletes to connect with people of various descents, backgrounds, and generations. Interviewees felt that they have to be the "perfect" human being for white communities to like them and welcome them into their lifestyles which is not only unfair, but overwhelming for black athletes to constantly be aware of their surroundings, whether that be the people around them, the things they say, the places they encounter, and more.

Some of our participants expressed that from watching the news and growing up in their local communities, they feel like black people can only be successful in sports and music. This relates to previous research that black athletes are growing in sports because of the racial segregation, discrimination, and lack of social opportunity in society that's forced blacks to seek its social and economic mobility in sports and entertainment (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018). My study contributes to this conversation by documenting how black athletes at college institutions find the balance between genuine supporters of their fan bases and racist community members who do not appreciate the contributions that athletics brings to their universities. From the responses of my participants, I found that black athletes at PWIs feel support of activism from fans when it doesn't seem to offend them; they only support activism when the fans believe that it benefits the community, including them. The Fargo-Moorhead community lacks a lot of diversity, which makes black athletes at NDSU feel like they are never in a comfortable or supportive environment to engage in activism.

Racial stereotypes in broadcasting typically describe white athletes as "smart" and "intelligent" athletes, while non-white athletes are described as "natural" and "physically exuberant" (Schmidt, A. & Coe, K., 2014). From the responses of our participants some of them

expressed that when they watch or listen to sports shows or streams, they notice the discrepancies in how black and white athletes are illustrated. Our participants feel that the discrepancies in how athletes are described make black athletes seem as if they do not have to work for their athletic success, but instead that it just comes easy to them, which is not only completely wrong but also disrespectful to the amount of work they put towards their craft. Black student-athletes spend a lot of time in the face of their local communities and the best way for them to connect with these local fans are by spending time with, telling stories about their journeys, and the hardworking experience of being an athlete at the collegiate level. Media biases towards races diminish the personification of minority athletes to connect with people, which makes it even harder for black student-athletes to connect with people who might not align with their ideals.

Contributions to Research and Theory

I aimed to know the relationship that black collegiate athletes have with their local fan bases and media outlets. I found that revenue-generating sports like football and basketball, spend a lot of time with media outlets because those sports are trendy for media headlines. However, for the low-revenue generating sports like track & field and volleyball, they are completely overlooked by media outlets. The main consensus that I found from most participants is that the stories that media outlets illustrate are predominantly about their athletic success, but rarely for the successes they have off the court, the relationship they have with the local community, and spreading light on any sort of activism that the athletes engage in.

When it comes to being a black citizen in the United States, there is a sort of racial obligation to engage in activism for the advancement of the black community. Black athletes believe they have a responsibility to speak on social issues that have affected black athletes of

the past and create a better future for black civilians (Agyemang et al., 2010). This study aimed to illustrate what measures black collegiate athletes have made to engage in social justice movements within and outside of their programs. Outside of their sports, lots of student-athletes engage in online activism by educating their followers on occurrences of racism in the United States. They also join protests in their home cities, wear black-owned clothes, sign petitions, and create a shirt campaign to support a local charity.

This study adds to social identity theory by documenting the fluidity of social identity for both black student-athletes and the fan base of NDSU. Both the black student-athletes and the fan bases are heavily invested in the improvement of NDSU Athletics, but outside of athletics, student-athletes perceive a lot of discrepancies in the identities between the athletes and fan base: race, political views, human rights, etc. The black student-athletes expressed in numerous testimonies (n=5) how they feel like they can't be their true authentic selves around the NDSU fan base because they feel fans only appreciate them for the value they bring to the university and athletic department.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) address the three parts of social identity theory in relation to inter-group conflict: social categorization, social integration, and social comparison. The NDSU fan base welcomes black student-athletes into their social group because they are hoping that the athletes will bring future successes to their programs. However, the division in the social group occurs when the black student-athletes engage in activism that aggravates the fan base that turns the black student-athletes into an out-group within the NDSU social group.

This study also demonstrates how media framing connects to social identities. Participants felt that local media portray African Americans as criminals and dangers to society because the Fargo-Moorhead area is predominantly white and conservative, contributing to

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negative perceptions of black student-athletes outside of their sporting environments.

Participants also felt that media coverage reflected and reinforced community beliefs about what types of activism were acceptable and what types of activism were not acceptable. When the athletes' activism came in partnership with community organizations, media outlets amplified their message because it was easier to explain how their activism benefited the community. In situations where the athletes' activism was more provocative, such as protesting and kneeling, media outlets tended to refrain from highlighting their actions because they could not explain the purpose behind them without alienating some portions of their audience. In their selectiveness regarding which types of activism to highlight, media outlets are making it clear what type of activism is deemed acceptable to their audiences.

Implications and Recommendations

Because North Dakota State University is a regional, mid-major university in the Midwest, a lot of the funding for the athletic department comes from regional donors. NDSU Athletics does not have support from major Fortune 500 companies that prioritize the upkeep of universities for decades on end. Therefore, NDSU Athletics focuses on maintaining positive relationships with their local and regional fan base so that they can continue to financially support their program. But that emphasis on their relationship with their fan base can have negative consequences for their relationship with their black student-athletes. Student-athletes perceive NDSU Athletics as refraining from addressing political and social issues because they do not want to lose support from their fan base and donors. It's not as if the athletic department doesn't care about social issues, but it's the sacrifice that they must make for the upkeep of their prestigious athletic department that generations of people have invested in.

This perception has implications for both recruiting and retaining black student-athletes.

There is a shift in top high school black athletes turning down major athletic programs at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and going to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) because they want to be in an environment that welcomes them, accepts them, and has a devotion to helping them grow not only as an athlete but as a great African American citizen as well (Henderson, 2022). HBCUs are colleges/universities that are originally founded to educate students of African American descent. HBCUs are typically underfunded because they do not have the political investment like PWIs, but there is a growing buzz about HBCUs and top athletes believe that they can come to these schools, win some championships, and help not only the athletic department grow, but the university grow into a nationwide powerhouse. If predominantly white institutions do not make changes to make their universities more comfortable for black athletes, then they are risking their future recruiting success.

College and universities can do their part by making their programs a safe space for black student-athletes. Even though a city and state can be predominantly conservative, a college institution is not supposed to be politically aligned to a certain party. College athletic departments are constantly recruiting black athletes, but there are measures that need to be put in place to welcome them into this next chapter of their lives. When major news of racial unjust occurs, departments need to have conversations with their athletes about the unrest, post statements about not accepting discrimination in their community, hold people accountable for publicized racism, hire people of color on staff so that minority students and athletes have people to converse with, and give verbal support to athletes wanting to engage in activism even if you do not directly want to engage in activism with them.

One way for college athletic departments to engage in activism with their programs is to follow a campaign design like the NDSU men's basketball team put together in 2020. The team

put together a t-shirt campaign that promoted equality of all races and included a Martin Luther

King Jr. quote on the back. The proceeds of the shirts went to the Boys & Girls Club of the

Fargo-Moorhead area. The team dedicated one game of the season to speak on the purpose of the

shirt and how it will bring the community together. This event was a huge success for not only

the game's attendance, but for the t-shirt campaign as well because the shirts nearly sold out.

Other athletic departments can adopt this strategy with their own programs by finding a local

charity or non-profit organization (Goodwill, Salvation Army, YMCA, YWCA, Big

Brothers/Sisters, etc.) to partner on the campaign with to promote racial and social inclusivity.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Out of the 396 athletes that we have at NDSU, only 54 of them are black, which is

roughly 13%. Out of the 14 teams that we have at NDSU, only 8 of them have at least one black

student-athlete on those teams. For future research, one black student-athlete from each team

should have been included in the study. There is only one black student-athlete on the baseball

team and wrestling team. Another adjustment that could be made to this study is potentially

interviewing some black coaches at NDSU. All the black coaches at NDSU were a black student-

athlete at some point of their careers, therefore, they can provide insight on the concerns they had

when they were athletes at publicly white institutions.

Not everything in study will apply to all experiences of black student-athletes at publicly

white institutions. Some PWIs reside in democratic cities, counties, and states who publicly

support activism from their citizens. Some athletic departments at other publicly white

institutions have made public statements about racism and how they do not condone that at their

universities. Some coaching staff and administration members at institutions physically engage

in activism with their athletes which makes black student-athletes even more comfortable

engaging in activism and want to get more creative and intuitive on how to have a broader reach in their activism.

A variation to this study could be doing a longitudinal or experimental study with black student-athletes while they engage in activism at NDSU. The new study could perform a cause-and-effect reaction experiment on the responses of the fan base from the activism that the athletes would engage in: kneeling for the flag, starting a protest, having a rally on campus, creating a video for social media, etc. From only gaining the responses of what the athletes engaged in individually, it's difficult to illustrate a consensus on what could happen if all the black student-athletes engaged in activism together.

This study was also limited in its ability to investigate how recent changes in college athletics marketing may impact student-athletes' willingness to speak up regarding social issues. The growing era of the NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) in college athletics allows collegiate athletes to gain sponsorship deals and start their own businesses/organizations while still maintaining their athletic scholarships. NIL deals allow these athletes to obtain sponsorships or extra compensation for their athletic abilities and personal reputations that they've created for themselves. For black athletes who cannot receive financial support from their families, gaining NIL deals allows them to gain financial stability to take care of themselves in places where their community might not be looking out for their best interests. Branding has always been a component conversation topic for companies and organizations, but now it's being brought up in discussion for individual athletes.

For this study, I did not go into full detail about how NIL marketability affected the participants' decision-making because NIL rules were created during their time at NDSU. Some of our participants (n=4) have gained some benefits from NIL during their college careers as an

extra income to survive being on their own. Our participants briefly mentioned that if they were to start college all over again, then NIL marketability would be another concern they'd have. We know that black athletes must spend extra time reviving their reputation and image repair when their narratives are tarnished (Brown et al., 2016, 2019). Because black athletes face greater pressure to maintain a polished image/personal brand, future research should consider how NIL intersects with the concerns identified by this study.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

I am conducting a study to better understand how black athletes feel at college institutions.

Our goal is to identify what the local community and media outlets have affected the level of comfortability that black athletes have at college institutions.

People who are eligible to participate in this study are those who are (a) currently a student-athlete at North Dakota State University, (b) have interest in engaging in social, political and civic causes, and (c) identify as an African American.

We are interested in the variety of experiences that black athletes have had both prior to attending NDSU and during their collegiate careers.

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will last no longer than 30-45 minutes.

If you would like to participate in this study or have any questions about the study, you can respond to me via TeamWorks, or email me at alexis.pitchford.1@ndsu.edu.

Thank You,
Alexis Pitchford
Multimedia Graduate Assistant
North Dakota State University

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:
Hometown:
Age:
Gender:
Academic Grade Level:
Athletic Grade Level:
Time in Fargo-Moorhead Area:
Years at NDSU:
Sport:
Major:
Race:
Races of Parents/Guardians:

Have you ever had an interest in engaging in social, political, or civic causes?
Have you ever engaged in a social justice movement?
Have you ever engaged or spoken out in a social justice movement publicly?

Cause of Social Justice Movement:
- o BLM
- o LGBTQ+
- o Environmental Safety
- o Human Health
- o Other:

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Study
Comfortability As A Black Athlete

This study is being conducted by:
Alexis Pitchford, a multimedia graduate assistant and master's student of communication at North Dakota State University.

What is the reason for doing the study?
The purpose of this research is to learn about how black athletes feel about their experience at college institutions, more specifically, predominantly white institutions (PWI). Our goal is to identify how the local community and media outlets have affected the level of comfortability that black athletes have at college institutions.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview via zoom. You will be asked to talk about your experience as an athlete before coming to North Dakota State University, and during your time here. Your interview will be recorded. Your responses will be transcribed, analyzed for common themes, and written about in a research article. Your name will be changed to keep your responses confidential.

Where is the study going to take place, and how long will it take?
You can join the zoom interview from a location of your choosing. It will take 30-45 minutes.

What are the risks and discomforts?
Some of the questions may prompt discussions of situations where you felt uncomfortable, excluded, or unsafe. You may choose not to answer the question, for any reason. You can stop the interview at any point if you are uncomfortable or for any other reason.

What are the benefits to me?
There are no individual benefits resulting from taking part in this study.

What are the benefits to other people?
You will help researchers learn more about what communication behaviors that fan bases, programs, support staff, and media outlets can use to help black athletes feel more comfortable and supported on college campuses.

Do I have to take part in the study?
Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may change your mind and stop participating at any time.

Who will have access to the information that I give?
- The researchers will keep private all research records that identify you.

- Interview recordings will be stored in a password protected file accessible only to the primary investigator. Electronic copies of the interview transcripts will be saved and protected in the same fashion.
- Data and records created by this project are owned by NDSU and the researcher. You may view information collected from you by making a request to the researcher. You may only view information collected from you, not information collected about others participating in the project.

Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study?
There will not be any compensation for taking part in this study.

What are my rights as a research participant?
You have rights as a participant research. If you have questions about your rights, or complaints about this research, you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at:
- Telephone: 701-231-8995
- Email: ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu
- Mail: NDSU HRPP, 1735 NDSU Research Park Dr., NDSU Dept. 4000 PO Box 6050, Fargo NDD 58108-6050

The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at: www.ndsu.edu/research/irb

Document of Consent:
You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Proceeding to the demographic survey on the next page means:
1. You have read and understood this consent form
2. You have had your questions answered, and
3. You have decided to be in this study.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What persuaded you to come to NDSU?
   - What concerns did you have when considering coming to NDSU?

2. What does it feel like being a black man/woman in the Fargo-Moorhead area?
   a. How does it differ from other parts of the United States

3. How does it feel being a student-athlete at NDSU?

4. At what time in your life did you first experience racism?

5. What measures of speaking out have you engaged in on your own?
   b. What methods have you used to speak out?

6. How supported by your program have you felt to speak out about social issues?
   a. Support level by NDSU athletics
   b. Support level by NDSU (the school)

7. How supported do you feel by the Fargo-Moorhead community when speaking out about social issues?

8. How do you feel the media illustrates African Americans?

9. When it comes to sports coverage, how does the media talk about black athletes?

10. How have your experience with local and regional media outlets been?
    c. What were you talking about?
    d. How well were you represented?

11. How have these experiences affected your choices when it comes to speaking out?
    - Willingness to speak out
    - Methods of speaking out