

"WE HAVE A CHOICE AND WE HAVE A VOICE": EXPLORING THE EFFORTS AND
EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN ATHLETES ENGAGING IN SOCIAL JUSTICE
ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

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Recent research has examined how and why athletes engage in social justice activism, as well as the reactions and impact of such. Framed by feminist cultural studies and informed by Black feminist thought and intersectionality (King, 2018; Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993), I explored the experiences of Black women athletes engaging in social justice activism. A feminist methodological approach (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002) guided this inquiry to understand how Black women athletes define social justice activism, their experiences with social justice activism, and their motivations. These Black women athletes shared powerful stories about their activism and the challenges they faced. Twelve Black women athletes participated in semi-structured interviews. These athletes represented six sports at the professional and collegiate level. Using open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) the higher order themes include activism and intersectional identities, everyday activism, challenges, and cultivating a better future. Activism engagement is deeply personal for these Black women athletes given their experiences of adversity and their prescribed status as outsiders within. Because of this status, their activism engagement is largely on a day-to-day basis whereby they recognize the power of speaking up and building social connections. They also use social media as a primary form of everyday activism. A lack of support at the organizational and individual level was reported as a major barrier to their activism engagement, particularly for athletes attending historically White institutions. The cultural expectation for them as Black women to address social inequities was another challenge. Ultimately, motivations driving athletes' activism include their fierce determination and ethic of care to ensure the next generation of Black athletes and Black peers

and family members can live safely and freely. As such, these Black women represent a new wave of athlete activism in which they use their disruptive power to self-empower and empower others. Moreover, this study affirms the notion that politics are a profound reality of sport, and, as such, athletes do not operate in a vacuum.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

On Saturday 9th July 2016, four members of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) Minnesota Lynx – Maya Moore, Lindsay Whalen, Rebekkah Brunson, and Seimone Augustus – wore black t-shirts at a pre-game conference. On the front of the shirts bore the words “Change Starts With Us: Justice and Accountability,” and on the back read “Philando Castile,” “Alton Sterling,” and “Black Lives Matter.” During this conference before their game against the Dallas Wings, Moore, Whalen, Brunson, and Augustus refused to talk about anything but social (in)justice.

The decision to publicly wear these customized t-shirts signaled a direct response by the Lynx to the killing of unarmed African American men (Castile and Sterling) by armed police in two different states in the same week. As the Lynx were warming up wearing said t-shirts on court, four off-duty policemen who were working security at the game walked out of the stadium, insisting the reason they did so was because they did not agree with the promotion of political matters on the court (Schoicet & Martin, 2016). Thereafter, the league fined the players and the team as the t-shirts were deemed a violation of the WNBA warm-up attire policies.

To be one of the first professional sport leagues to engage in peaceful protest like this represents the collective and consistent movement spearheaded by Black sportswomen in the fight for social equity (Ayla, 2020). Two months after this event, San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, took a knee during the United States' (U.S.) national anthem in September 2016. This peaceful protest sent shock waves across the country, in turn deepening the political divide amongst U.S. citizens. Kaepernick was effectively rendered unemployed by the National Football League (NFL) following his perceived disrespectful actions. He also faced high levels of public criticism and social ostracization, particularly across social media spaces

(Dickerson & Holder, 2020; Graber et al., 2020). That said, akin to players of the Minnesota Lynx, Kaepernick galvanized critical conversations across educational, media, and, not least, sport spaces about who and what the U.S. is *really* about in terms of race relations. In particular, Kaepernick's actions ignited (inter)national discussion and debate on the implications of the legacy of institutional racism in the country during the aftermath of his very public and very peaceful protest.

Contrary to popular belief, however, efforts to draw attention to social injustice and enact structural change was *not* started by Kaepernick, nor will it end with him. For example, at the 1959 Pan American Games, Eroseanna Robinson refused to stand during the national anthem, and in 1973 eight Brown University cheerleaders sat in protest during the national anthem. Another more recent example is U.S. Olympian Gwen Berry. In a similar manner to using the national anthem as a cultural medium through which to engage in symbolic activism (Cooper et al., 2019), Berry raised her fist on the gold medal podium at the 2019 Pan American Games in Lima, Peru, because she “knew that the national anthem did not speak for people like me in America” (Berry, 2020). Following her fist-raising, however, Berry was admonished by the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) who barred her from national or international competition for a year. As a result, Berry suddenly found herself with no sponsors, thus rendering her a “Black broke woman” (Berry, 2020). Ironically, at the time of Berry's punishment, Tommie Smith and John Carlos – U.S. Olympians who famously raised their black-gloved fists on the medal podium at the 1968 Mexico City Games – were inducted into the USOPC Hall of Fame. The treatment of Berry by the USOPC reveals a pervading hypocrisy: the fact that Berry's punishment occurred at the same time of Smith and Carlos' celebration sheds

critical light on the gendered racism (Collins, 2009) that Berry is often forced to confront as a Black sportswoman excelling in her career.

Athletes have been and continue to be at the forefront of who we see fighting for social justice, in what ways they are fighting, and why this matters. Perhaps among the most prominent American historical figures in the trajectory of athlete activism are Jack Johnson, Wyomia Tyus, Erosanna Robinson, Jackie Robinson, Muhammed Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos. In the twenty-first century, LeBron James, Megan Rapinoe, Gwen Berry, Maya Moore, and Raven Sanders are among those who have publicly advocated for the issues and people they care about most. Importantly, all these athletes embody one or more marginalized identities. They also demonstrate the heterogeneity of Black athlete activism. For example, demonstrating grassroots activism (Cooper et al., 2019), Erosanna Robinson, a U.S. national track and field star, regularly contributed to anti-segregation nonviolent protests at her local skating rink. In one instance she, used her athleticism to run away from police in the late 1940's and early 50's (Davis, 2019). Consistent with economic activism (Cooper et al., 2019), LeBron James has invested millions into social projects that serve the needs of communities traditionally at the hands of systemic poverty (Schneider, 2021). Even one's presence in sporting spaces can be viewed as activism against the system that constructs and controls their marginalization (Collins, 2009). Yet, while we "idolize early activists for fighting for racial justice . . . the conditions they sought to eradicate" continue to be reproduced and reinforced (Kaufman, 2008, p. 230).

More to the point, the Lynx's and Berry's activism is emblematic of what Edwards (2017) classifies as the fourth wave of athlete activism whereby "Black professional athletes . . . find their political voices . . . [and] leverage the political power potential inherent in their positions" (Edwards, 2017, p. 159). By speaking up against "the injustices and inequalities that

continue to cast a shadow over American society and the institution of sport” (Agyemang et al., 2010, p. 432), professional athletes become powerful change-makers in the fight towards social justice. Athlete activism is not a new social phenomenon (e.g., Love et al., 2019); yet it is still considered a non-normative behavior (Kluch, 2020). What’s more, when athlete activism is discussed across academic and non-academic spaces, rarely are the efforts and work of Black sportswomen brought into the conversation. That is, it is not uncommon for the collective and individual efforts of Black women athletes to be overshadowed by Black and white male athlete’s social justice activism (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020).

For decades, Black athletes have been speaking up for change, utilizing their social platform and cultural capital to protest against anti-Black racism in America. Athletes like Gwen Berry and Maya Moore represent a generation of professional athletes who are deeply engaged in and cognizant of the political climate in which they compete (Edwards, 2017). Notably, this generation of politically active and socially progressive athletes on and off the field/court/track have the financial means to be politically active. For example, after years of fighting for higher pay, top players in the WNBA can now earn over \$200,000, plus endorsement deals and sponsorships (Feldman, 2020). However, it should be noted that many Black athletes in the WNBA leave the U.S. during off season to compete internationally because their salary is not enough to secure their livelihoods – unlike their male counterparts in the NBA. In any case, WNBA players’ economic position arguably differs from the people they seek to represent and support. Therein lies the cultural agency of professional athletes as potential change-makers: Black women in the WNBA possess a much-loved stage (i.e., sport) from which they can speak out against social injustices, utilizing their voices in careful, strategic ways for the betterment of Black communities (Edwards, 2017).

People who hold marginalized identities are more likely to engage in activism (MacIntosh et al., 2020). It is no surprise, then, that athletes competing in the WNBA – a league that is 80% Black and comprised of players who openly identify in LGBTQ+ community (Lapchick, 2021) – have engaged in social justice activism for several years. The problem is that they are just not getting the necessary recognition and credit. This reflects Black women’s *outsider-within* status in sport and in the larger U.S. society (Collins, 2009). A woman’s presence in sport represents a disruption to the dominant social hierarchies and gender ideologies about where and how women ‘fit’ into society (Collins, 2009). Berry’s and the Lynx’s case illustrate that even today there is “little patience or interest when socially conscious athletes call attention to racial disparities” (Edwards, 2017, p. 230). Despite – or perhaps in spite of this – athletes, especially Black women and queer athletes, continue to protest in unique ways depending on the physical and social context.

Given the lack of attention to Black sportswomen’s efforts in social justice activism in academic scholarship, media, and wider public discourse, this research study examines social justice activism of Black women athletes. The impetus for activism can include, but is not confined to, police brutality in the United States, Black Lives Matter, marriage equality, reproductive justice, equal pay, and LGBTQ+ rights. This project stems from the recent rejuvenation of professional athlete activism in the last six years. For example, in July 2020, the WNBA announced their #SayHerName campaign following the murder of unarmed Breonna Taylor by armed police. On an individual level, Minnesota Lynx’s Maya Moore took time away from the WNBA for two consecutive seasons to fight for racial justice in the criminal justice system (Streeter, 2020). As such, this research aims to prioritize the voices of Black sportswomen. It seeks to examine and understand the experiences of professional and college

athletes as they engage in social justice activism. And it is committed to capturing the stories of athletes who are fiercely dedicated to using their platforms for social justice.

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Black women athletes are at the center of this study. As such, it is important to situate them in sport and examine the research on their experiences of social justice activism.

Race and Sport: Whiteness and Racism

Sport does not exist in a vacuum; race and everyday racism are central to understanding how and why sport operates (Hylton, 2021). As such, the role of whiteness cannot be understated.

The White Way: What is Whiteness?

The social construction of race in the U.S. is deeply complex. As the “master category of social organization” (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 108), race categorically has become one of the most defining cultural, social, political, and historical characteristics of the U.S. Yet, although the concept itself is not real – the concept of race is something that was made up for the economic purposes (Appiah, 1994) – the idea and implication of race creates very real realities for individuals living in the U.S. So much so that racism, specifically anti-Black racism at the structural and everyday level (Essed, 2001; Roithmayr, 2014), is uniquely and characteristically American (Morrison, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2015; Roediger, 2001). As Kendall (2020) explains, “despite the idea of freedom and equality for all being a significant part of American ideals, in execution American society relies on anti-Blackness and inequality” (p. 177).

According to Roediger (2001), “no one was white before they came to America,” (p. 330). Given that the country’s inception and wealth was founded upon racist ideology and practices, such as racialized chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation, it is not surprising that the White supremacy is never not there (Kendi, 2017; Omi & Winant, 2018; Roediger, 2001). For example, in the era of post-independence war as a British-America was becoming America,

systemic beliefs around and policies toward blackness ensured the perpetual ‘otherness’ of people of color while simultaneously elevating the White status quo (Jordan, 2000). As young America cultivated its identity and place among other industrialized countries, discourses around and attitudes toward race flourished through modern pseudoscience, classical philosophy, and cultural literary products and producers of the time. Blackness was never perceived as an inherent part of the ideals of beauty, intelligence, and humanness (West, 2002). This process can be explained as racial formation, the “sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 109). In this way, racial formation operates at the structural, institutional, and everyday level in profound, implicit, and explicit ways not seen in most other developed countries. Race and racism, therefore, hold profound meaning and value in U.S. society. Being or passing as White is preferred and privileged; anything else warrants skepticism. For example, the racial category of ‘White’ is the only group that is defined socially by what it is not – to be White is to not be a threat, is to not be lazy, is to not be deemed in need of control.

The reliance on anti-Blackness is rooted in whiteness, which is the “way that White people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared” (“Talking about race,” para. 1). On a structural level, this means that racial ideologies and racism permeates the very fabric of society, including education, health, housing, and sport. On an individual everyday level, this means that anyone who’s skin color is not White-passing and who does not conform to the White way of being is othered. Although chattel slavery and segregation are ghosts of the pasts, the inhumane legacies of such persist. That a person who does not look, act, talk, or dress White is subjected to discrimination in their everyday lives in the twenty-first century speaks to the power that the idea of race still holds in the U.S.

People who identify as White often inadvertently (re)produce structural racism through their everyday (in)actions as their subconsciousness recognizes the benefits they receive from a system that was made by and for people who look like them (Leonardo, 2004). A key driving force of racial discrimination in the U.S. is the normalization and subsequent invisibility of whiteness; therefore, the visibility of every other racial group is emphasized— a process propagated by contemporary discourses of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiAngelo, 2018; Hartmann, 2016; Roediger, 2002). Colorblindness is the claim to not “see” a person’s skin color, choosing instead to look past and through it. In other words, colorblindness is the notion that racial identity or ethnic background does not matter. This is problematic; to not see a person’s skin color means to blissfully ignore the social, political, emotional, and economic realities that people of color are forced to endure because of their skin color (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Put simply, to not see skin color is to not see a person as their holistic self.

Racializing individuals is an involuntary process within a racialized society like the U.S. wherein “racial meaning and categories are relevant and enforced and where racial differences are naturalized” (Lewis, 2004, p. 269). In other words, akin to Butler’s (1990) work on gender, ‘doing’ race is the everyday performance of and contribution to the construction of difference. The difference among individuals is *not* the problem; rather, the problem lies in the meaning attached to that difference (Johnson, 2018). Moreover, in stark contrast to people of color, White individuals are “rarely, if ever, asked to articulate or to examine either their racial identities or their positions within racialized institutions” (Lewis, 2004, p. 642). This, in turn, reinforces White people’s sense of disconnect from, or un-relatability to, race and racism. As a result, the invisibility of whiteness and the consequence of racializing diminishes the fundamental role whiteness plays as a system of oppression. This invisibility is largely left unquestioned and

taken-for-granted by the people who benefit from it (MacIntosh, 1989; Prewitt-White, 2020). As DiAngelo (2018) writes, “racially inequitable relations are comfortable for most White people” (p. 135) because racist systems benefit them (and why sacrifice those benefits?). Conversations around this comfort often causes White discomfort. Put differently, whiteness is everywhere, therefore it is nowhere, continually upholding the standard to which people in the U.S. are expected to adhere from behavioral, professional, economic, and social standpoints. Whiteness, therefore, is not the shark in the water, but the entire ocean.

Mass immigration throughout the early twentieth century, from mainly European, South American, British, and Asian countries, changed the social, cultural, economic, and political landscape of U.S. society (e.g., Ngai, 2004). Increasing numbers of immigrants entering the country increased White fear that the racial hierarchy would collapse. This fear bred a series of exclusionary legal frameworks, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, to ensure the lifeline of White superiority. Individuals who did not look, act, dress, or talk White were expected to adjust accordingly to prove their worthiness and assimilability to gain access to the advantages that being or looking White affords (Barrett & Roediger, 2005; Higginbotham, 1993; Johnson, 1997; Ngai, 2014; Roediger, 2002). Those who did not or could not conform were subsequently marginalized in a myriad of ways. This is what Higginbotham (1993) coins as politics of respectability: to be deemed respectable and respected in society, the White way was the only way. Accordingly, respectability politics is a central component to how many Black women navigate the White world given their outsider within status (Collins, 2009; Higginbotham, 1993), especially Black women in sport (e.g., Martin, 2019). One’s hair style, speech, clothing, and behavior can be considered signifiers of otherness. In this way, respectability politics persists today. For example, Chasity Jones, a Black woman, sued her employer for citing her hairstyle as

a reason for dismissal (Griffin, 2019). Jones and her legal team lost. In sport, tennis star Serena Williams sparked new dress codes at the 2018 French Open. Her custom made black Nike sport performance attire, made specifically to minimize her health risks following childbirth, incited controversy about what should not be worn and who should not wear it at this tournament. The tournament director claimed that one must “respect the game and the place” (Wamsley, 2018). These cases represent a pattern highlighting the ubiquity of whiteness in contemporary contexts, especially for Black women who are largely misrepresented and mistreated in sport and beyond (Martin, 2019).

Whiteness as a mode of domination has not gone away. Ideas about difference continue to permeate American life insofar as the perpetual othering of individuals who do not conform to the racial status quo (Chang, 2010; Johnson, 2006). Specific to sport, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games reflect the profound infusion of whiteness in international sport policy and practice. For example, a specific brand of swimming caps, called Soul Caps, accommodating hair textures and styles common among women of color was banned ahead of the Games by the international swimming federation (Fryer, 2021). The ban was not evidence-based; it was simply based on prejudice because such a product had not existed before. In this case, Black women swimmers’ physical differences are hyper-emphasized and constructed as a problem. Rather, policy makers’ inability to accommodate these differences among athletes should be highlighted as the problem. This example points to the operationalization of whiteness in sport and, specifically, the ways in which it impacts athletes’ experiences at the elite level. Since White women or men were not subjected to this ban, this example also supports the argument that Black women in sport are forced to confront unique obstacles and differential treatment. Overall, the Black community in

the U.S. remains one of the most discriminated against social groups today (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Hanks et al., 2018).

Race and Racism in Sport in the U.S.

As one of the most enjoyable, visible, and profitable forms of entertainment, sport holds an unmistakably special place in the heart and identity of U.S. people. National sport events, for example the NFL Super Bowl or the NBA finals, are delegated spaces on annual American calendars, with companies paying over six million dollars for a thirty second advertisement during those events (Knox, 2022). Sport thus becomes almost undetachable from and intertwined with everyday life. In this light, sport is such an integral part of American culture that in many ways it defines and distinguishes America from the rest of the western world. As Martin (2014) writes, sports are “more American than apple pie” (p. 1).

Critically, in contrast to the popular belief that sport is an apolitical meritocracy, sport is a racialized institution in a racialized society (Washington & Karen, 2001). Like other sociocultural institutions in the U.S., sport was created by and for White people with the long-held exclusion of people of color; whiteness, therefore, is embedded into the structure and nature of sport. Given the legacies of slavery, including institutional poverty and the exclusion and assimilation of people of color in organized sport (McDonald, 2005; Ruck 2019;), sport is best understood as a social site wherein “racial images, ideologies, and inequalities are constructed, transformed, and constantly struggled over, rather than a place where they are reconciled or reproduced one way or the other” (Hartmann, 2000, p. 230). For instance, some sports at the college and professional level are culturally constructed as ‘White sports,’ such as ice hockey, rugby, swimming, and tennis due to the money, time, and access required to participate in these sports. For decades, Black people were not permitted in the same spaces as White people,

including the same pool, the same ring, the same field, or the same court. Black people had to literally and symbolically fight their way into these spaces to be allowed to compete (Edwards, 2017).

Sports like soccer, gymnastics, tennis, and boxing have “received much attention over the last century with the inflow of Black sporting bodies into these traditionally white spaces” (Sutherland (2017, p. 48). Other sports are socially constructed as ‘Black sports,’ such as basketball, given the overrepresentation of Black players compared to White players. For example, the stacking of professional and collegiate football players (i.e., coaches disallowing and discouraging Black players from positions on the field that require cognitive and intellectual abilities) reinforces racial hierarchy (e.g., Kasier et al., 2016; Lapchick, 1995). The overrepresentation of Black athletes in collegiate and professional sport further perpetuates the claim that sport is a utopian, meritocratic institution devoid of systemic race-based issues. However, everyday experiences of racism that Black athletes endure on and off the track/field/court reveals the dire legacies of slavery and Jim Crow (McDonald, 2005). These legacies extend beyond sport participation. The lack of opportunity for and the negative experiences of Black individuals in sport media, administration, athletic training, and leadership typifies the normalization and acceptance of whiteness (e.g., Love et al., 2019). As a result, sport paradoxically has “become one of the most visible reflections of racial progress and constraint in the new millennium” (Miller & Wiggins, 2004, p. 316). This creates the assumption that race and/or racism in sport no longer persists (Martin, 2014; 2015). Accordingly, sport continues to serve as a “contested racial terrain” (Hartmann, 2000, p. 230), existing as a site for political struggle in relation to the nature of sport participation and the value of one’s voice (Fletcher & Hytton, 2017). Racism in sport is not new; it is also a result of intentional, sometimes

unintentional, processes For example, former NFL player Michael Bennett (2018) points to the reality that the majority of NFL players are Black while the majority of team owners are White. He thus equates the NFL draft to slave auctions (see also Rhoden (2006)). Ultimately, racial inequality in sport is often wrongly seen as “exceptional and irregular than routinely ubiquitous and deeply ingrained” (Hylton, 2009, p. 23).

Whiteness also manifests in sport through the heated defense by White sport fans, owners, and players of using Native American mascots – a cultural practice that has shown to have negative psychological effects on the people being represented through derogatory images and messages (Fryberg & Watts, 2010). Sport is an arena through which “the complex interplay between ethnicity, ‘race’, nation, culture and identity in different social environments is most publicly articulated” (Ansari, 2004, p. 209), therefore becoming a formative medium through which race assumptions are constructed and articulated (Adair, 2011). In addition, since sport is constructed as neutral in its assumed position as a space that “sits outside the formal demands and questions of power and ideology,” it is thus able to “symbolically impact the racial order precisely because it can simultaneously claim to be a space removed from politics” (Carrington, 2010, p. 92). This perceived political neutrality of sport in popular and scholarly discourse, however, only reinforces the idea that participation and achievement in sport “constitute[s] a proof of equality, a mechanism of assimilation, and a platform for social mobility” (Miller, 2010, p. 330). In turn, sport is claimed to be an institution for the ‘greater good’ rather than as a tool for whiteness and racism.

Because whiteness has been so central to America’s identity and collective nationhood (e.g., Roediger, 2001), it remains a dynamic, durable feature of American social, political, and economic life and living (McDermott, 2020). For example, Fusco’s (2005) examination of men’s

and women's locker rooms at an athletic and recreation center at an urban university in Toronto, Canada, reveals the permeating *absent presence* of whiteness in everyday sport and fitness spaces like locker rooms – a space that seemingly cannot be or is not racialized. However, sport spaces like this are not devoid of respectability practices (Fusco, 2005). The implications of such findings reflect larger critical insights on how sport, and social spaces within sport, are conceptualized and operationalized.

Rather than leaving the labor of deconstructing whiteness to sport scholars of color, White sport scholars are responsible for unpacking and dismantling whiteness since they benefit from the system of racial hierarchy in which they work (McDonald, 2005). White sport scholars' responsibility then, including mine, is to highlight how whiteness as a system “serves to produce and perpetuate existing racial hierarchies and white domination” (Hartmann, 2016, p. 56). White sport scholars should aim to critically analyze sport and its inextricable relationship to whiteness by decentering whiteness and (re)centering subjectivities, experiences, and voices of people of color in sport. Part of this decentering involves confronting the barriers that function to otherize Black sportswomen. This approach should thus be on White sport scholars' intellectual agenda (e.g., Oglesby, 1981).

Academic conversation analyzing sport through a critical cultural lens have increased in recent years, with particular focus on how sport promotes whiteness and how such studies can contribute to eradicating racial injustice in sport and, by extension, in society. There has been a small but significant push for analytical work that focuses not on whiteness as a concept, but rather as a *structural problem* (Hartmann, 2016; King, 2005). For instance, examining the crucial role of colorblindness in constructing sport as a racially progressive, almost raceless sociocultural entity that operates beyond the everyday racial politics and complexities of

American life and how colorblind discourse is deployed as a distraction from the actual racism (Hartmann, 2016). In his critical analysis of sport commentator Rush Limbaugh's comments about Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb, Hartmann (2016) concludes that Limbaugh's denial of racism or racially motivated comments typify sport and the "normativity of whiteness [that] typically operates to assert its authority" (p. 48). In this sense, one of the main ways whiteness operates in sport is to hide its own existence through the rhetoric of 'not seeing color' or 'it not being about color.' Hartmann's (2016) work aligns with Carrington's (2011) concept of the White sports/media complex. Carrington (2011) examines the role media plays in constructing racial narratives and ideas in the twenty-first century.

We might think the sports/media complex as having an important role – a role arguably more powerful than any other social institution – in the ideological transmission of ideas about race: the sports/media complex becomes the modality through which popular ideas about race are lived. (p. 86)

Here, western sport media constitutes our social understandings of race in very fundamental ways (Carrington, 2011). How Black athletes are represented through and understood within American media is key in the co-creation of racialized (and gendered) discourses and ideologies often rooted in whiteness. Specifically, the ways in which their performances are thought of and spoken about points to the workings of whiteness in sport. The findings of this research are situated in the overarching research paradigm of racism in sport, specifically who is and who is not impacted by these systems of oppression.

Gender and Sport: Sport as a Constructed Male-Preserve

Black women athletes are at the center of this study. They operate in an institution that privileges their male and White peers. Understanding the history of women's exclusion from

sport, the treatment of Black women in sport, the impact of stereotypes of Black women in sport, and experiences of Black women in sport is therefore crucial to contextualize their experiences of social justice activism.

History of Women in Sport: Exercise of Exclusion

The organization of sport in the early nineteenth and twentieth century reinforced the gender binary: the idea that men and women are inherently physically, emotionally, and psychologically different (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner, 2011; Theberge, 1993). Specifically, this gender binary positions men as the superior sex and thus as natural athletes, while women are the weaker sex and thus unnatural athletes. In this sense, sport is one of the formative sites in western society that naturalizes this kind of binary thinking. Since the body and physical performance is central to athletic experience, sport is a “particularly powerful setting for the construction and confirmation of gender ideologies” (Theberge, 1993, p. 315).

Since its inception in the Victorian era in Britain and translating to North America, organized sport was made by and for men, therefore constructing sport as an exclusively male preserve (Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 2002). In this exclusivity, men were conditioned to embody the dominant and deeply valued form of masculinity, known as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity in sport remains resistant to change. Today, sport often serves as a cultural medium through which boys and men are socialized into a certain form of masculinity, a unidimensional preferred way to be a ‘real’ man (Hartmann, 2010; Messner, 2010). Further, hegemonic masculinity is “conflated with heterosexuality: to be a real man is to be heterosexual and being gay or bisexual is a negation of masculinity” (Waldron, 2019, p. 21). As such, hegemonic masculinity impacts the experiences of both men’s and women’s sport participation,

as well as how sport as an institution contributes to the reproduction and articulation of dominant gender ideologies (e.g., Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

Sport does not operate in a vacuum separate from society (Cooper et al., 2019); sport is thus deeply connected to societal values and beliefs, including how gender is conceptualized and understood. Clothing, colors, and even nonverbal communication, such as walking and sitting, are gendered in western society (Kauer & Rauscher, 2019). Sport is no different: certain sports are perceived as girl/women sports while others are understood as boy/men sports. Examples of the former include gymnastics, diving, and volleyball. Examples of the latter include rugby, basketball, and surfing (Sobal & Milgrim, 2019). As previously mentioned, sports are raced; they also are gendered. As gendered spaces, what sport one participates in is often a signifier of sex and sexuality. For example, Hamilton (2020) found that women athletes who participate in a masculine perceived sport, in this case, MMA fighting, overdo gender in contexts outside of sport to compensate for feminine insecurities. Given historical and hegemonic gender ideologies constitutive of and constituted in sport, women who participate in sport are subject to the lesbian label (Cahn, 2015; Mann & Krane, 2019).

The historic deliberate exclusion of women from sport participation reflected the popular (mis)conceptions that involvement in competitive sport damages a woman's house-bound, baby-making body, and that sport participation will masculinize her in undesirable and unnatural ways (Lenskyj, 1986; Krane, 2001; Cahn, 2015; Mann & Krane, 2019). This exclusion from sport exemplifies the long history of the medicalization of women's bodies. For example, doctors in the west have long viewed sportswomen as "women first and athletes second" (Lenskyj, 1986, p. 35). As a result, the idea of female frailty permeates public opinion (Theberge, 1998). Although the enactment of Title IX in 1972 encouraged and provided more opportunity for girls and young

women to participate in youth and college sport than ever before, the perpetual message that sport ruins women and women ruin sport persists (Walker, 2021). In other words, athletes as women and women as athletes pose a threat to the status quo and to the gender hierarchy.

Because sport exists in a web of systems of oppression, sport is a powerful sociocultural vehicle for reinforcing heterosexism and breeding homonegativism (Mann & Krane, 2019; Sartore-Baldwin & Cunningham, 2009). Due to the privileging of maleness, whiteness, and straightness at all levels of sport (e.g., Jeanes et al., 2020), ideas around women's participation in sport conflate with race and sexuality (Adjepong, 2017). Athletes as women and women as athletes disrupt the entire "ultra-feminine image of the Victorian lady" (Cahn, 2015, p. 166), thereby propagating the lesbian myth (Waldron, 2016). This myth postulates that women in sport "are participating in a masculine endeavor and therefore must be lesbian" (Mann & Krane, 2019, p. 71). Such myths and popular ideas around sport and its relationship to race, gender, and sexuality underscore the noteworthy ways in which women's participation in sport is often shaped by White heterosexuality and how this affects women's sense of belonging in sport (Adjepong, 2017).

Women in sport tend to avoid being labelled a lesbian by practicing hegemonic femininity, such as dressing in traditionally feminine attire (e.g., skirts and tight tops), minimizing vocal celebrations, and avoiding displays of aggression, to assert their womanliness in this supposedly masculine space. Hegemonic femininity is the dominant, taken-for-granted way of being a woman that reinforces the dominance of men and subordination of women (Schippers, 2007). Conforming to these set social norms is largely rewarded so as to "deny the presence of lesbians and to counter the lesbian myth" (Mann & Krane, 2019, p. 71). Many sportswomen conform to traditional ideals of what it means to be a woman by expressing

characteristics that are stereotypically feminine, for example passiveness, modesty, and delicacy in body shape and size. This is referred to as the female athlete paradox (Krane et al., 2004) whereby a female athlete is positioned at the collision of sport culture and the larger culture of society: the ‘push and pull’ negotiation of looking one way for optimal athletic performance in sport while being scrutinized for looking that way in society. In so doing, the fluidity of gender expression and identity is largely disregarded, in turn reinforcing hegemonic notions of gender.

Although some sportswomen attempt to disrupt to these rigid, limited ideals of womanhood in sport and in society, the female lived paradox remains a reality for many women in sport (e.g., Ross & Shiner, 2008). Moreover, the lesbian label has had negative implications for sportswomen who *do* identify as lesbian in whatever capacity (e.g., athlete, coach, administrator, psychologist, athletic trainer). For example, the more women in sport express their marginalized identities, the more sport organizations in which they work attempt to control them (Walker & Melton, 2015).

Treatment of Black Women in Sport

Sport is an institution that privileges whiteness, maleness, and straightness (Birrell, 2000; Hall, 1996; Hylton, 2009; Krane & Mann, 2019). As a result, Black sportswomen are often subjected to criticism and conflict due their intersecting identities in predominantly (Black and White) male spaces. They are also often forced to learn the “guide to the game within the game” (O’Neale, 2018) due to their outsider within status (Collins, 2009; hooks, 2000). Oglesby (1981) argues that “Black women in the United States, perhaps more than any other group, have an intimate knowledge of and-experience with prejudice” (p. 5). Black sportswomen, in particular, have such intimate knowledge and experience with prejudice as they work and compete in a

predominantly White male space. Black sportswomen are subsequently forced to exist within the boundaries of White patriarchal ideologies.

Because of this constructed *outsider within* status (Collins, 2009), Black women, particularly in sport, are forced to the margins within the physical and cultural spaces they occupy, and yet are silenced and surveilled as individuals who seemingly do not belong in those very spaces (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014). Because spaces in our society have been “formed through what or who has been constructed out” (Puwar, 2004, p. 1), the seeming invasion of such spaces occurs when “those bodies not expected to occupy certain places do so” (Puwar, 2004, p. 1). The perceived invasion of sport by Black women is reinforced through the rhetoric of colorblindness – that blackness is only accepted when blackness stays within its historically conscripted limits (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014). In our hierarchical system of society that “prioritizes White skin, especially White male skin” (Edwards, 1999, p. 278), Black sportswomen are therefore perceived as disrupting the status quo and are constructed as inherently different (Ratna, 2018). As such, when Black women navigate through society, they threaten the ‘natural’ social order (Collins, 2009).

The socialization of Black girls and women in the U.S. into certain sports, such as basketball, compounded by the lack of access and opportunity to other sports, such as figure skating, exacerbates myths of race and gender in sport (Bruening, 2005; Smith, 1992). Still, blackness represents a “potential crisis point for the current hegemonic arrangement: it is a persistent site of potential disintegration and disruption that continues to cause anxiety within whiteness” (Battema, 1998, p. 24). Accordingly, individuals who are not White or male are problematized when they enter this gendered and racialized space. This, in turn, shapes Black women’s experiences in sport, marked as undeniably different than that of their male

counterparts due largely to systemic sexism and racism (Bruening, et al., 2005; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Simien, et al., 2019; Stratta, 1995; Withycombe, 2011).

The question remains then: why are Black sportswomen in the U.S. neglected to the point that “they and their achievements have been essentially forgotten?” (Lansbury, 2001, p. 234). To answer this, the problem for Black sportswomen is that they have “largely remained just that—athletes” (Edwards, 1999, p. 281). While having to learn the game within the game and contesting the perceived assumptions of a Black women in a sporting space, Black sportswomen’s psychological and emotional labor is reduced to the physical. Within the context of capitalism that privileges profit over people, what their bodies can and cannot do or should and should not do for the benefit of the majority White audiences, stakeholders, sponsors, and media remains a priority. Accordingly, a paradox reality is revealed whereby Black women are rendered “both invisible and hyper visible in particular sporting and popular culture spaces” (Ifekwunigwe, 2018, 24). The by-product of sport being “dominated primarily by White men and privileging White women” (Sunderland, 2017, p. 48) points to the reality that Black sportswomen cannot do or say anything without being scrutinized to some degree (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Martin, 2018). As a result, Black women in sport are continually forced to self-discipline to avoid or minimize repercussions. The case is amplified when it comes to athletes’ voices on political matters. As professional tennis player Naomi Osaka contends, athletes are often “met with criticism for expressing our opinions” (2020, para. 7).

Additionally, Black sportswomen have been largely silenced in sport research (Bruening, 2005; Cooky & Autonovic, 2020). The wider society does not seem to regard Black sportswomen with the same level of respect, admiration, and celebration as they do Black and White male and White female athletes. This reflects the intersectional nature of Black

sportswomen's oppressive conditions as they are seen through the lens of White patriarchy (Martin, 2018). In other words, racist and sexist discrimination is very much a lived reality for many Black sportswomen in the U.S. As such, Ratna (2018) calls for critical sport scholars to reframe how we view women of color in sport: often, the constructed differences of women of color coupled with the limited, largely oversimplified representations of them in sport further otherizes Black sportswomen (Johnson, 2006). Therefore, critical sport scholars must challenge and move beyond research that "positions women of color as just being merely different" (Ratna, 2018, p. 202).

Despite continuous sporting (inter)national success, Black sportswomen continue to be "framed and represented in problematic ways that reinforce sexist and racist ideas about Black femininity, as well as their symbolic role in helping to consolidate popular beliefs concerning the end of racism and the arrival of a colorblind society" (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014, p. 175). So, the problem is not that Black women are successful in sport; the problem is how this success is framed and the multiple barriers to sporting success. What's more, the problem is not that Black women remain disproportionately targeted by discrimination in sport; that is a symptom of the problem. The problem is that sport privileges White men (LaVoi, 2022).

Stereotypes of Black Sportswomen

Since race and racism is fluid, the historical construction, treatment, and stereotyping of Black women manifest in twenty first century U.S. society – much of which follows the legacy of slavery. For example, the child-like characterization and imagery of the Aunt Jemima in the late nineteenth century perpetuates stereotypes that Black women are animated, dependent, and there for the sole purpose of entertaining and domesticity (Collins, 2009). Such dominant, raced-gendered stereotypes impact Black women's representation and the opportunities afforded to

them in sporting positions, such as coaches, athletic directors, and administrators (Siemen et al., 2019). For example, McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) found that Black women in sport managerial positions faced constant unwarranted criticism and scrutiny about their workplace ability and decisions compared to their male counterparts. In this sense, sport remains a domain in which “differences can be exploited in the interests of malevolence” (Adair, 2011, p. 3). From a critical perspective, sport often reinforces the racial stereotypes associated with certain groups of people who have minoritized identities. As Carrington (2010) contends, sport has been increasingly “co-opted in the service of reinforcing dominant racial ideologies concerning both ‘natural’ black athleticism and black intellectual inferiority” (p. 173). So, while scholars and fans rightly applaud and promote sport for its capacity for diversity and life skills development, sport nonetheless remains a sociocultural domain wherein racialized *others* are perpetually stereotyped (Adair, 2011).

The nature of Black sportswomen’s experiences is largely characterized by historical racist and sexist stereotypes (Carter-Francique, 2020). As a permeating *process of othering* (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 105), race operates in sport through the reinforcement of Black women athletes’ otherness, thereby shaping their experiences in and beyond sport in often negative ways. This is particularly the case when Black women use their cultural platforms and physical sporting spaces to resist the very practices and policies that positions them as the others. For example, when Serena Williams wore an outfit described as a black catsuit while competing at the 2002 U.S. Open, the cultural discourses that followed reinforced the stereotype of Black women’s hypersexuality through the oversexualization and objectification of her body (Cooky & Rauscher, 2016; Schultz, 2005; Tredway, 2018). Such reinforcement of racial stereotyping occurred again when Williams wore a black unitard during the 2018 French Open, a customized

uniform made specifically to prevent blood clots following complications after giving birth. In this case, Williams' health was completely disregarded as her blackness and femaleness worked both as a marker of difference and a reminder of White and male dominance (Battema, 1998).

Experiences of Black Sportswomen

The legislation and implementation of Title IX does not necessarily equate to positive sporting experiences for Black women (Gill & Green, 2013). For example, access to sport in high school for Black girls is unequally distributed, mostly due to socioeconomic resources and (un)availability of sport spaces/facilities in predominantly Black and urban schools (Pickett et al., 2012). As a result, young Black women are missing out on the benefits of sporting experiences, such as team bonding and self-esteem building, especially as they move from high school to university (Theune, 2019). At the collegiate level, Black sportswomen who attend predominantly White institutions report feelings of isolation due to lack of campus diversity and lack of Black coaches and staff (Bernhard, 2014). Unfulfilled expectations also constitute their experiences. For example, during recruitment, athletes were made to believe coaches cared about their well-being; once enrolled and in the full throttle of intercollegiate sport, however, coaches made athletes feel like they only cared about their athletic performance (Harmon, 2009).

In a semi-structured interview with Dr. Madeline Manning-Mims, a former Olympian and track and field athlete, Waller, Norwood, Spearman and Polite (2016) provide a window into the status of Black women Olympians. Dr. Mims noted in her response that, at the time of Dr. Harry Edward's Olympic Project for Human Rights movement at San Jose State University, Black sportswomen were not invited or even asked to be a part of the 1968 Olympic Games protest – a dismissal Edwards retrospectively admits was wrong (Edwards, 2017). This is further evidenced by Wyomia Tyus (2018) in her autobiography about her experiences as a track and

field athlete during her time with the Tennessee State University TigerBelles in the 1960s and '70s. Under the leadership of coach Ed Temple, who ensured the maintenance of respectable, feminine Black sportswomen (Lansbury, 2014), Tyus reflected on the dismissal of Black sportswomen in terms of their sporting achievements and their activist efforts. Respectable Black femininity, in this case, was characterized by heteronormative behaviors (e.g., getting married to a man and having children) and maintaining a presentable appearance (e.g., wearing make-up and feminine clothing; having hair deemed professional). Ultimately, Tyus (2018) speaks to the fact that her activist actions were overlooked.

Although Black sportswomen today have more access to sport participation than they did fifty years, the nature of that access and participation remains problematic. What's more, although Black women can now earn money in sport, their earnings do not match that of their Black and White male counterparts (Abrams, 2019). Systems of power continue to shape the livelihoods and experiences of Black women athletes. They are habitually scrutinized, their bodies are under constant surveillance, and their sporting performances routinely dismissed or stereotyped in American media. In an institution that claims to be for the greater good, what good and for whom?

Athlete Activism

This study is concerned with the experiences of Black women athletes engaging in social justice activism. These athletes place themselves in the long history of Black athletes using their voices to advocate social change. Given this history, athlete activism is growing field of inquiry. To contextualize these athletes' activism, this section explores examining sport as an arena for activism, the history of Black athlete activism, and the current impact of athlete activism. In

addition, exploring the case of Colin Kaepernick and athlete activism at the collegiate level provides a backdrop to this research.

Sport as an Arena for Activism

Activism is intentional and active participation in challenging the status quo and working toward social change (Cooper et al., 2019). Activism by athletes is not a new phenomenon. For decades athletes have utilized their positions in society to stand up against social injustices. In particular, athletes with minoritized identities have used sport to speak out against injustices in the U.S. given their firsthand experiences with systemic oppression and discrimination (Agyemang, et al., 2020; Calow, 2021, Coombs & Cassilo, 2017).

It is not surprising that athletes use sport as a tool to perpetuate social justice given the communicative power (Atouba & Wilson, 2020) and cultural value of sport in western society (Trimbur, 2019). This is largely due to the access to and centrality of sport in public life. For example, the relevance of sport in society is affirmed through the celebrity status athletes are accorded. Sport thus serves as a unique site “to resist and persist through activist efforts” (Cunningham et al., 2021, p. 41). That is, sport often is used as an arena for activism due to its interconnectedness to society and the people who occupy it, thereby furthering the stance that sport cannot be separated from the society in which it operates (Cooper et al., 2019). Because of this inseparability, those who are connected to or participate in sport are (in)directly affected by the injustices, oppressions, and discriminatory practices and policies present in the broader society (Cooper et al., 2019).

However, the claim that sport is and should remain an apolitical site, that politics is not necessary or welcomed in sport, and that athletes should simply ‘shut up and play’ persists (Sullivan, 2018). To politicize sport, or to mix politics with sport, means to disrupt the

supposedly inherent political neutrality of sport. Such disruption to this ideal incites backlash against athletes who engage in activism, particularly Black athletes (Dickerson & Holder, 2020; Frederick et al., 2017; Kaufman, 2008; Sanderson et al., 2016; Sappington et al, 2019; Trimbur, 2019). Backlash can come from an array of sources: media and news outlets (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020), people with institutional power and positions, such as coaches, sport administrators, presidents (Kaufman, 2008), and sport fans online through social media (Dickerson & Holder, 2020). In addition, the reasons for such backlash have been linked to the perceived threat of American nationalism (Niven, 2021).

Despite their minoritized positions in society, Black American athletes engage more in activism against social injustice in the U.S. than their White counterparts (MacIntosh et al., 2020). Yet athlete activism is still considered a non-normative behavior given the repercussions athletes may face (Kluch, 2020). When an athlete of color chooses to speak up or sit down or raise their fist, considerable backlash ensues (Kaufman, 2008). Negative reactions to athletes who engage in activism is not so much about the message of the protest as it is about the manner in which the protest is performed. Put differently, the focus tends to be more on *how* athletes protest, not *why* they protest (Atouba & Wilson, 2020). As a result, the inherent message of the protest is discursively negated; the focus tends to lie more on the protest itself rather than the justification or reasoning behind it.

This is especially critical in the seemingly post-racial society in which we live – a society that breeds colorblind rhetoric and thinking through political discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). The myth of political neutrality in sport is reinforced, perpetuating the message that race does not matter in society, especially in sport since it is largely constructed as a bedrock for neoliberal ideals that transcends racial barriers (Coakley, 2011). For example, the overrepresentation of

Black athletes in certain sports, such as basketball and American football, strengthens the perception that sport is divorced from race-related issues. When an athlete who has minoritized identities speaks against racism they may be subsequently punished and/or shunned by those who occupy positions of power, including the wider (White) society. The backlash garnered from the wider public and stakeholders can also be severe (Hartmann, 2000; Kaufman, 2008; Sanderson et al., 2016; Thiel et al., 2016). Because of this, athletes of color may avoid engaging in activism around controversial issues like racism because of potential financial risk, as well as the chance of being perceived as a ‘traitor’ in public opinion, as we saw with Colin Kaepernick (Cunningham & Regan Jr., 2011). This backlash is exacerbated by a deeply rooted belief that the need for protest, especially protest related to anti-Black racism, is widely unnecessary (Sappington et al., 2019). As Hylton (2011) notes, “those who deny racism, or evoke the notion of ‘race’ uncritically or loosely, reflect the ease with which racial conflict in sport and wider society is maintained” (p. 238).

It goes without saying that such voice-raising and perceived rule-breaking is not without negative consequences, particularly in our increasingly social media-driven society wherein online public opinion can drive offline political outcomes (Frederick et al., 2018; Galily, 2019). Those who “dare voice opinions on issues such as social injustice and political oppression often face a hate-filled backlash of scorn and contempt from teammates, coaches, fans, and sponsors” (Kaufman, 2008, p. 216). This is particularly evident when the issue an athlete protests is racism in the U.S. (Kaufman, 2008). Nonetheless, sport is recognized and used as a powerful platform for athletes to speak up for the people and issues they care about.

Waves of Athlete Activism

It would be rude to talk about athlete activism and not mention Dr. Harry Edwards, the co-founder of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR).¹ Edwards played a key role in organizing the revolt of the Black athlete at a time when racial and social oppression in the U.S and beyond was rife. The rise of African American athletes in college campuses, alongside the rise of Black social and sport institutions, since they were not permitted in the White ones, meant that Black people could now utilize sport as a means for integration into society. Such integration did not mean political progress, however. The famous fist-raising on the medal podium by athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Mexico City Games Olympics was a direct response to the social, economic, and political oppression Black Americans faced.

Edwards (2017) posits four interconnected arguments about sport and the Black athlete. First, sport is inherently political. Second, sport is inherently White in that it is an institution owned, controlled, and managed by White people often at the expense of its Black laborers/athletes. Third, African Americans are economically, politically, and culturally oppressed by (White) America. And fourth, the fight must continue. At the end of the day, Edwards argues, sport is and can be a “source of potential power for Black people” (Edwards, 2017, p. 95).

Edwards (2017) paints athlete activism in four waves. The first wave, from 1900 to 1946, focused on Black athletic opportunity and legitimacy, with boxer Jack Johnson and baseball player Jackie Robinson as key figures in their racial barrier breaking. At the time, legacies of slavery and Jim Crow pervaded society as ideas about the inferiority and stereotypes of Black Americans were difficult to avoid and evade. As such, Black athletes used sport as an attempt to

¹ The OPHR is a national movement established by sociologist Dr. Harry Edwards in October 1967. The movement was the brainchild of Edwards and athletes at the time who proposed a boycott by African American athletes from the 1968 Olympic Games to protest the racial injustices and inequity in the U.S. and beyond.

disparage those ideas. The second wave, from 1946 to 1965, constituted Black access to sport. Gaining access to sport meant that Black athletes were afforded opportunities, such as financial income, that may not have otherwise existed. This entry point into sport was also used as a tool to prove the humanity and legitimacy of Black people as working, worthy citizens. The third wave, from 1965 to 1990s, focused on the treatment of Black people on and off the field. And the fourth wave, beginning in 2005, constitutes today's context in which Black athletes are deeply cognizant and socially aware of the sociopolitical climate in which they live and work by strategically utilizing their platforms to raise awareness about social justice issues. This last wave is particularly poignant given the visibility of professional athletes using their social capital and cultural platform to speak up against injustices. For example, NBA player LeBron James, tennis player Naomi Osaka, and hammer-thrower Gwen Berry have all at some point in recent years advocated for police reform on social media, during interviews, or on event panels. They have utilized their sporting careers to shed a bright light on racism in America. Ultimately, Edwards (2017) argues that Black athletes in the U.S. have to and/or will continue to use their voices seeing as they are viewed as people in society with a certain stage from which to uplift the larger Black community to achieve the 'promise' of America.

Edwards' (2017) work no doubt remains central to the historical trajectory and current conceptualization of athlete activism. It also illustrates the heterogenous ways in which Black American athletes resisted against systemic racism and institutional discrimination. However, conceptualizing such a long-standing social phenomenon into waves effectively risks essentializing the people, events, and issues constitutive to the essence of the movement (Cha-Jua, 2007; Love et al., 2019). Much like the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement that "renders the African American experience effectively ahistorical" (Cha-Jua, 2007, p. 284) and

homogenizes an incredibly complex and deeply contextual process, grouping decades worth of athlete activism into four waves for the sake of convenience engenders a dismissal of the critical moments within the movement that contributes to the overall character, direction, and magnitude of athlete activism. In other words, “form is mistaken for essence” (Cha-Jua, 2007, p. 276).

More to the point, a notable gap in Edwards’ (2017) work is a discussion of Black sportswomen’s activism in the U.S. This lack of attention to and erasure of Black sportswomen’s collective and individual efforts towards social justice in the U.S. is indicative of their intersectional oppression in sport and larger society (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Edwards, 1999). This erasure also contributes to the construction of athlete activism as a male-centered social movement wherein men are perceived as the designated, natural leaders. Speaking directly to this issue, former Olympic two-time gold medalist Wyomia Tyus (2018) notes in her autobiography that “Edwards and Black and white male athletes who created the OPHR never . . . came to me or my fellow Black female athletes to ask them to join the organization.” She “was not on his radar in 1968. None of us women were” (Tyus, 2018, p. 124).

In recent years, Black sport activism has been reincarnated. Building upon Edwards’ (2017) foundation, Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez (2019) explicate Black sport activism through the analytical framework of critical race theory. The authors’ extensive typology of Black sport activism explores the socio-history of Black athlete activism (albeit not an exhaustive exploration) and the different kinds of Black sport activism; that is, not just athlete activism, but also activism by athletes and sportspeople through sport organizations, communities, and localities. The typology includes symbolic activism, scholarly activism, grassroots activism, sport-based activism, and economic activism (Cooper et al., 2019). Symbolic activism is deliberate action by athletes usually in the form of non-violent protest

designed to draw attention to social injustices and incite change (Cooper et al., 2019). A contemporary example of symbolic activism is Olympian Raven Saunders who raised her arms into an 'X' on the medal podium at the 2020 Tokyo Games. This gesture marked Saunders' message to the world about the people who live at the intersection of multiple axes of discrimination. Scholarly activism is the production of knowledge and transmission of ideas by individuals and groups to deepen understanding about oppressive systems, including sport, and ways they can be deconstructed (Cooper et al., 2019). For example, Dr. Harry Edwards' OPHR, whereby Black athletes and sportspeople engage in counter-storytelling primarily through centering the experiential knowledge of Black athletes and sport scholars (Cooper et al., 2019). Grassroots activism refers to actions taken by activists at the meso and micro levels to challenge dominant social norms and systems in and beyond sport. For example, WNBA star Brittney Griner created a charitable foundation, BG's Heart & Sole Shoe Drive, in 2016. This community-based initiative aims to help unhoused people by providing shoes for them (Voepel, 2022). Sport-based activism is intentional action taken by athletes individually and/or collectively level to disrupt hegemonic policies and practices through their sport organizations that reinforce the marginalization of certain communities (Cooper et al., 2019). For example, in August 2020 teams across the WNBA peacefully protested the unlawful shooting of unarmed Jacob Blake by postponing scheduled games and wearing bullet-holed ripped t-shirts with Blake's name painted across (Sonoma, 2020). Economic activism is the strategic creation of business ventures or institutions in historically underserved and disadvantaged communities by individuals or groups connected to sport with the intention to stimulate economic and social empowerment and stability (Cooper et al., 2019). Economic activism includes Black entrepreneurship, such as two-time WNBA champion Renee Montgomery who created The Last

Yard, to raise money to improve education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Banbury, 2020).

As noted above, Black athlete activism is heterogeneous. The key takeaway is that sport cannot be separated from the larger society in which it operates, and that sport cannot and should not be understood as an apolitical or ahistorical entity. Yet, although research provides an understanding of Black athlete activism, the work and voices of Black sportswomen is once again largely erased or ignored.

The Power of Athlete Activism

The power of athlete activism perseveres. In the last five years, the magnitude, frequency, and direction of athlete activism in the U.S. has traversed transnational borders, illustrating that “there are many different ways of doing activism” (Haslett et al., 2020, p. 7). For example, in the aftermath of his controversial kneeling, demonstrating grassroots activism (Cooper et al., 2019), former NFL player Colin Kaepernick created a national Know Your Rights campaign, an educational-based program aimed at advancing the “liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, and mass-mobilization” (“Who we are,” para. 1, 2021). More recently, team members across the WNBA wore t-shirts with the words “Vote Warnock” to support Rev. Raphael Warnock. Warnock was in the run for a U.S. Senate seat against WNBA’s Atlanta Dream co-owner Kelly Loeffler, who penned a letter to WNBA commissioner Cathy Englebert opposing the social justice initiatives (including wearing Black Lives Matter shirts) organized by the league (Pickman, 2020). Warnock eventually won the vote in August 2020. In this moment, WNBA players shifted the political trajectory by influencing public voting behaviors.

Athlete activism is not confined to U.S. borders. The movement of athletes using their respective sports and positions in society to advocate for social justice has transcended national borders as more athletes utilize their voices for various social issues than ever before. For instance, Afghan national football player Khalida Popal spoke out against systemic sexual abuse by sport officials in 2018 (Abed & Nordland, 2018). Activism by Norway national football player Ada Hegerberg in 2019 led to equal pay (Given, 2019). Fencer Aleksandra Shelton, who was born in Poland, recently won a court case that typifies age and gender discrimination among female athletes (Longman, 2020). Activism by Irish Para athletes for better inclusion and acceptance within Paralympic sport showcases the various ways in which athletes across geographical borders use sport to challenge hegemonic systems of discrimination both in sport and the wider society (Haslett et al., 2020). This illustrates the reciprocal, intimate relationship between sport and society.

Athlete activism is also not confined to one way of doing. Reflecting the fluidity of social and cultural life, there are a myriad of ways in which athletes engage in activism. For example, a sideline kiss that made headlines after the 2019 World Cup signified Danish footballer Pernille Harder's advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights in and out of sport (Weldon, 2020). At the beginning of the 2020 season, the WNBA announced the launch of a new social justice initiative platform, the Justice Movement, to amplify WNBA players' social justice advocacy ("WNBA announces," 2020). In the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake, WNBA teams postponed play as players of teams "met on court and kneeled in solidarity" (Voepel, 2020). In July 2020, WNBA player Natasha Cloud walked the streets of Washington, joining hundreds in a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest. These examples demonstrate the many ways athletes have and can partake in activism.

The Case of Kaepernick: American Nationalism and Activism

In August 2016 during a pre-season home game against Green Bay, NFL San Francisco 49ers player Colin Kaepernick sat on the bench during the American national anthem. Shortly thereafter, public outcry ensued. Kaepernick received a letter of support from a former NFL player and military officer Nate Boyer. Boyer and Kaepernick met to work together to discuss different ways to protest without disrespecting the military community. Kaepernick then executed his new method of protest (i.e., kneeling) during the 49er's final preseason game in September (Boren, 2020). Kaepernick's kneeling created a prodigious storm of criticism, effectively polarizing the nation on its ideals of patriotism and civility (Smith & Tryce, 2019).

The negative reactions to Kaepernick's peaceful protest leads to a critical understanding of American nationalism framed within athlete activism. Although athletes have been engaging in activism before him, Kaepernick was the first in the twenty-first century to engage in symbolic activism like this (Cooper et al., 2019) (i.e., kneeling during the national anthem). Patriotism and nationalism are often conflated; however the terms differ ideologically. Patriotism is the love of one's country with openness to critique that country (Kosterman & Feshbach, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019). Nationalism, on the other hand, is the blind love of and commitment to one's country, accompanied with an excessive valuation of that country. Individuals with strong nationalism for their country "often believe their nation is superior to other nations and have uncritical acceptance of the national, state, political authorities" (Schmidt et al., 2019, p. 657). As an ideology, nationalism has become exceedingly and characteristically American (Smith & Tryce, 2019). In a post-9/11 context, American nationalism is often reinforced through militaristic performances and rituals at major sporting events (e.g., flag raising) to reaffirm national identity and uniformity (Bratta, 2009). To many Americans, the nation's flag stands as a symbol strongly

associated with the military, representing freedom, and democracy (Becker et al., 2017).

Therefore, when an athlete, especially an athlete of color, protests during the American national anthem - a song that is steeped in American symbolism and history - emotional responses about American nationhood and identity are provoked (Smith & Tryce, 2019). Kaepernick was labeled unpatriotic and anti-military because people reacted to his method of protest (Atouba & Wilson, 2020). Subsequently, what mattered most was how Kaepernick protested, not the reason or message behind his protest. This case also highlights the intricate connection between sport, nationalism, and the military in the U.S. . More to the point, nationalism, not racism, is the reason why Americans react the way they do when an athlete kneels during the national anthem (Smith & Tryce, 2019). This explains why Kaepernick was treated the way he was by the NFL, football fans, and the wider public; because Kaepernick's protest was perceived as a direct threat to people's feelings about America – feelings that have been culturally constructed and compounded within the national anthem itself – Kaepernick was thus ostracized for his seeming disrespect.

Yet, to think of American nationalism it is hard *not* to think about White supremacist ideology that perpetuated the idea of nationalism in the first place. Given America's history of slavery, exclusionary immigration policies, legacy of institutional racism and segregation, and trajectory of political rhetoric aimed at preserving the problematic social forces of America, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, the inequitable justice systems, racial disparity in war on drugs, nationalism conflates with racism. The fact that America was founded, operated, and conceptualized by White men means that American nationalism is often connected to ideas about defending the alleged racial purity of the U.S. Put differently, a dominant function of nationalism is to preserve the whiteness of country; nationalism can be interpreted as defending that America

is and should remain a White nation. In this regard, Smith and Tryce's (2019) work on the intimate relationship between sport and nationalism contributes to what we know about reactions to athlete activism. For example, when LeBron James wore customized shirt in support of Black Lives Matter in February 2018 and discussed living as Black people in the U.S., he was scolded by right-wing media (i.e., Fox News) to "shut up and dribble" (Sullivan, 2018, para. 2).

Athlete Activism at the Collegiate Level

Athletes at the collegiate level often are conditioned to believe their power to contribute to societal and cultural change is limited (Kaufman, 2008; Mac Intosh, et al., 2020). Athletes are hesitant to engage in activism, to exert their own power, because this perceived rule-breaking is an assumed threat to the authority (i.e., the coach or university for whom they play). In addition, if Black college athletes engage in activism, there is a high risk of losing scholarship, game time, and/or rapport with teammates and/or coaches (Kaufman, 2008). For many, then, the repercussions of activism engagement take precedence, especially for Black college athletes.

In recent years, however, there has been a rise of young people across universities in the U.S. recognizing their power and utilizing their voices for change. For example, football players at the university of Missouri led a boycott in 2015 that resulted in the resignation of the university's president, among other people. These moments of college athlete activism demonstrate that college athletes do, in fact, have the power and knowledge to be agents of change in part because qualities inherent in sport can increase the likelihood of athletes to engage in actions towards progressive social change (Kaufman & Wolf, 2010). For example, sport can foster a consciousness about what it means to be a responsible citizen since being a disciplined, talented athlete in athletics is akin to "being a responsible citizen in society" (Kaufman & Wolf, 2010, p. 167). College athletes with minoritized identities often embody activism by

acknowledging and using their social capital as athletes to promote change in their everyday lives (Kluch, 2020). What's more, college athletes with minoritized identities are more likely to engage in activism given their firsthand, lived experiences with oppressive systems (Mac Intosh et al., 2020).

To understand athlete activism requires the voices and experiences of athlete activists themselves. While such research remains limited, what has emerged is the incompatibility of college athletic identity and activist identity (Beachy et al., 2018). Kluch (2020) interviewed college athletes who have marginalized identities and who identify as activists to gain deeper insight into how they define and engage with social activism. His sample included thirty-one NCAA Division 1 interviewees – only one of whom identified as African American female. The findings illustrate five ways in which college athletes conceptualize social activism: as social justice action, mentorship, authenticity, intervention, and public acts of resistance. Kluch (2020) concluded that for these athletes the image of an activist is not so much that of one walking in the streets, but rather that of one using the “social power they have as an athlete to promote strategic change in everyday situations” (p. 567). Although these findings help elicit the relationship between sport and activism, they do not address the voices and experiences Black sportswomen activism.

George-Williams' (2019) work centers the voices and experiences of nine college Black-identified athlete activists. Framed by critical race theory, George-Williams (2019) created the Black Athlete Activist Leadership (BAAL) model that is “intended to honor the lived experiences of Black college athlete activists in such a way that a roadmap is conceptualized to provide comprehensive and holistic support toward the support and development of this population” (p. 171). A study like this is a first of its kind – one that focuses solely on

intercollegiate Black athletes and their engagement with social activism through interviews. The study contextualizes the history of student protesting on and off campuses compounded by the circumstances unique to college athletes. Such history and contextual information is crucial to understanding the causes and consequences of Black collegiate athlete activism. Leath and Chevous (2017) found that Black college athletes are more likely than their White peers to engage in activism in their first year of attending historically White institutions. As such, a model for *comprehensive and holistic support* for Black college athletes who choose to engage in activism is imperative (George-Williams, 2019).

Most studies examining athlete activism focus on Black college male athletes (Agyemang et al., 2010; Fuller & Agyemang, 2018), revealing their use of social media as a prominent tool to speak out and mobilize support (Byrne et al., 2021; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). For example, Agyemang, Singer, and DeLorme (2010) found that Black male athletes believe that race is a salient reality and therefore “Black athletes have a responsibility to speak on social issues and causes today” (p. 419). That said, White college athletes are realizing their privilege and using it to stand up for individuals afforded less privileged (e.g., Scheadler et al., 2021); however, a failure to acknowledge where this privilege comes from leads to some White college athlete activists inadvertently reinforcing social hierarchy (Kluch et al., 2022). For example, White college athlete activists approached activist efforts through a micro/individual level (i.e., ‘I am White, therefore I am privileged’) as supposed to deconstructing that privilege through macro/structural level (i.e., ‘why am I afforded privilege as a White person?’) (Kluch, et al., 2022).

History of Black Sportswomen’s Activism

Like the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, athlete activism is perceived as a male-centered social movement (Goorevich & LaVoi, 2022). Black sportswomen as leaders in the athlete activism movement seem inconceivable for the wider public, due in part to representations in popular culture and through socialization. Yet, Black women have been at the forefront of this movement for decades, both in how they protest and for what they protest. For instance:

- High jumper Eroseanna Robinson refused to stand for the national anthem at the 1959 Pan American Games held in Chicago – the first documented to use the anthem in this way. Robinson also publicly critiqued the U.S. government’s nationalist propaganda during a time when Black athletes were used to promote the supposed harmonious and superior nation (Lee, 2022).
- Following her 1960 Olympic Games success and subsequent State Department trips during Cold War propaganda, gold medalist Wilma Rudolph was active in local protests to racially integrate a restaurant in Clarkesville, Tennessee (Zirin, 2018).
- Eight cheerleaders – all of whom were Black – of Brown University sat during the national anthem on 8th March 1973 during a basketball game against Providence College at Providence Civic Center, Rhode Island in protest against the treatment of Black communities. Cheerleader Denise Freeman said that “as individuals we do not stand up for the national anthem; we do not agree with governmental policy . . . the national anthem is not expressing views we agree with” (Casey, 1973).
- At the 1968 Games in Mexico City, track star Wyomia Tyus became the first person – male or female – to win two consecutive gold medals in the 100-meter dash, claiming the title of best in the world. Tyus’ athletic success and activism at these Games often is

overshadowed by Tommie Smith's and John Carlos' infamous fist raising protest against social injustice. However, Tyus did her own protest on the track in support of the OPHR cause. While competing the 400-meter relay, she wore black shorts instead of the white ones assigned as part of the US team uniform (Tyus, 2017).

- Toni Smith, a college athlete on the Manhattanville College women's basketball team, turned her back to the American flag during a pregame ritual in 2003 in protest of the country's involvement in Iraq and overarching inequality (Pennington, 2003). Smith noted she did this "for my own self-respect and conscience. . . there are a lot of inequities in this country, and these are issues that needed to be acknowledged. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, and our priorities are elsewhere" (Pennington, 2003, para. 8).
- Tennis champion Venus Williams penned an open letter in 2006 demanding equal prize money for women compared to men at Wimbledon and the French Open (Williams, 2006). As a result, Williams became the first woman to receive the same earnings as her male peers in 2007 (Lee, 2022).
- In 2012, four-time WNBA champion Seimone Augustus advocated for same-sex marriage. Augustus spoke publicly against a Minnesota ballot that would have made same sex marriage illegal (Lee, 2022).
- Following the death of Michael Brown by police in 2014, Knox College basketball athlete Ariyana Smith staged her own protest before a game against Fontbonne University in Missouri. Smith stood in the then-popular 'hands up, don't shoot' protest position during the national anthem. She then dropped to ground and stayed there for four and a half minutes, honoring the four and a half hours Brown lay dying on the street.

Smith then got up and and “raised the black power salute. I held that for thirty seconds and continued to walk out of the gym with my fist still raised” (Zirin, 2014, para. 3).

Smith subsequently was suspended from her team before being reinstated (Zirin, 2014).

She did not return to the team, however because “it’s just not a space to have to endure treatment from racists and people who have demonstrated that they don’t care to learn about who you are and what struggles you face in life” (Zirin, 2014, para. 8).

- WNBA’s Brittany Griner and Layshia Clarendon co-wrote a news opinion piece in 2017 voicing their concerns for the wellbeing of trans and queer athletes following the introduction of Texas Senate Bill 3 banning people from using the bathroom consistent with their gender identity. In the article, Griner and Clarendon argue that “we know what it feels like to be singled out for not fitting neatly into social norms. . . . We believe it is our moral duty to use the platform we have been given to speak out” (Griner & Clarendon, 2017, para. 5).
- Tennis champion Serena Williams, who has advocated for racial and gender equality for much of her career, penned an open letter in 2017 explaining the pay inequities unique to Black women in sport and beyond (Williams, 2017).
- Decorated WNBA star Maya Moore took time away from basketball in 2019 to focus on her activism regarding the criminal justice system. Specifically, Moore fought tirelessly and fiercely for the release of her now-husband Jonathan Irons, who was wrongly convicted and spent twenty years in jail for a crime he did not commit. Accordingly, Moore has become a prominent voice for prosecutorial changes, fighting for legal system reform (Streeter, 2020).

- In 2020 after the shooting of unarmed Jacob Blake in Wisconsin, Naomi Osaka refused to play in the semifinals of the Western and Southern Open. The tournament was subsequently postponed (Dator, 2020). A week later, Osaka wore a different black mask, each with the name of a black person killed by police, during each of her seven matches during the U.S. Open, which she won (Calow, 2021). Osaka also has spoken out about the importance of professional athletes' mental health.
- At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, shot-putter Raven Saunders raised her arms into an X shape to represent the intersectional nature of discrimination during the medal ceremony. Saunders, a Black gay woman with a history of mental health struggles, publicly defended her peaceful activism on social media and continues to advocate for better treatment of people who live at this intersection (Lee, 2022).
- Also at the 2020 Games, the most decorated gymnast of all time, Simone Biles, withdrew from the team and individual all-around final. In the context of the abuse she experienced by Larry Nassar, Biles cited mental and physical exhaustion as a reason for not competing. Shortly thereafter, Biles voiced her support for the protection of athletes' mental wellbeing (Lee, 2022).
- During their 2020-2021 season, the WNBA organized the #SayHerName campaign highlighting the unlawful deaths of Black women. Spearheaded by Black players who reached out to the family members of victims, this campaign was dedicated to Breonna Taylor, an unarmed 26-year-old who was shot and killed in her own home (Asmelash, 2020).
- In 2021, WNBA members changed the political trajectory of the state of Georgia through their Vote Warnock campaign. During this campaign, WNBA players wore "Vote

Warnock” t-shirts, engaged in community political events, and openly encouraged their fans and fellow athletes to exercise their right to vote. Reverend Warnock, a democrat, won his runoff election against republican and WNBA team co-owner Kelly Loeffler, making him the first Black Senator in Georgia (Gregory, 2021).

- Most recently, Olympic track superstar, Allyson Felix, shed critical light on the issue of Black maternal mortality in the U.S. Following the death of her teammate, Tori Bowie, who died following childbirth complications, and in the context of her own childbirth experience, Felix penned an open letter arguing that “the medical community must do its part. There are so many stories of women dying who haven’t been heard.

Doctors really need to hear the pain of Black women” (Felix, 2023, para. 4).

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of Black sportswomen’s activism. Nevertheless, the history of Black women athletes protesting social injustice runs deep in the history of sport and activism. This pattern of Black sport women’s activism further supports the notion that sport cannot and should not be separated from the larger society in which it operates. It also underscores the importance of understanding that Black women athletes’ lives are not apolitical.

By using sport to speak up against social inequities in U.S. society, Black sportswomen cement themselves as trailblazers in the fight towards racial equity and social justice. It is not uncommon for the collective and individual social justice efforts of Black sportswomen to be overshadowed by Black and White male athlete’s actions and White female actions (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). This demonstrates two things: first, that athlete activism is not a new social phenomenon (Love et al., 2019); and second, the efforts, experiences, and voices of Black sportswomen are rarely part of the conversation. Above all, Black sportswomen represent a *core*

group who are often overlooked and undervalued in discourse about and research of athletes and protest (Davis, 2019; Gilreath et al., 2017; Withycombe, 2011).

What's Missing? Gaps in Literature

Black sportswomen's activism is undervalued, underestimated, and overlooked in both academia and society at large (Cox, 2016; Perry, 2020; Thomas, 2020). This is not surprising given the sexist and racist society in which we live that perpetuates dominant stereotypes, controlling images, and intersecting discriminatory practices directed toward Black women that pervade public and political discourses (Collins, 2009), including in sport. Moreover, mainstream media coverage typically focuses stories on male athlete activism. When sport media *does* talk about women's athlete activism, it is conceptualized alongside, or even outside of, men's athlete activism (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). In so doing, sportswomen's activism is rendered almost invisible given the sociocultural hierarchy of men in western society (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). A disruption to the dominant narrative is therefore necessary, giving the sportswomen activism narrative its own space, credit, and validity.

As previously noted, athlete activism is not a new phenomenon. Contrary to popular belief, contemporary athlete activism did not start with Colin Kaepernick, nor will it end with him. Black sportswomen's voices are and have been there. The relevance of social injustices within and beyond sport in U.S. society means that athlete activism is not going anywhere. The movement's long-winded history is married to the socio-historical and political context in which it occupies; thus, the voices of athletes and sportspeople, including sport scholars, are needed more than ever.

One significant area missing from the literature is the experiences and voices of Black sportswomen who engage in activism for social justice. As noted above, some research has been

done at the collegiate level; however, there appears to be no current research specifically examining Black sportswomen's activism. This oversight speaks to the intersectional oppression Black sportswomen are forced to confront and demonstrates how their activism remains at the margins of public consciousness and academic scholarship. Simply put, Black sportswomen are seldom studied in any serious and sustained way. . . . When they were studied, they are examined through a biased lens. [Studies of Black sportswomen] are therefore needed to call attention to their dual experience with raced and gendered practices that constitute them. (Seiman et al., 2019, p. 422)

As such, this study is needed because Black women athletes who engage in activism are not given credit when credit is due. Their voices and experiences in the context of social justice activism are largely ignored. And their insights about social justice and activism are unaccounted for. The purpose of this study, therefore, is threefold: to center Black sportswomen's voices and experiences; to contribute to research on athlete activism, in particular the work of Black sportswomen; and to facilitate conversations around sport as a powerful tool for social justice in academia and beyond. Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do athletes who identify as Black and compete on women's teams define and understand social justice and activism?
2. What are their experiences of engaging in social justice activism?
3. What are their motivations for engaging in social justice activism?

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge and knowledge production. It determines “what researchers accept as the truth or as real, which then guides how we attain that knowledge” (Whaley & Krane, 2011, p. 396). In this way, epistemology examines the relationship between the knower, the would-be knower, and what can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Krauss, 2005). It guides how we come to know what we know and what we consider as legitimate knowledge or truth. Epistemology matters because it is key to understanding what questions researchers ask, how they ask those questions, and how it relates to the construction of knowledge and structures of power (Letherby, 2003). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), all research is “guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (p. 56). Epistemology, then, steers how researchers enter academic conversations, thereby impacting selection of data collection methods, approaches to data analysis, and presentation of data.

I locate myself within the critical theory epistemological paradigm since my work is rooted in social critique and advocates for social transformation aiming to liberate women in sport (Hall, 1996; Theberge, 2002). A critical epistemology encompasses a subjectivist or transactional position that recognizes a researcher cannot separate themselves from the research and researched. In other words, the researcher is situated in the research so much so that they are a part of the knowledge production process.

Moreover, the knowledge created is never value or theory-free; rather, knowledge is historically and socially situated (King, 2018; Markula & Silk, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Whaley & Krane, 2011). As a researcher within a critical theory epistemology, I situate my

research within the current sociohistorical and cultural moment. Put differently, what is observed in *this* present moment may not be similar to that observed in a different sociohistorical time.

What meanings have been created and knowledge that has been produced inextricably filters into the knowledge being created and that is to be created (King, 2018). From this perspective, knowledge produced at a certain time or in a certain moment always is shaped by the social and cultural contexts. For example, I am writing about and framing my study within this historical time following a highly divisive presidential election that has further polarized U.S. society in terms of racial relations and political ideologies. My study is situated in a time when western society (and the world) continues to cope with the devastating effects of Covid-19, the practical implications of rebuilding economies and confronting healthcare, and income inequities exposed by the pandemic. My study is contextualized within the sociohistorical moment in which patterns of unarmed Black American bodies are being murdered by armed (mostly White) police. And, my study is located within this cultural moment whereby the role of the athlete is frequently and intensely questioned; the potential role of sport and professional athletes has never seemed more seminal in simultaneously building and breaking collective community.

Questions, comments, and beliefs about what athletes should and should not do or should and should not say about issues that exist outside of sport pervade everyday conversation and institutions (e.g., the media). The popular belief that sport and politics should not and cannot mix continues to reverberate across society in the immediate aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd in early 2020. Race relations are taut and tense, and maybe they need to be for change and progress to materialize. I feel I am living in history; this project is my way of documenting a small but significant aspect of that history. At its core, a critical epistemological framework aims to

critique hegemonic practices that sustain social inequities. The researcher, therefore, takes on an activist or advocate stance in their work.

Feminist cultural studies is a paradigm within critical epistemology and guides my research. At its core, feminist cultural studies analyzes the everyday with gender at the center, providing a critical framework to ask questions we do not typically ask, to question the unquestioned. As Letherby (2003) explains, feminist researchers “start with the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women’s lives. ... They are concerned with challenging the silences in mainstream research both in relation to the issues studied and the ways in which a study is undertaken” (p. 4). The main tenants of feminist cultural studies include an emphasis on everyday social practices; unequal gendered power dynamics; hegemonic processes; and the privileging of normative sex, gender, and sexuality (Waldron, 2019). An emphasis on everyday social practices is important as it allows for an examination into the taken-for-granted, largely overlooked aspects of everyday life. Specifically, using feminist cultural studies enables a better understanding of how power at the everyday level operates to perpetuate gender inequities. This includes how power operates in our institutions, namely sport.

Feminist cultural studies also is concerned with unequal gendered power dynamics. Gender is a mechanism of control and power through which women are disproportionately marginalized and (ab)used by patriarchal forces in society. The *feminist* aspect of feminist cultural studies allows a dive into revealing the institutionalized social, political, and economic inequalities aimed at women in western society. The cultural aspect serves as keyhole into everydayness of those inequalities, both at the micro and macro level. Relating this to my study, sport at the collegiate and professional level is an institution organized by gender; therefore, to examine sport critically is to examine the unequal gender dynamics (Cole, 1993).

Because gender and racial power dynamics are evident in sport, using feminist cultural studies to identify and interrogate such hegemonic processes is imperative to understand how and why sport as an institution operates (Adams et al., 2016; King, 2018). Feminist cultural studies thus problematizes sport, interpreting it as a contested arena that enacts and reinforces processes of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., English, 2017; Messner, 1990), emphasized femininity (e.g., Domeneghetti, 2019; Grindstaff & West, 2006), and the normalization of whiteness as systems of power (Kauer & Rauscher, 2019). For example, my study examines athletes who grew up in a post-Title IX world in which competitive opportunities are readily available to girls and young women. However, in sport, women often are surveilled, policed, and scrutinized more than their male counterparts (Barak et al., 2021). This strongly suggests that hegemonic ideologies and practices in sport, such as privileging maleness, remains, and that sport continues to be a gendered, contested terrain (Barak et al., 2021; Messner, 1988). As LaVoi (2022) attests, the underrepresentation of girls and women in sport is “not the problem; it is the symptom of the problem. The problem is that sport privileges maleness.”

Hegemonic processes in sport include the privileging of normative sex, gender, and sexuality (Waldron, 2019). In our heterosexist patriarchal society, there is an assumed or expected way to look and behave in everyday life. For example, male athletes who compete in American football are assumed to be heterosexual due to the masculine culture of sport in general compounded by the traits associated with being an American football player (e.g., aggressive, agile, competitive). If a man defies this assumption of heterosexuality, he often is confronted with homonegativism (Kauer & Rauscher, 2019). Similar cases arise for women athletes when they do not conform to the traditional standards of femininity (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004).

Feminist cultural studies also underscores the belief in the relativity of truth (King, 2018). Systems of power shape individuals' everyday experiences. No two people go through life with the same experiences; although they may face similar challenges or obstacles or discrimination, their experiences of such will vary depending on their social and cultural contexts, their social identities, and their individual perspectives (Collins, 2009). In this way, there is no grand, universal truth; rather, there are multiple truths and therefore multiple realities. In other words, the relativity of truth depends on the interpretation of that reality. Athletes in the same league who engage in activism for social justice will have different truths to tell depending on their individual experiences. As a qualitative researcher, I do not assume there is a unitary reality or truth that can be known; instead, "each of us experiences a different reality . . . since each of us experiences from our own point of view" (Krauss, 2005, p. 760). Acknowledging multiple truths and realities does not invalidate each players' experience and understanding of systemic racism and sexism; rather, this kind of approach allows for a deeper understanding of the multiplicity in how Black sportswomen interpret, respond to, and engage in activism. Moreover, it can reveal how they interpret and respond to the social and racial climate in which they live and compete (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). This kind of approach enables a rich compilation of knowledge production and meaning making.

Another tenant of feminist cultural studies is a commitment to progressive social change and empowerment (King, 2018). Feminist cultural studies constitutes its traction and trajectory in the sociopolitical betterment of the individuals it seeks to understand and support. To do so requires centering the disruption of the status quo, such as the marginalization of women through institutional and social practices and gendered power dynamics. Emphasizing the empowerment

of women encourages the politicizing of theory and theorizing of politics (Grossberg, 1997) that may not otherwise be explicitly recognized or accepted in the academic landscape.

The purpose of my research is to understand how Black sportswomen understand and experience activism for social justice from their perspective. To do this, I will pay attention to each of the main tenants of feminist cultural studies: emphasis on everyday social practices; unequal gendered power dynamics; hegemonic processes; and the privileging of normative sex, gender, and sexuality. My study will examine activism as it is engaged in and experienced by Black sportswomen. Sport is a part of everyday social practices in western society; for Black women athletes, sport is their profession and/or means of education. Sport is therefore a substantive part their everyday lives. As a sociocultural institution, sport – including at the professional and college level wherein White men are afforded the most power – can often serve as a tool for marginalization and discrimination. In this case, my study will investigate the gendered power dynamics athletes experience as Black women occupying these social locations in sport.

Methodology

Methodology is the “framework guiding why we use specific methods or procedures in our research” (Whaley & Krane, 2011, p. 396). Stemming from my feminist cultural studies epistemology, this project employs feminist methodology, reflexivity, intersectionality.

Feminist Methodology

Feminist research is not a “unified project” (Letherby, 2003, p. 4). It is, however, unified in its political praxis of the emancipation of women (e.g., Johnston & McDougall, 2021). As Srikrishna (2020) writes, feminist methodology disrupts orthodox, androcentric ways of knowing by questioning “the process of discovery and construction of knowledge and makes the

researcher look at appropriate means for producing or discovery knowledge” (p. 422). In this way, feminist methodology is characterized by four major tenants: legitimizing and centering women’s lived experiences; recognizing the diversity of those experiences; disrupting the traditional hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched; and centering the role of reflexivity (Collins, 2019; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Wigginton & Lefrance, 2019).

In this study I am centering women’s experiences in my design (Prügl, 2020). My feminist methodology allows me to explore (not assume) participants’ experiences and center their voices by way of asking explicit questions about their experiences in sport as they engage in activism for social justice. Using feminist methodology means I consider the participants as experts on their experiences, thereby guiding me to collaborate with, not use, them. For example, I began the interviews to incite conversation with, “can you describe your journey to college and/or professional?” Asking a broad question like this placed me to the side and the participants to the forefront. Interviewing in feminist research “offers researchers access to people’s thoughts, ideas, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Allowing the voices of my participants to be at the center of the research is important given the long history of exclusion of women’s ideas, thoughts, and voices, especially Black women’s ideas, experiences, and voices (Collins, 2000).

Following my feminist methodology, I am “approaching research as emancipation” (Prügl, 2020, p. 306). As Brandzel (2020) interrogates:

Good intentions, feminist impulses, and even our own political investments in disrupting the status quo are all well and good, but who and what subjects and objects of knowledge

are we using in the process of all of our aspirations? This is what feminist methodologies are about. (p. 77)

By using a feminist methodological framework, my aim was for participants to feel empowered through telling their stories (Fonow & Cook, 1991). This study also entails a commitment to social change (King, 2018; Wheaton, et al., 2018). My aim was to fuse the cultural, political, and individual to demonstrate how and why Black sportswomen's activism for social justice matter in the current sociocultural climate. In this case, I am using what Smith (1992) describes as relational levels of research, which "value social realities and personal and cultural experiences," and "focuses on how women of color make sense of their own experiences and what strategies they employ as a result of their awareness of the power relations produced in society and sport" (Smith, 1992, p. 244). Therein lies the power in employing feminist qualitative research by way of attempting to decenter and deconstruct whiteness and maleness.

Giving participants the space and time to explain their story in their own words created a pathway for participants' empowerment. The interview process was a dialogic one wherein I "strived for an egalitarian relationship with [my] respondents by making space for them to tell their stories as they desire" (Bloom, 1998, p. 17). In so doing, I decentralized myself, in turn destabilizing the traditional hierarchical dynamic between the researcher and the researched. In other words, during the interview process the participants and I *co-constructed* knowledge and meaning by way of disrupting standard research power dynamics. Fontana and Frey (2005) argue that interviewing is "not merely the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers. Two (or more) people are involved in this process and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort" (p. 696) in the construction of knowledge and meaning making. In this

exchange, a unique kind of relationship can form between researcher and respondent (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

Reflexivity: Situating Myself in the Research

Understanding how one's *situatedness* shapes the research design, delivery, and outcomes requires a kind of introspection and critical reflection that may not be otherwise required or practiced (Krane et al., 2012). Reflexivity is thus a "positioning of critical self-awareness whereupon the complex relationships between the self, the other, and society are made apparent" (Krane et al., 2012, p. 30) allowing subjectivity to be embraced (Vandeboncoeur et al., 2021). Being reflexive demands a "constant questioning of the interactions" (Vandeboncoeur et al., 2021, p. 260) between the researcher, the participants, and the study outcomes. Feminist methodology calls for an explicit, extensive understanding of the researcher (Srikrishna, 2020). As such, the data collection and interpretation is influenced by my subjectivities and social positionality (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ifekwunigwe, 2018; Krane, et al., 2012). I am situated in the analysis of the research design, data collection, and data analysis as the interpreter and my identities, epistemology, and experiences inform how and what I interpret (Johnson, et al., 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Markula & Silk, 2011). This is especially important as I am a member of a social group who is afforded more privilege and power than the group I studied (Alcoff, 1994). My whiteness means my voice may be heard with more tolerance and volume compared to my Black peers. That said, my whiteness also means I may unintentionally re-other the individuals about whom I am writing (Ratna, 2017; 2018; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Alcoff, 1994). As Alcoff (1994) notes, we should "strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" (p. 183). Interrogating how my whiteness, for example, may

have impacted what and how much participants shared with me during interviews contributes to my reflexivity. How did my non-Americanness impact the nature of the researcher-responder interaction? I am a White able-bodied, cisgendered straight woman from Northern Ireland who has been living and working in American culture for six nonconsecutive years. From a citizenship/national identity perspective, my non-Americanness affords me a unique critical outsider-looking-in perspective when talking about issues and realities of American society and culture since “what I know is shaped by where I have been located” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 90). My non-Americanness may have influenced the kind of questions I ask interviewees. Even in my attempts to be reflexive and aware of what I’m bringing with me to the interview, what am I missing?

Moreover, as a former elite athlete, my experiences in sport greatly influence the lens through which I analyze sport academically. The nature of my experiences in the elite sport system were not all positive – in fact, the latter half of my sporting career was one of the most personally challenging times of my life. Accordingly, the approach I take in the sociocultural study of sport as an institution is a critical one. I often am asked why, as a former athlete, sports fan and advocate, do I tend to be critical of it. Just because I study sport critically does not mean I do not love it. Indeed, it is because I love sport that I am critical of it. I believe it can and should be better. Sport has and always will be a part of who I am, including what and who I research. By analyzing sport in the U.S., and the wider western society, through a critical feminist lens, I hope sport can reach its true, full potential. This research, therefore, is largely driven by this complicated love, and the commitment to ensure sport is more just and inclusive for future generations.

In addition, my methodology involved an attempt to avoid essentializing Black women (Johnson, 2003). It involved constant self-evaluation and ensuring active care and attention at capturing accurate representation of what participants shared with me (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I aimed to make my participants the subject of study rather than the object of analysis. My goal was to speak *with* them, rather than *for* them. The implications of what this research has on participants was also considered (Alcoff, 1994). For instance, I continually reflected on what can participants, as Black women in professional and college sport, gain from this study.

Physically documenting this reflexivity before, during, and after the research process provided tangible evidence of my implementation of feminist methodology. The reflexive journal writing exposed what ways my experiences and subjectivities may have been influencing the data and the data analysis. For example, in my reflexive journal I considered how and where my whiteness was shaping the research process and where whiteness was being produced. I assessed how my sporting experiences situated me in the data collection and analysis. The reflexive journal located an awareness of my sexual orientation and gender identity and how these social positionalities informed the research process. Not least, I reflected on the racial and nationality identity dynamics of the interview (i.e., a White Northern Irish woman interviewing Black American athletes). As Vandeboncoeur, Bopp, and Singer (2021) point out, recognizing and acknowledging my whiteness in this work should not be an apologetic or guilt-ridden endeavor to the point of discouraging such work. Rather, it is important that White researchers “attempting to access the lived experiences of racially marginalized populations engage not merely in just reflecting on their position of power. . . . Instead, attention should be placed on how whiteness is produced, both discursively and ideologically, in our research” (p. 38).

As a White woman and sport scholar, it is my responsibility to contribute to anti-racism conversations to help unpack and confront whiteness (McDonald & Shelby, 2018). It is my hope, then, that this project can spark, or contribute to, larger conversations about how we can understand race and gender through sport and vice versa. I also hope this project complicates those understandings to reflect the complex everyday realities of Black women in sport in U.S. society. As such, I am cognizant that, in writing this particular work, I am partaking in the process of constructing different expressions of blackness (Johnson, 2003). As a critical researcher, I “must be sensitive to the construction of difference in order to find solutions to tackling deeply rooted forms of complex g/localized oppressions” (Ratna, 2018, p. 202). To address this, I continually ask myself what brings me to this work, who are the data really for, and who, ultimately, benefits (Pillow, 2015).

Intersectionality

Recognizing the diversity of experiences among participants is another key tenant of feminist methodology. For example, as Black women living, working, and studying in the U.S., participants may experience oppression from the same structures (e.g., sexism and racism); those experiences, however, may look and feel different for each participant (Collins, 2000; 2019). Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993) reveals the convergence of multiple axis of oppression that exist in our multidimensional society by conceptualizing how processes of domination and difference-making interconnect and affect the lives of individuals. Intersectionality as methodology guides the researcher to focus on multiple axes of power affecting the lives of participants, such as racism, sexism, and homonegativism (Bowleg, 2008).

The power of intersectionality lies in its utility as a methodology. Using intersectionality as a methodological framework influenced what type of questions I asked, as well as the way I

interpreted the responses to those questions. For example, the questions asked mirrored my understanding that participants' lives are not unidimensional. For example, "can you describe what it's like to be an athlete on that team?" Asking open-ended, experiential-based questions like this provided participants the opportunity to reveal their multiple social identities and the experiences that constitute them. This self-identification in turn allowed me to present participants authentically. It was my job to contextualize participants' experiences within the current sociocultural moment (i.e., to consider the sexism and racism and other axes of power framing their experiences) (Bowleg, 2008). A key task I took on in this study, therefore, was to "make explicit the often implicit experiences of intersectionality, even when participants do not express the connections" (Bowleg, 2008, p. 322). While the participants shared their experiences with me, my data analysis strongly considered the sociocultural context in which these experiences occurred. That is, even if participants did not mention sexism explicitly in their response, my data analysis accounted for the structures of power and privilege that affect athletes *intersectionally* (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Method

Guided by feminist cultural studies (FCS) epistemology and feminist methodology, my aim was to center the voices of Black sportswomen engaging in activism for social justice. The primary goals of my interviews were to understand the experiences of athletes through their eyes and the meaning they attach to those efforts and experiences. To examine the experiences of Black sportswomen engaging in social justice activism, I employed synchronous semi-structured interviews (Ely, 1991; Smith & Sparkes, 2016) with current and retired Black and women-identifying athletes who compete and live in the United States.

Participants

The criteria for participation in this study were: (a) identify as Black and/or African American; (b) be a current or recently retired (no more than two years) athlete competing on a women's team at the professional and/or collegiate level (any sport, any division); and (c) have engaged in activism of any form for social justice, including but not limited to Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ rights, or equal pay.

The total number of participants interviewed was twelve ($n=12$). Their racial identities included Black ($n=4$), African American ($n=3$), biracial ($n=3$), Jamaican-African American ($n=1$), and Afro-Indigenous ($n=1$). The gender identity of all participants was woman ($n=12$). Although not necessarily relevant to this study, one participant disclosed their sexual orientation (bisexual), while the rest was undisclosed ($n=11$). Participants' sports were basketball ($n=6$), track and field ($n=3$), figure skating ($n=1$), volleyball ($n=1$), and soccer ($n=1$). The level of sport participation included professional ($n=2$), NCAA Division 1 ($n=6$), NCAA Division 3 ($n=3$), and National Junior College Athletic Association community college ($n=1$) at the time of interview.

Participant Recruitment

After receiving approval from the BGSU Institutional Review Board, participant recruitment began early in the Spring 2022 semester. I recruited twelve participants through a snowball technique (Markula & Silk, 2011). I began by asking key informants – people I knew within my professional network who have connections with Black sportswomen at the professional and collegiate level – to reach out to potential participants. Key informants were sent a script to forward to the athletes whom they knew. This script described who I am, the purpose of the study, the method of inquiry (i.e., interviews), confidentiality procedures, a request to be included in the study, and my contact information (i.e., university email and personal phone number). The script was also posted on my social media accounts (i.e.,

Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn), as well as on my professional networks (i.e., North American Society for the Sociology of Sport listserv). When they agreed to participate, participants were emailed an informed consent document along with a request to schedule a time and date that was convenient for the interview.

It should be noted that my whiteness may have impacted how many participants I was able to recruit. I posted the call for participants on my social media accounts, which have my picture on my profile page. Potential participants may have seen my picture (i.e., a White woman) and become discouraged to contact me. That said, I was recruiting participants at a turbulent time; the news that Brittney Griner had been imprisoned in Russia and institutions and professional sport leagues dealing with halted games and postponed schedules in the aftermath of Covid-19 (among other sociopolitical circumstances) perhaps limited my access to and availability of potential participants.

Development of Interview Guide

An interview guide was used to frame the interview process (Roberts, 2020; Smith & Sparkes, 2016) (see appendix A). Semi-structured interview guides provide some structure while also allowing flexibility in what questions are asked and in what order (Turner III, 2010). For example, I began the interview with ice breaker questions, such as “can you describe your experiences in college sport?” followed by more thought-provoking questions, such as “what are your goals within social justice?” and “how do you define social justice specific to the U.S.?” The open-ended questions reflected the larger research purpose (Markula & Silk, 2011). That is, the questions primarily drew upon participants’ personal experiences, values, insights, and behavior in relation to sport. I asked participants broad questions to guide the conversation (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Content-specific questions allowed for in-depth responses pertaining

to the larger research questions (Markula & Silk, 2011). Accordingly, I developed broad questions around large issues to facilitate initial engagement (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). For example, a question like “how would you describe social justice in the U.S.?” provided a starting point from which the conversation could build. In addition, asking broad questions like this gave power to participants to lead the conversation rather than me telling participants what to talk about in their answers (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Establishing the correct order of questions was an important part of constructing the interview guide. As Smith and Sparkes (2016) explain, questions “shouldn’t confuse participants, but should rather be an invitation for them to talk freely and happily about something they have experienced” (p. 110). For this reason, each question on my interview guide is a single question addressing one topic to encourage in-depth responses. Sensitive questions were placed toward the middle and end of the guide (Smith & Sparkes, 2016); thus, as the interview unfolded, the intention was to ensure participants felt ready and willing to discuss the more sensitive topics (Seidman, 1998). For example, the questions at the beginning of the guide examine general life experiences within sport. Towards the latter half, questions directly address activism toward social justice, such as “what motivates you to engage in activism for social justice?” and “what were the reactions from others after engaging in activism?”

Further, Josselson (2013) suggests preparing a number of *pocket questions*, or what are generally known as probing questions, as part of the interview. These are a set of auxiliary questions to have at the ready to keep the conversation going and to navigate more emotional and sensitive areas of discussion. Probing questions were thus tailored to the participant based on my background research on their sport background and activism, such as asking for clarification, examples, and elaboration. For instance, “in July 2020, your team participated in a protest for

justice for Jacob Blake. Can you explain what that was like for you?” or “you mentioned you felt this way, do you mind elaborating on that?” or “you noted your experience in college sport can be [enter word]. Can you give me an example?” or “you mentioned that vulnerability is a ‘big thing; for you in your activism. Can you explain about what you mean by that? What does vulnerability look like for you?”

Pilot Interview

Conducting pilot interviews is a key strategy to test the interview guide and practice my communication and interpersonal skills before conducting interviews with study participants (Markula & Silk, 2011; Smith & Sparkes, 2016; Yin, 2016). Pilot interviews allowed me to decide how I want to present myself to the participants (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). For example, what to wear, what tone to use, how to begin or introduce myself. These taken-for-granted factors influenced the trajectory and nature of the interview, so I tested my presentation and abilities during the pilot interview to assess what was best moving forward. Importantly, my pilot interview enabled me to test the efficacy and versatility of the interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) insofar as determining if, for instance, participants would understand the questions being asked and if the questions I asked participants led to relevant information needed to answer my research questions.

Being comfortable with moments of silence was a significant aspect of this practice since moments with no talk can be beneficial in making of knowledge and meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In other words, moments of silence allow time for thoughtful responses and can elicit empathic and curious demeanor from me (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Accordingly, I practiced active listening during the course of conducting the pilot interview. For example, I “never assumed an understanding of what someone means” (Seidman, 1998, p. 112); instead, I

asked participants to elaborate or give an example to cement a point if I was unclear on what exactly they meant.

I also utilized my personal and professional network to interview current or recent college athletes who engaged in social justice activism. Given time constraints and busy schedule, one pilot interview was conducted. Immediately after the interview was completed, the pilot participant provided feedback. The feedback provided addressed the following questions: how did I do as the interviewer? Did they feel they could answer openly and honestly? Are there any questions I should omit and/or change? The feedback provided was largely positive; the only suggestion was for me to slow down when I spoke and asked questions. The pilot interview was recorded via Zoom and shared with my critical friend.

Procedure

The purpose of interviewing as a research method is to “learn to see the world from the eyes of the those being interviewed” (Ely, 1991, p. 58) and interpret the “meaning people make from their experiences” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Interviewing thus enabled me to ask questions about and listen to each participant’s story with the goal of capturing their individual perspectives and insights. To embrace a non-hierarchical relationship in the interview process, I followed the feminist methodological framework of encouraging the interview to be “more like conversations” rather than interrogations, thereby evoking “both focused attention to the respondents and non-judgmental validation of their experiences” (Bloom, 1998, p. 20). In so doing, I avoided essentializing the participants as one homogenous group. In the data collection process, I thought of myself as a *traveler*, in that I, as the researcher, journey “with the participant and construct knowledge together” (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p. 109).

Online, synchronous interviewing has increasingly become the most popular form of qualitative data collection for researchers and participants due to its accessibility, cost-effectiveness, user-friendliness, and ability to observe nonverbal communication, such as participant's facial expression and body language (Archibald et al., 2019). Moreover, using Zoom as a virtual live platform for conducting interviews can expedite participants' feelings of comfort and familiarity since they are participating in the interview from their own chosen physical environment (Salmons, 2015).

Virtual interviewing entails a different kind of interaction since it is not in person, but still is face-to-face in effect. As the interviewer, it was my job to "listen to what is said and how it is said" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 138) in the construction of knowledge and meaning in that moment. Therefore, active listening was key (Seidman, 1998). As an active listener, I allowed participants the space and time to talk, listened attentively and responded curiously to what was being said, and was present in the moment. Simply put, an effective interviewer "listens more, talks less" (Seidman, 1998, p. 63) since interviewee-guided research "requires great attentiveness on the part of the interviewer during the interview" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 24). Also, a woman "listening with care and caution enables another woman to develop ideas, construct meaning, and use words that say what she means" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 24).

Once I made initial contact with interested participants via email or social media, I asked for their contact details. I then emailed interested participants an informed consent form and waited for their response. Some participants signed and sent the consent form back to me electronically within two days, while others took a week. If I had not heard from a potential participant after a week, I emailed them again to remind them and ask if they had any questions or concerns before signing the informed consent form. Once all interested participants

electronically signed and sent their informed consent form via email in a Microsoft Word or PDF format, I replied asking when was a convenient for them to arrange the interview.

Thirteen interviews were completed in total. Given the varying geographical locations of the participants, the continuing health concerns proliferated by Covid-19, and recent technological advancements, Zoom offered a cost-and-time-effective way to conduct interviews (Gray et al., 2020). The average time of interviews was 63.52 minutes, with the longest lasting 112 minutes. I followed the interview guide, but also asked probing or follow up questions for elaboration or to clarify points made by participants. Using a conversational style helped develop rapport and strip away the formality of a traditional interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 1998). I also approached the interviews with the goal to encourage storytelling. To do so I used active listening, probing questions, following where the participant led the conversation, and being flexible with the order of questions on the interview guide.

I asked each participant for a second interview. However, given time constraints and schedule conflicts, only one participant was free for a 65-minute second interview on zoom. The second interview enabled the participant and I to reflect on what was previously said, reconnect, and clarify points made by participants and/or fill in incomplete information that was said in the first interview. As Josselson (2013) notes, new information or details may emerge using the first interview transcript as a basis to create questions for second interview to “enlarge understandings” (p. 178). The questions devised for the second interview were specific to the participant based on reading the transcription from the first interview.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using the transcribing function on Zoom. I also reviewed each transcript while listening to each Zoom recording (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). I strove to capture full details of what was said and how it was said during the

interview. For instance, I noted which words were said louder using capitalization and indicated laughter using closed brackets.

After each interview I wrote in my reflexive journal. These post-interview reflections on the content and process of interviews included examinations of how I felt the interview went overall, what went well, what went not so well, what could be better, and where my biases may have entered into the space and why. This practice equipped me for the next interview and for the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Coding qualitative data is a dynamic, iterative process (Yin, 2016). Thus, I constantly moved back and forth among data, codes, and themes to ensure all coded data best fit within the defined themes (Barak et al., 2021). I used open and axial coding to analyze and interpret the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Once all interviews had been transcribed and saved as Microsoft Word documents, they were stored in Dedoose, a computer-assisted qualitative data storage and management software application. Here, all data were organized, saved, analyzed, and accessible in one space. Data analysis proceeded in four stages: familiarization, open coding, axial coding, and development of higher order themes. In the first stage, I familiarized myself with the data by rereading each transcript and reflecting on the nuances and potential meanings within it in relation to the research questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Saldaña, 2013; Yin, 2016). For example, before uploading transcripts to Dedoose, I re-watched each video recording to refamiliarize myself with the interview. During this process, I reviewed each transcript while watching the Zoom recording to ensure accuracy and to take note of body language and facial expression of participants. In addition, I made necessary changes to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality was maintained by using

pseudonyms and concealing any identifying information, such as team name, city, university names, and names of other people. Data were deleted from the Zoom account after all interviews had been conducted and stored on a password-secured personal device.

The second analysis stage involved open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding is the “process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Put differently, this process is the *starting point* of methodic analysis and serves as a “useful preliminary to more detailed analysis” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 35). Open coding involves attaching a tag or code to all meaningful segments of data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Thereafter, the third stage was axial coding of the open codes. This process involved identifying connections and patterns among the open-coded data. The axial codes represent conceptual meanings and reflect connections among open-coded categories (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, higher order themes were developed by grouping the axial codes into broad, conceptually guided categories. These higher-order themes were intersectional identities, everyday activism, challenges, and cultivating a better future.

Trustworthiness

Consistent with feminist methodology and critical theory epistemology, I used pilot interviews, rapport building, a reflexive journal, and a critical friend to support the trustworthiness of this study. Using my professional network, I contacted potential interviewees for pilot interviews. Given time constraints and busy schedules, one pilot interview was completed. This pilot interview allowed me the opportunity to practice interpreting interviewee’s response and asking follow-up questions, as well as further develop my interview skills. It also allowed me to assess the interview questions to gauge if participants understood the questions,

the questions elicited in-depth responses, the order of questions allowed for conversation to flow well, and to add any other relevant questions (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Developing rapport with participants maximizes feelings of comfort in exposing themselves during the interview (Reinharz, 1992; Ely, 1991). To do this, I gained background information about each participant that gave me a better sense of where the participant is situated in the context of this research. For instance, I searched on Google to find their biography on university's athletic websites or articles that focused on their activism. I also searched social media platforms (i.e., Instagram and Twitter) to understand more about who they are and their activism involvements. Having this information before going into the interview enabled me to find moments of connection with participants and that expedited rapport-building. For example, when I found out one participant was a volleyball athlete, I made a point of letting her know early on in our conversation of my (failed) attempts at volleyball in my local area. From there, she asked what sport I had played at the elite level and my experiences playing it. By revealing my experiences in sport and discussing the similarities, as well as the differences, between our sport experiences served as a gateway to form a connection with her. In another case, I found an article written by a participant about being the Black woman on a White team. I brought this article up when I asked about her experiences at her institution, after which she explained in more depth why she wrote the article. Another way I developed rapport with participants was actively listening to understand (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) participants' responses and life stories. In so doing, I strayed from the interview guide at times; that is, I asked questions that were not listed on the interview guide. Nevertheless, asking these impromptu questions made for rich data by encouraging participants to give examples, share more stories, or provide deeper

insights into a topic/event/issue. Developing rapport with participants ensured they felt safe enough to share their stories and insights about social justice and their activism with me.

A conversational interview style also helped develop rapport by stripping away the formality of a traditional interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 1998; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). I designed my interview guide so the conversation would flow nicely. For example, the initial questions focused on participants' journey to college and/or professional sport. These opening questions enabled participants to share their story to sport. These questions were also an opportunity for me to get to know them and for them to get to know me. For instance, I asked for examples, shared my thoughts on what they said, and, in turn, found common interests or values. As a result, these introductory questions served as a "warm up" to the heavier questions, such as 'how do you describe social justice?' Employing a conversational style approach enabled participants to feel they could trust me with their stories.

Further supporting the trustworthiness of this study, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process that enabled me to continually acknowledge, embody, and account for how my racial and cultural positionality informed the research (Vandeboncoeur, et al., 2021). Continual self-reflection facilitates critical introspection into how my biases and beliefs shaped the study and its outcomes. Before and after each interview, I spent about twenty minutes reflecting on the interview, including what went wrong, what went right, and what to do for the next one. For example, after the first interview I recalled on the impact my anxiety and my whiteness may have had on the participant's responses and interaction with me. The more interviews I did, however, the less anxious I became. To give another example, I noted in the journal the value of sharing my life experiences and sport stories to help participants feel less alone. For one participant, sharing my negative experiences in sport made her feel able to share

her negative experiences in sport related to body image and disordered eating. The reflexive journal also was used to note seemingly mundane things, like the time of day of the interview, where participants physically were while being interviewed (e.g., college dorm room, family TV room, or campus dining hall), and how that may have affected their responses. In addition, during the data familiarization and transcribing process, I wrote in my reflective journal about any preliminary collective themes that appeared. This informed the data analysis through my preconceived knowledge of potential axial codes and high-order themes.

Regular and open communication with a critical friend also enhanced the trustworthiness of this study. A critical friend is a person positioned outside of the research who has knowledge within the research methodology and of the broader topic (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). As an outsider-looking-in, this critical friend worked closely and regularly with me during each phase of the research to provide constructive feedback and make suggestions to improve the quality of the study. Interaction with my critical friend began with the design of the study and continued during every step of the research process, including the data collection and analysis. For example, the interview transcripts were shared with my critical friend. I also talked with my critical friend about the different open and axial codes I had originally applied. This thorough discussion led to a re-organization of the data codes in a more succinct way that better reflected the meaning of the data. These axial codes were also shared with my critical friend to discuss and “allow a fresh view at what is there” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 46), as well as to keep my biases in check. Having a critical friend with whom I could reflect on the research process and brainstorm content that emerged from the data ensured a high-quality study and effective interpretation of data.

CHAPTER IV. INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

Based on the data analysis, I developed four higher-order themes: intersectional identities, everyday activism, challenges, and cultivating a better future. For each theme I define the higher order theme and present the accompanying axial codes and open codes that are applied to elicit this theme. In this chapter, I discuss the higher order theme of intersectional identities. Consistent with my feminist cultural studies framework, when quoting athlete. I include athletes' self-descriptions of their social identities to contextualize their comments. I intentionally do not include a comma in between identities to explicitly depict athletes' undivided intersectional identities (cf. Mann & Krane, 2019).

Participants' identities as Black American sportswomen greatly impact their lived experiences. Participants identify with multiple social identities; their lives are therefore multifaceted and multidimensional. Their life experiences are unlike the experiences of their White female and Black male peers. That is, Black sportswomen are uniquely situated in sport, and in broader society, because they are Black *and* they are women *and* they are athletes. As Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, affirmed,

with being a Black woman, there's the intersectionality there with not only being Black, but you're also a woman, so there's going to be more obstacles and more barriers that are there and sometimes it feels like you can't get through them.

Echoing Marilyn, Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, explained intersectionality affects me probably the most. . . . I mean I always kind of thought that there's definitely an uneven playing field. I know there's an uneven playing field and I know [Black women] are at a disadvantage . . . when talking about things like this it does make people uncomfortable.

Some participants also noted additional components to their intersectional identities. For example, Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, identified as working class and as a person with ADHD while Eleanor identified as a Type One diabetic. Participants in this study also considered activist as an identity.

Participants cannot compartmentalize or separate these multiple social identities. Various hegemonic forces and systems of discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, classism., etc.,) converge to create heterogenous, although not dissimilar, experiences. Such multidimensionality requires an intersectional analysis to underscore the complex realities of Black sportswomen's lives, experiences, and treatment (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2009, 2019). Taking their intersectional identities into consideration, the axial codes that emerged among participants are lived experiences in U.S White patriarchy, confronting adversity, the role of sport participation, and sport is temporary, activism is for life.

Lived Experiences in U.S. White Patriarchy

Participants disclose what life is like as a Black woman athlete in and beyond sport. The open codes reflecting this include defining social justice and activism, realities of being Black and being a woman, the persistence of whiteness in early sport experiences and college sport experiences, and representation in sport matters.

Defining Social Justice and Activism

Unpacking the terms social justice and activism is fundamental to understanding what one is fighting for and why. Participants shared their definitions of these terms pertaining to what they perceive as not working or wrong in/with society. In this case, some participants define social justice through a systemic lens. Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, for example,

provided a definition of social justice grounded in a critique of the systems that “contribute to someone’s oppression.”

Social justice is in a large sense is like the editing and the correcting and the counteracting of problematic policies and just social habits that we just [are] accustomed to living by that a lot of us don't even understand are problematic. [Social justice is] actively seeking out where those errors or miss-structures are and reversing those and then just doing every effort to kind of get things on the right track.

Similarly, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, said,

Social justice is getting to the top and making a difference when it comes to policy and just trying to find ways to inspire the older people [who] might not do it the same way. I think that trying to find those tiny ways of inspiring people is the biggest thing [and] working my way up instead of just trying to make people angrier.

For Ruth, “making a difference” is linked to her success in her sport: “I think the better I am at volleyball and people seeing that [social justice and sport] also ties together, so the bigger of an influence I have the bigger of an audience that I have.” Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, also notes that social justice is “so much more than just voting and human rights. . . it's about the legal system, it's about the judicial system, it's about reform for our prisons, it's about a lot of different things.”

Some participants define social justice through a micro-level approach. For example, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, believes social justice is “holding people accountable for the things that mistreat a person or a specific group.” Farrah, a Black track and field college athlete, also believes social justice means “holding people accountable for their actions, not just based off of their race, just based off of what they did and how they should be

held accountable for that, and then also just how people act just in general.” Farrah explained further by providing an example of what social injustice looks like to her.

This one time in high school me and my friends we were being dumb. We were up on top of a parking garage at this mall inside of a car and we were smoking and then there was . . . I don't know how, but there were multiple cop cars came and surrounded the car. It was very hostile for, I wouldn't say not for a good reason, but for the scale of it . . . it was a couple of high school kids . . . there was no need for six cop cars.

Activism is largely defined as contributing to social change in some shape or form. For example, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, noted that activism is

trying to make a change in something. It doesn't always have to be racial, it could be gender, it could be ethnicity, it could be anything. I would define activism as someone trying to change something for the greater good . . . you can show change through different things, it's just how you feel and . . . what change you're trying to drive.

In this way, participants approach change from a structural standpoint that often requires small steps to achieve measurable impact. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, suggested,

When we talk about being an activist in the context of the U.S., I think at that point then you're talking about changing how a country works and functions and that takes a lot of time and a lot of small steps that lead to big steps. Being an activist should involve a level of actual change or measurable change or policies that are being corrected [which] can happen on a local level and expand to a state level and expand to a national level. So I guess you can find a way to fit any level of activism and say that this is serving the greater good of the U.S., it just will take a lot of those moments to add up and continue to push the needle forward over time.

Echoing Eleanor, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, affirmed that activism is “rooted in the fact that there's such inequities at those higher levels and just wanting to get to the root of them. So why do these issues exist?” Christina, an African track and field college athlete, also asked, “if you are against providing everyone basic human rights, why? What is the reason?”

Participants frame social justice through a structural and individual approach. To them, social justice refers to the various systems in society that perpetuate unequal treatment of certain groups of people. Participants define activism, then, as making change. Actively addressing such unequal treatment through micro level change can, in turn, lead to macro level change. Above all, participants emphasized that making change – however big, however small – is required for social justice to be achieved.

Realities of Being Black and Being a Woman

When asked why they cared and spoke out about certain sociopolitical issues, such as Black Lives Matter, participants referenced their lived experiences of racial discrimination, particularly at an early age. For example, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, explained the racial profiling at her school.

My brother and I went to a private Catholic school for nine years and it was kindergarten to eighth grade same school where there were no Black kids, like four or five and I'm not even lying when I say four to five. It was only us kids who ever got in trouble. So when I was in seventh, eighth grade that means my brother was in third or fourth grade. He was constantly getting in trouble for the same stuff that his classmates were doing, but he was the only one who'd get put on an island or he was the only one who had to sit outside by himself . . . he was the only one to ever get in trouble. It was kind of around that time,

seventh eighth grade, that I remember noticing that it was just weird, because it was me and this other guy in my class and my brother who are constantly in trouble. Yeah, we liked to talk, but not to the point where you send us to the principal's office . . . it was typical for us to get called out for doing the bare minimum.

In the context of “Black people being criminalized by the police” (Morgan, biracial college basketball and track and field athlete), Bonnie, a Black college basketball and track and field athlete, noted,

I know my rights. I know what I have a right to do and not do, and it's sad because I know I have to act a certain way with the police . . . I could be driving and see a police car and put my foot on the brake and slow down and I'm probably not even going over the speed limit. I'm just uncomfortable . . . I'm not comfortable at all.

Relatedly, Jamie, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, explained an interaction she had with the police.

Nobody [on the gymnastics team] ever understood until one day we had a team meeting with coach. I was late because I got pulled over and they're holding me up because [the police] were like, “Oh I think you have this in your car, we need to check your car” and blah blah blah. It was just very uncomfortable for me because at the end of the day, say a teammate was in the car with me, maybe the interaction would have been different. . . and how can my teammates stand up for me in that sense, you know what I mean?

Jamie continued to share her feelings of apprehension when discussing her reasons for supporting Black Lives Matter.

I think because I kind of understand how Black people are treated. . . . I've never been in such a serious situation such as George Floyd or anything like that, but just the things that

people can say really do get to me sometimes. I know they would never say that about anybody else which is where I'm kind of just like . . . I don't know, it just really hurts sometimes just to see what's going on.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, also spoke to the differential treatment of Black people by police: “where if someone else were to be stopped it's completely different to when I was to be stopped at a traffic light.” For Elizabeth, a biracial college basketball athlete, the murder of George Floyd was not unfamiliar.

When George Floyd was murdered that was a very eye-opening experience for America. I want to say because, I mean, as Black people or just as people who are aware of how the world that we live in so to speak . . . I don't think anybody was shocked to see that happen, it's not the first time and it's not going to be the last, but that was just a particularly jarring incident.

For Farrah, a Black college track and field athlete, the perpetual fear of such race-based violence motivates her to stay active in her activism engagement.

I feel like any day that could be me, that could be my friends, that could be any Black person that I'm close with. I'm glad that nothing that close has happened to me so far, but I feel like just because it hasn't happened to me yet, I don't get the right to just sit by in my little house or whatever and not say anything.

Describing their experiences in and out of sport, participants explained the realities of being a Black woman in American society, specifically related to appearance and behavior. For example, Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field college athlete, explained that growing up in a largely conservative White community she

wasn't even comfortable to be who I am and especially even with my hair. My hair is all curly, so I would never wear it like that while I was in middle school and high school. It was always straightened or always back in a bun. I was never able to embrace those parts of it, so something as simple as my hair, but also as far as expressing my ideas and just being comfortable with not being ridiculed for voicing my opinion.

Elizabeth, a biracial college basketball athlete, described,

for me . . . if you're the only Black woman in the room, I'm going to do something in the way that I speak or the way that I look or the way that I interact with people is going to reinforce that difference, so that way when you have people that don't have as many differences as you and you have a big room full of people who are just different in all kinds of ways, it's like you can kind of relax a little bit and not be so over analytical of yourself. You don't feel that pressure to code switch, for example, or change your dialect. . . . Granted it's a casual space and there's a whole bunch of nuance to that, but just to be in a social setting where you don't have to censor yourself or really wonder what everyone's thinking about what you said or how you're presenting yourself it's a big break. . . . So that's a really special thing when you grew up knowing and feeling that you're so different and feeling different.

Although such self-policing is common among participants, the nature of and reasons for self-policing varies across participants. Christina, an African American track and field college athlete noted,

I am an example [of intersectionality], but intersectionality could look different amongst different women, and I think a lot of people don't understand that [we] all face the same

issues. . . but we all have individual issues [and] we all have individual reasons why we want to fix these individual issues.

Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, talked about a Zoom call during the early days of Covid-19 pandemic when the team discussed,

the Black experience is not a monolith . . . it's not monolithic and I think that really showed through my experience from that Zoom call with my teammates. There were some my Black female teammates having a different experience than me, or not feeling like it was something that needed to be talked about. I think one big thing is that's what makes it hard because everyone has their own experiences and they're all valid, but it makes it hard to advocate for some people who don't believe in it.

In describing their lived experiences in U.S. White patriarchy, participants reported on the realities of being Black and of being a woman. From an early age, these women are socially conditioned to fear the police and to self-police their appearance and behaviors in contexts in which their minoritized status is palpable. Although they shared experiences of racism and sexism, they are individually nuanced.

Whiteness: Early Sport Experiences and College Sport Experiences

Participants' lived experiences of being the only Black woman on a team are indicative of the normalization of cultural practices embodied and enforced by those who are afforded privilege on those teams. In other words, whiteness – the standards by which everyone is measured related to appearance and behaviors – plays an integral role in participants' early and college sport experiences. For instance, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, noted that her sport is

predominantly White . . . the sport in general is very commonly White [and] I usually was the only Black girl on the court at times, even when it comes to [major university in the south]. When I first started, I wasn't really used to being around people that didn't look like me, so it's very hard when it came to hair and style and music and just culture in general.

Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field college athlete, suggested she is “almost an anomaly” since she is “the only Black person who throws” within her sport. Further commenting on how this impacted her experiences in sport, Morgan noted,

I had a White teammate who had commented on a Black coach's hair style in a very derogatory fashion. She was removed from the team. I mean, last year there were two Black people on the team and it really took so much convincing as to why this was wrong. It was a blatant form of racism . . . that's what it was, and it was just really hard to advocate for myself without making it seem like you guys all need to care about these issues as much as I do and I have a very different lived experience than most of you and you need to understand that and take that with whenever you're going to come at me because the way you go through life is not the way I go through it.

Relatedly, Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, explained,

I switch it up with my hair stuff all the time. One day I'll wear my weave, one day I'll have braids, one day I might have my natural hair out. You're never going to be able to tell which is which, but we got into a point where it's one thing to comment and say ‘Oh I like your hair, it's this sweet’ and ‘Oh I love your hair style,’ but I sometimes feel like some of the comments made by other teammates can be a little if not passive then a little kind of ‘what you're doing?’ . . . You know, you're not just trying to genuinely compliment

my hair. For example, one girl had went as far as to say ‘I don't know how you do it, how you switch your hair up so often, you don't get tired of it?’ and I’m like ‘tired of what?’ and she’s like ‘just coming up with new styles,’ and I know that it was probably out of genuine curiosity, but no I do not get tired of it . . . you don't think to *not* say something like that to someone? So, I think it's just times of moments of lapses in judgments. I mean you could just say ‘I like your hair’ and leave it at that, but some people go as far as to say ‘Oh, I like this style’ or ‘I like what you did.’ . . . I just kind of see as condescending sometimes, but those are the small moments of microaggression.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, also shed light on the lack of understanding of Black women’s hair in the context of sport.

We had talks about hair. So we had pool conditioning and we had our caps and one of the African American girls said ‘coach, I can't get my hair wet’ and stuff like that and he used to get agitated because he thought we were just joking around or we were overprotective of our hair while we practiced . . . and these are things that he didn't know about because he hadn't coached players that look like us.

For Penelope, a Black college ice figure skater, the prevalence of whiteness in sport meant that she struggled to find a suitable uniform: “some things that I did have was trying to find the right color of tights to match my skin. I am a very dark skin, so trying to find the right tights was hard.” Along these lines, Christina, an African American college track athlete, talked about the difference between high school and college is it gets more real. I mean there's no other way to put it than that . . . you encounter more scenarios of prejudice than I did in high school because you're more aware of what prejudice looks like, you're more aware with . . . microaggressions. You're aware of what a microaggression is, so I’ll say it just becomes

almost, I wouldn't say a sixth sense, but it was some days I'm just like 'Huh! This is my life that I live, this is what it's going to be like as African American student athlete.' I think there's a difference between being a student-athlete and being a student-athlete of color, and I mean that's not to say anyone has it better than the other, that's just to simply point out that there is a different life that we live and that's the truth.

Christina shared this example:

I was captain one of my years and I had a teammate . . . I was good, I was fast and I was captain because people looked at me as an example and when it came to competition I was there too, my head was in the game and I was not a slacker. Now this one particular teammate was upset because they were a senior and I was a junior and they felt that their seniority should have been in play, but for some odd reason I felt like it was a little bit more than seniority. . . . I think this person was possibly jealous of my skills and of course I didn't want to make it about race, but at the end of it all I did get fed up to a point where it's like why me? I'm not the only junior who's captain, so what's really the problem? Is it because I'm African American? And she said, "I just don't think you deserves it." Well, why? We had the same qualifications, if anything I over qualify. It did come down to race because there's no other reason why you don't think I don't qualify when I clearly do, so it's like . . . well, this is the thing you can live with your emotions on your face and no one's going to say anything to you . . . you can walk into a space and present you authentically and no one's going to sit here and say you shouldn't be that way. I can't do that. . . . I don't have that same liberty of being able to walk into a space mad, sad, too happy, too genuine without someone questioning or without someone saying something.

In this way, being the one of the few Black women, if not *the* Black woman, on a team is “definitely a weird experience” (Jamie, African American college gymnast now cheerleader).

Jamie noted she

started out in a gym in [Midwest U.S. state] and I actually was probably the only Black girl in that gym . . . maybe a couple others, but they graduated or quit or moved away, so I was really the only one.

In contrast, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, shared the positive impact of seeing women who were not White on her sports team after “being the only Black girl” for a long time.

The team was very diverse. . . I've never been on a team with that many Black women before. We actually took a picture of all of us together and we could have made a whole other team. It was so amazing because even my mom was shocked and she was just like ‘this is beautiful.’ Yeah, so it was just nice to be a part of a team [and] being able to see all ethnicities . . . we had Asian players . . . I never played with any Asian players . . . I loved being able to play with people that I’m not used to playing with. And so yeah, I could talk to a lot of people about a lot of different things than I could have with a few other members on the team simply because of lifestyles and different ways with growing up stuff like that.

Participating in soccer with a racially diverse team enabled Nora to feel less isolated.

If at any point during my four years we felt like something's been off, whether vocally with the coaches or racially or just any little thing that comes up . . . sometimes we would have a trainer make a comment . . . so it was good because, I mean, there would be teammates in the room and we just be able to look at each other and know what we're thinking and saying we could talk about it later, compared to say a friend who grew up in

[predominately White areas]. . . it just goes right over her head. So it was nice having people like that and validated how other people felt about how they were being treated at times . . . stuff like that.

Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, also noted the impact of a supportive team both on and off the court.

[We were] like a family, so my teammates were like my sisters. It was just a big family . . . we laughed and cried, we did everything together and some of my best friends have come out of women's basketball. We just really cared about each other at the end of the day and I think that's what sometimes some teams miss . . . they missed that relationship built in and a part of being able to win is being cohesive and being able to be around these people that you're around basically all the time. . . . So if I was going through something I knew I could like go to [my teammates]. I knew I could talk to them, I knew they were gonna have my back no matter what and vice versa. It was just we were literally like a family, they could call me today and I would drop everything.

Or, as Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, put it,

it's kind of like having a group of people with a shared experience who you get to live through and then also someone to come back to. I know a lot of people they go to college and they can't be themselves, they're really trying to find that core group to get into and regardless I'm bonded with these girls [on the team] whether it be through dying at a morning conditioning or lifting our butts off . . . we're just all so rooted in success and wanting to be the best we can.

Nonetheless, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, noted the social biases held by people in positions of power (i.e., coaches) and how this impacted her.

I think the biggest thing is coaches have their ceiling for you. I realized that I hit that ceiling that they had in their mind for what they needed me to do for the team and I wasn't going to get any further than that and I think that's what made me want to go to [another university] . . . so I would say overall I love [University], it's just you get to a point where you learn like, okay this is all they want to give you.

A key part of participants' lived experiences in U.S. White patriarchy is feeling forced to meet the cultural standards set by the White majority. Being one of the few, if not the only, Black woman on sport teams, particularly at historically White institutions, fundamentally impacted their early sport and college sport experiences, such as confronting daily microaggressions about their hair or their athletic abilities. Most participants noted examples of whiteness, thus underscoring its omnipresence in sport.

Representation in Sport Matters

Many participants shed light on the value of representation as it relates to their lived experiences within U.S. White patriarchy given the prevalence of whiteness in sport at the youth and collegiate level. Seeing people who look like them in sport matters, at the managerial level and otherwise. As Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, explicated,

Oh, I would say [representation is] very important. My biggest mentors are Black women who played [basketball]. My basketball trainer right now, I call her my basketball mom, I've been training with her since I came to [a southwest U.S. state], so she's been there for me through my whole collegiate career. She played on the highest level, she's played on the Olympic team, won gold, played in the WNBA, so having someone like that in my corner and she's also a coach on the collegiate level. I'm having those connections, but

also being able to know what I need to do [and] also knowing me as a person and knowing when to push me or when I might need a little bit more support. Also, my Amateur Athletic Union coach, she's a Black woman . . . so they've been there for me when stuff wasn't going well at [former university] and then at [other university]. They're still in my life helping me figure out the professional world . . . I've had other mentors and people that I know in the collegiate field like my [university] coaches, my head coach is a Black female, so that's huge. It makes a difference having that representation . . . just having someone who understands you, it really, I think, helped my game.

Marilyn offered more insight into why having “someone in my corner” who shares similar social identities is important. She made the decision to transfer schools to pursue her desired degree, but also to join a Black sorority with which her family shares history.

Sometimes it feels like you can't get through [the challenges], but if you see someone, even if it's one person that might have got there you think ‘hey, maybe either things have changed or there's a way for me to navigate through all those obstacles’ and I think that was a big reason. I actually ended up going to this [university] because I wanted to study engineering and I also wanted to become a part of this sorority because my mom was in the sorority, so that was kind of ingrained in my mind and also my nana was in the sorority. It was something I've always wanted to do . . . I remember during my official visit there are some Black female engineers who are also [sorority members] and they were able to come in and show me the engineering class and I was like ‘that's who I want to become’ . . . so I think that helped me reach for that and actually achieve it at [the university] even though there were definitely times where I didn't see any Black female engineers who were [sorority members] and who also were athletes . . . you add the

athlete part into it, I think there were times where, I don't know, any basketball players on my team or trying to find all three, but I was able to figure it out and have mentors.

They helped me get through, but yeah that's why I think representation definitely matters and helped me find what I want to do and go and try and achieve it.

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, echoed Marilyn's sentiments, suggesting "just being able to have people who related to my experience who also were pretty high achieving people" helped her navigate college sport, and the wider, world. Penelope, a Black college figure skater, also explained,

for me personally, when I see another Black figure skater, I get so excited . . . overly excited, it's a little creepy. I just need to tone it down, but you never see other Black figure skaters, so I get so excited. So this one year . . . I know there's another Black girl, and she was on the skating team with me and her and I became good friends. She was also on both teams, so we went to competitions together [and] that was a nice bond to have another Black person on the ice. I also take skate lessons as well, so when I see some Black kids learning to start to skate, I get super excited about that.

Specific to athlete activism as it relates to representation and intersectional identities, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, noted the meaning of seeing WNBA players engage in activism.

The WNBA, they had a big contribution to [social justice]. They are Black women like me, they're wearing T shirts, they were kneeling, they were just posting about [racial injustice], and I was like this is amazing, they're using their platforms, there's millions of people that look up to them and they're able to use what they have to inspire other people.

Participants articulated the importance of representation in sport. To have someone in their corner who looks like them who can offer guidance, relate to Black women's lived experiences, and share common values and goals enabled participants to find ways to successfully navigate U.S. White patriarchy. In addition, participants underscored the value of Black female role models in their lives.

Sport Participation

Participants noted how sport participation provided an opportunity for participants to develop their activist identity. For instance, Brenda's involvement in women's professional sport guides the issues and people she cares about as a Black woman because "it's something that I've been a part of my entire life, so it's close to my heart." In other words, would Brenda engage in activism and speak out about "more visibility for professional women's sports" if she were not directly involved in and have lived experiences of professional women's sport? That said, participants also shed light on the limitations of sport participation pertaining to activism engagement.

For Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, "you make so many great teammates and friends out of [sport]. My best friends are a lot of people that I played basketball with." As a result, Marilyn's confidence grew as a person and as a female athlete.

Sports also gave me a lot of self-confidence, especially in college . . . because I was very tall and skinny . . . when you're younger you have the ideal female image of what that was and my body style didn't fit that, but it definitely does fit and helped me become a great basketball player and I think learning through lifting and getting stronger and really growing into my body, I think that showed me like, "oh this is why I'm built this way, it's

for a reason, it's for something that I love to do.” So I think that also helped me like enjoy playing basketball.

Jenna shared similar insights, noting,

sports are supposed to build character, right? And in terms of this knowing how to work as a team, putting yourselves accountable, punctuality, things like that and me being able to mature and walk away . . . if you lose a game, you gotta leave you know what I mean? Stuff like that and being able to win graciously and being able to lose graciously . . . people need to organize and be able to go out there, so that takes a lot. You can work to be able to organize that rally or something like that . . . but also being able to walk away, you walk away before it becomes violent . . . you have to be able to value your life, even though you want to fight for something we have to make sure that you can come back and fight another day so we can accept this loss and we're not always right, you lose the battle, but we didn't lose the war right? So we're going to be able to explain if you lose a game, you didn't lose the whole conference, you lost one game and have another game next week . . . let's go back to the drawing board, how can we effectively do this?

Relatedly, sport participation taught Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, that

it is okay to fail because that failure is a foundation for something that there's always a stepping-stone. I think a lot of people are so scared to fail . . . if you're going to fail, be scared to fail backwards, but if you're going to fail in a way that you makes your next move to somehow either advance two steps forward from that failing spot or a little bit. So I think when I look at my future there's a lot of things that are starting to get worn out, a lot of things that we've been wearing out for generations and it gives me hope that

hopefully someone like me can [address social injustice] fully and it's not about taking the credit, but it's about doing something that we've tried to do in the past and it's finally working.

Similarly, Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, shared that athletics has helped me tremendously, not only getting my voice but also being able to use my voice to empower others, to help others understand something that they didn't really realize they were probably going through until I spoke of it, or I use my own experiences to help them help it click in their head.

Christina further explained,

when it comes to something as simple as a commentator messing up my name during the meet, that right there is a moment in my eyes of activism. You can choose to not say nothing to him and let that ruin the rest of your meet. For me personally, it's a simple "hey, it's [name of participant]." I don't think a lot of people realize those are little moments of speaking up for yourself, those little moments of activism, those filter into my athletic life.

Similarly, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, articulated her current involvement in sport as a basketball coach reframed her identity.

I always say when I was in college, I was more of an athlete activist, you know that you don't really have a lot of control over that. I would say now I'm one of the activist athletes because I am helping these young women not only become better basketball players, but I'm helping them to become better women and better people, so I will say now probably more of an activist athlete.

Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, believes she is

both an athlete and an activist. I'd say I've used more of my sport to be more in the activist role a little bit, so I wouldn't say that I'm an activist first, but I think when I did want to speak about something that's what I ended up doing.

For Jamie, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, sport participation enables her to think more critically about the operationalization of sport as it relates to racial (in)justice.

I feel like sport [participation] has played a big role [in my activism] because it's something that I always think about now when I'm doing things. So with the whole NFL rule change right now, they have to hire someone either have a different minority and they also have to have a woman and I was just like I wonder how they're going to do that, where are they going to put these women, and I was thinking of how well there's very few Black NFL coaches . . . well if they're going to add women now and they have to add women are they going to still hire them, but they're not going to be in a position of authority or you know what I'm saying? It was like I was thinking of it in a way where that yeah they may have to do it, but now how are they going to try and find a loophole...that that's kind of how I see it.

Then moving into the cheer team because when I was trying out for them, they asked my experience and I said well, I can tumble but I said when I did do cheerleading I was a flyer, I didn't lift people in the air, I just don't have that strength . . . And I was talking to my friend who was a cheerleader and she goes "you know it's interesting, if you think about it in cheerleading when do you ever see a Black flyer?" . . . and I was like what? And I actually had to go and look on social media and watch routines and all

the popular teams and I was like wait a minute, there really aren't that many and then if there are they are on majority Black squads . . . it makes me think all the time.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, noted the benefits of sport participation as it relates to activism engagement from a practical sense.

We've worked for a long time, so physical endurance and just being out there, all that . . . it's a mental thing of being an athlete and say okay even though I'm tired, but why am I doing this? I'm doing this so that we can succeed and win, so I think that from that perspective, from an athlete, that's where we get it from.

Importantly, activism engagement enhanced participants' sport participation. For example, Morgan, a biracial basketball and college track and field athlete, explained,

I don't think it impacted [my sport performance negatively], if anything it made it better. There was sometimes in high school where people would just say a lot of derogatory things which I didn't hear when I was on the court, but my mom would hear while I was playing it and I never got wind up all of them, but it kind of fueled my passion so I'm like 'Oh so you're mad that I exist in your space . . . let me just make you that much more uncomfortable,' and It's like I guarantee you the reason you have a problem with me is because of the color of my skin . . . you can always tease out the way they're trying to describe you and you're like most of those have to do with the fact that I present as a Black woman.

Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, shared similar sentiments:

Oh, I actually feel like [engaging in activism] made me feel a lot better. [For example], if I had a bad practice and we went to the children's hospital, I will feel so much better after

just being with kids, it just be like ‘ah’ that doesn't even matter, whatever, we're fine, everything's fine. . . . I think it's a release.

For Christina, an African American college track athlete, this mandated community service contributed to her holistic sense of purpose: “I think honestly it didn't affect it negatively . . . if anything positively more so, I'd feel rewarded, I'd feel great.”

Participants attested to the benefits of sport participation related to their activist identities. However, there are notable limitations - the most prominent of which is time restraints. For example, Farrah, a Black college track athlete, noted that “sport have definitely created conflicts with timing.” Echoing Farrah, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, noted,

you set your schedule, but things are mandatory. . . . I'm being paid to be a basketball player and to be at school so . . . it wasn't like I was able to just go out my way and serve like I would when I was at home or in high school or things like that.

Relatedly, when trying to find suitable days and times to arrange a social justice event that worked with fellow athletes' schedules, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, explained, a challenge we have is getting people to come to our events sometimes. Although our engagement has been pretty good, it's still not excellent because we're busy and tired. Our events are usually in the evenings because that's when we can count on enough people to be free to even go, but then it's at 7:30 at night so do people want to go back to campus? Do people want to stay on campus for another hour? Yes they do, but they do want these things, people are asking for these events to be there, but we are also just being spread so thin so it's like do I take part of my rest time to do this thing for an hour and a half or do I just go home early? It's very easy to not engage with something even when you know you

would enjoy it and it would benefit you . . . so people like what we do and they like engaging with it, but that's still a challenge.

Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field athlete, reflected upon the limitations that sport participation has on the nature and extent of her activism engagement.

I do consider myself an activist. I think just some of the ways I don't want to say restrained, but I have to think about a lot of things before I can just blatantly go out and speak my mind because I know how many things are tied to me as a track athlete and a basketball athlete.

Participants reported the transferrable lessons and skills they gained through sport participation, such as confidence and physical stamina, which they take into social justice activism contexts. They shared how sport participation contributes to their activist identity development by enabling a sense of purpose and thinking about sport more critically. They also noted, however, that sport participation somewhere discouraged activism engagement due to strict training regimes and time constraints.

Sport is Temporary; Activism is for Life

The final axial code in the intersectional identities theme focuses on the temporality of sport participation and the longevity of activism engagement. Participants understand their time in competitive sport is limited; their time in activism is limitless, however. In other words, activism is a key component to these athletes' intersectional identities.

As Black sportswomen actively engaging in social justice activism, participants explained the inherent activist nature of their identities. As Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete who "lives to serve," noted, "I think [activism] is just in me . . . that's just who I am, who I want to be . . . it's just who I am as a person." Bonnie continued, noting,

how I am as a person, it's not shocking to people who know me. [They] know I will give you the clothes off my back if that's what you need. I am a giver for sure, I will give you my last and probably won't even know you. . . I'm a strong believer in what goes around comes back around, so if I give this to you I'm not looking for anything in return, but I know I'll be okay . . . because if you know me, you know [I] will do whatever for anybody.

Similarly, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, noted that activism will “always be a part of me because I just feel like there's always going to be something that if you're not fighting for anything, what are you doing.”

As such, participants acknowledge that activism engagement extends beyond their sporting career. For example, Christina, an African American college track athlete, noted, I'm always an activist first because at the end of the day, realistically, I'm done after senior year. I don't plan on going to the Olympics, I don't plan on continuing in my running career because I want to focus solely on the law career and my advocacy career.

Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field athlete, further explicated,

I think if I weren't to be an athlete, I would still want to be an activist if that makes sense because me being an athlete isn't going to negate from the fact that I have a Black mom and I have Black cousins and all those types of things who are being affected by this stuff daily.

Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, noted her activism is “not going to stop just because I'm done with my sport.” Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, also affirmed

I think that because I'm an athlete it gives me the opportunity to be an activist if that makes sense, so it ties together, but I think that I'm more passionate as I'm getting older and I'm realizing I'm probably not going to be an Olympian. I know that I can be an activist for the rest of my life, so I think I'm more of an activist than an athlete.

Participants shared their self-perceptions as activists, acknowledging that their identities as athletes is short-lived, but that their identities as activists can endure.

For some participants, the temporality of sport accompanied by the opportunity to develop their activist identities led to a career choice within the activism realm. For instance, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, is

trying to figure that out now when it comes to my career path because I can go in either direction. . . . I want to go into either diversity, equity, and inclusion work or into sports broadcasting and . . . as you know my sport career is slowly ending . . . but I think it's pretty cool to be able to use my platform to go to talk about activism. Right now, I'm working on an internship with [a university] with the DEI chief so I'm trying to make my way back there.

For Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, her energies lie in getting a law degree.

I don't plan on continuing in my running career because I want to focus solely on my advocacy career. I do want to become a defense attorney. I would not even, just a defense attorney, but use my degree to any form of advocacy that I can. . . I've recently learned that it isn't just about refining the criminal system, it isn't just about refining the legal system, there's a lot of other systems that's out here that's that are broken as well.

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete who is pursuing a career in medicine, noted she “definitely wants to find ways to engage in activism post-[university].”

Although she doesn’t “know what exactly that'll look like,” she has

been looking into organizations at the medical schools I could possibly attend and seeing how they go about [diversity and support for minoritized students]. There's also a lot of national organizations for people in medical school to get involved with as far as diversity in general, but especially Black medical students in those spaces and how to navigate it and how to be almost an advocate for other our patients who have similar lived experiences to us.

Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete is a Type One diabetic, seeks to pursue research focused on athletes with chronic illnesses:

I guess whatever spaces that my academic endeavors take me I want to be involved in whatever diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are going on. My main goal, I guess especially now that I’m done playing basketball and my priorities are changing very rapidly . . . I’m going to start my masters in the Fall, so I want to do very well in that so that I can get into a good Ph.D. program and study what I want to study and how I want to study it. I’m really interested in studying Type One diabetes because I’m a Type One diabetic, but also just sociological impacts on and of other chronic illnesses. . . . There's a project I’m working on right now and it basically looks at Type One diabetes and eating disorders in the context of college sport and how college sport basically makes it very difficult to manage either condition and how all the factors intersect. I’ve had a teammate on basically every team I’ve been on who has a chronic illness that has at some point impacted their ability to participate. That could be like for them to settle practice for five

minutes or they have to miss a couple games because their asthma or whatever maybe is acting up, so I'm very interested in how that impacts them and how they're treated by coaches and other leaders and their institutions because of that. . . . What I want to do is to understand more of the medical sport sociology side of that kind of stuff and lead policy changes and policy developments to serve athletes that are living with chronic illnesses.

In this sense, participants noted that engaging in social justice activism is a life-long commitment made by choice. Participants are secure in who they are, what and who they value, and aspire to stay engaged in activism post-athlete life. For some, this means pursuing certain career paths that enables them to continue to speak out and stand up for the issues and people they care about most.

Confronting Adversity

As Black sportswomen activists in a White heteronormative patriarchal society that largely ignores and ostracizes them, encountering hardship is not new. Participants reflected upon the individual challenges they have faced in their lives to get to where they are now and how, in turn, facing these challenges informs their activism. These challenges include experiences of being bullied and the lack of institutional support for health issues.

Experiences of Being Bullied

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, noted her experiences being bullied during her youth and young adolescent years. Consequently, her confidence levels were very low. Talking about this time in her life is thus “a little difficult . . . and a little traumatizing.” Nonetheless, she revealed:

this is probably elementary school and middle school and high school. Basically, all the younger years. I would tell people that I'm Native American and over time I actually stopped saying that. . . . I noticed that I started saying I was White instead of Native American because my mom could pass as White, but she also passes as Native American so I kept White and [classmates] would make fun of me, saying "oh just because she's from Canada do you eat Canadian bacon, mm I bet you love maple syrup," or they would make the Indian sound with your mouth and your hand all the time. I didn't even know that was wrong until I was older . . . yeah, I just . . . whenever I would talk about it, I thought that I'd be able to be comfortable explaining my heritage, but instead people use it as a form of bullying and I was like okay, that's not really cool.

Despite these "traumatizing" experiences, Ruth is proud of her Native American heritage - so much so that she is keen to learn more to guide her activism.

I'm trying to figure out how can I incorporate Indigenous lives into my activism. I need to educate myself way more about it even though it's in my culture. I have no idea because people see me as a Black woman first, they don't really talk about Native American heritage, so it's a little difficult.

Penelope, a Black college ice skater, was "bullied for things like my hair, my skin color." These experiences motivate her to engage in activism: "obviously I don't want another young Black person to go through that, so I'm going to try and speak up about those issues." Similarly, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, discussed the reasons she believes she was bullied.

My skin is a little different and when I was kid, I had eczema and now psoriasis and it causes my skin to be discolored. I suppose I was a little chubby when I was in middle

school so that too . . . [and my] teeth were really crooked . . . it was just a lot. I was just awkward. I have always been the tall girl, but I was an awkward age to be tall. I want to say . . . it's an awkward age to be a tall girl, you hadn't really started playing sports and it's just one of those things because the boys aren't as tall, so they're hating on you . . . just things like that I would say that through elementary to middle school.

When asked did her experiences of bullying inform her activism, Jenna noted,

yeah, these are things that I've overcome, but also I know what it's like to be picked on. I know what it's like to not have a voice and to feel like you can't express yourself, so therefore I'm going to always speak up for the person that can't or the person that won't. I always say, 'that's not right, you shouldn't allow yourself to be treated like this and that you can do this.'

Interestingly, Jenna's bullying lessened when she "got to high school and was super cool because I started playing sports, so it's different territory." Needless to say, Jenna affirmed that her experiences of being bullied informs who she is today as an activist.

I mean I'm grateful for my experiences, whether good or bad, I think that it made me person who I am . . . I am very resilient from the experiences that I've had in my life. Sport has shaped that in multitude of ways, and I mean I see the correlation through social injustice. I wouldn't change those things. I don't agree with bullying and now if I see bullying for sure I'll step in and say something, because it doesn't make that person feel nice. Those things that happened to me made me the person that I am. I'm able to recognize bullying, even though some people might not see certain things as bullying, you know what I mean? I'm able to be like "hey stop that, get away from that person" and stuff like that or say "hey, how would you feel like this is," you know I mean? I think

my psychology background and just having fallen through those things as a kid makes me aware and makes me a better person [and] a better human. . . . It's our life experiences, anything that we go through, that makes us more empathetic genuinely empathetic to people because we can say I'm sorry for your situation and that's it.

Participants shared their experiences being bullied in their youth, whether for their heritage or their physical appearances. These experiences, in turn, inform their social justice activism.

Lack of Support for Health Issues

Participants discussed their experiences of confronting adversity related to the lack of support for health issues. When discussing her motivations for engaging in activism and the realities of being a Black woman, Christina, an African college track athlete, disclosed her mother's former drug addiction.

Oh, this kind of goes hand in hand with social justice because I got to see hands on how a city or how the legal system treats those who are addicts, those with a literal disease. In a way my mum's story has become in my story because not only has it affected me, but I've been able to watch her grow from someone who completely had their life torn apart to rebuilding it and I mean that's a strength that isn't modeled every day . . . I always knew my mama was strong, but to see her turn her life completely around it's almost like . . . it's an oath of who I am because that's who my mama is. . . . I refuse to let her down and I'm a living testament to the fact that people think so badly of addicts, and there are some people who made those decisions and have to live with those consequences, but I think what people forget is addicts are people too . . . they're human too . . . they make mistakes like we do and it doesn't take away from who they are. I use my story to help

people understand that as hard as it looks from the outside looking in and as hard as it may be from the inside because you're living it, you just gotta take control of your own life despite what's going on around you, but also give grace to those who are trying.

Christina revealed more about what life was like living with a person who had a drug addiction, the accompanying hardship, and, ultimately, how that experience transformed her outlook on life.

Up until now, again being able to use my own voice, my own narrative to tell my mom's story was empowering because so many people wanted me to be angry with her and I was like I understand everyone's anger . . . y'all have every right to be angry for me, but I couldn't, she was my mom. It was hard . . . parts of me hated that sometimes she would put her addiction over me, but what I guess and this is probably the empathetic side of me she's still human, she's trying her best. She never stopped being my mom . . . we faced the eviction, we were impoverished, all of that, but she was there with me, I mean it's not like she left me, she didn't abandon me, she didn't do any of those things. I was fed, clothed, put through a good school system and although I had to take a toll on my own life, I will never ever bite the hand that fed me . . . it was a nice being on the outside and that's another form of a advocacy . . . it was an experience that I never knew I needed . . . a humbling experience if I may say.

Echoing Jenna, Christina noted although extremely difficult and life-altering, her experiences confronting adversity in relation to her mother's addiction led her to be the kind of activist she is today.

But that right there is the passion behind what makes me want to advocate, whether that is for social justice, whether that is for my own life. Experiences push me to help as many

people as I can in any way that I can like speaking, just listening, helping . . . I would feel so blessed to just be able to just help; whether that's post flyers, do anything to just get the word out there . . . which is why I feel like that's my reason why I'm an activist, that's my reason why I'm an advocate because my passion. I'm willing to take on the burden of these people [in Alcohol Anonymous] from these different communities . . . I'm willing . . . and I'll do it with you, I'll do it for you. I just do it because I care.

Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, was “diagnosed with Type One diabetes when I was in seventh grade, right around the time that I started playing basketball.” She noted I’m told “you have diabetes at age thirteen, so from now on you have to track everything, intake the right amount of insulin for it.” When you're not very careful about educating young people diagnosed with diabetes about how to track what they're eating, when you're at this sensitive time when our bodies are changing and minds are changing and things like that, so now it's like ‘oh my gosh, now I have a reason to be obsessed with what I’m eating’ and then fast forward to now you're a collegiate athlete, well now you have weigh ins and now you have performance benchmarks and now it's like my teammates around me who do not have a chronic illness that pertains to food already struggling to manage their eating habits. . . . I’ve already had this issue for 10 years and now I just have all these reasons to manipulate how I eat and how I interact with food and things like that and I don't know . . . it's really interesting, it's very preliminary, but I’m hoping to really run with it and make it matter to the right people so that we can be better resource in the future. . . . [This is] kind of difficult because it's already challenging to manage diabetes by itself and all college kids that have diabetes have to learn managing

that away from home, away from your family, so dealing with that on top of school and on top of basketball, it was just a lot.

The lack of support as a Division 1 college athlete was the reason Eleanor decided to transfer schools.

What I noticed, especially in hindsight now that I'm kind of doing some research on health policy and chronic illness and sport, is there were resources there that I could have used to help manage my diabetes and there are ways that I could have advocated for myself and rights that I had as far as limitations that I would have to put on myself on certain days depending on how my diabetes was doing, but I didn't really know how to use them, I was kind of afraid to speak up and advocate for myself because the environment was just so intense and everything was just about sport and that was all that mattered, so anything that anybody else had going on, mentally, physically, that was going to threaten your participation in sport there was no time for that [and] diabetes also got grouped into that kind of stuff. That was not a good situation for me . . . that's a big reason why I left.

Eleanor continued to share that engaging in activism enabled her to build resilience through sport participation.

I wouldn't say that [activism] impacts my performance, but I will say that it did help increase my level of commitment, especially towards the end of my season. I was really feeling burnt out with my sport, the worst burnout I've ever experienced. I didn't even know if I can finish the season. I was so burnt out, but basketball has opened a lot of doors for me, it has allowed me to be visible as someone with Type One diabetes and it's put me in a lot of rooms that I never knew I was going to be able to be in. So from that

sense I'm like 'okay, I'm going to work a little bit harder, I'm going to go get some extra shots up' because basketball has allowed me to do work in the Type One diabetes space and as far as again with my identity as a Black woman it's allowed me to. . . I've been able to use basketball to do work in those areas, so with that being said basketball has given me so much as far as allowing me to contribute to those things that are really important to me so I'm going to finish this out and push a little bit harder for these last few weeks of the season.

Participants shared their experiences as Black sportswomen confronting adversity and that these experiences guide their activism moving forward. Confronting adversity for these women includes experiences of being bullied for who they are and the lack of support for health issues.

Discussion of Intersectional Identities

To be Black and to be a woman in the United States often means to be subjected to converging forms of oppression through systems of domination (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). As a formative socialization tool, sport contributes significantly to Black women's life experiences since they are "directly targeted by the manifold practices of racial and sex discrimination" (Simien et al., 2019, p. 411). That race is "never not a factor, never not in play" (Dyer, 2017, p. 4), participants speak directly to their experiences of racism given the "centrality of race to sport" (Smith & Hattery, 2015, p. 231).

Confronting covert and overt racism is not new for participants. Knowing one's racial identity and how it impacts one's lived experience within the structures of power that minoritize that identity (Bruening, 2005; Dhamoon, 2011) is a level of consciousness unique to participants. These Black women athletes thus face "tremendous psychological, identity, and cultural barriers

when attending college” (Howard-Hamilton, 2001, p. 153), particularly at historically White institutions that are rooted in White supremacist ideals (Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Oglesby, 1981). In other words, these Black sportswomen often are forced to confront profound challenges that are unfamiliar and non-existent to White female and male college athletes (e.g., Bernhard, 2014; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Ofoegbu, 2022). Participants, therefore, have a unique perspective of the world and use this perspective to inform their activist efforts.

Sport is an institution that privileges whiteness and maleness (e.g., Hartmann, 2007; Hylton, 2009; Krane et al., 2004; McDonald, 2012). Some participants were one of the few, if not *the*, Black girl/woman on their sport teams or even in their sport. This lack of representation can be linked to legacies of chattel slavery (i.e., systemic poverty) and the institutionalized racial segregation of and within sports (e.g., Pitts & Yost, 2013; Wiggins & Swanson, 2016). Given the centrality of race and the process of racialization in the United States, Black people and White people “come to learn what is expected. . . and gain understanding of what constitutes whiteness and blackness” (Martin, 2015, p. 1), including who ‘should’ compete in what sports. Although sport, including sport organizations and sport institutions such as the media, are slowly changing, there remains a failure to include historically marginalized people in a way that makes them feel welcome. Consequently, those who disrupt the status quo are deemed *space invaders* (Puwar, 2004). That is, Black sportswomen are constructed as invaders of these prescribed White and male-only spaces into which they seemingly do not belong nor have a right.

The persistent present-day surveillance, silencing, and othering of Black women in sport (e.g., Bruening et al., 2005; Mwankiki, 2017; Withycombe, 2011) is a result of the creation and structural organization of sport. In other words, historically, sport was made by and for White men at a time when systemic racism and sexism (e.g., chattel slavery) was a legal, normalized

part of society. Those whose identities do not meet the normative social order and set standards within these prescribed male-centered and White-only spaces are therefore positioned and perpetuated as the other. Accordingly, as Black women in sport, participants are *outsiders within* (Collins, 2009). Despite being afforded space in these historically exclusionary spaces, these Black women are almost never afforded full power in these spaces. As a result, Black women athletes are forced to “learn the guide to the game within the game” (O’Neale, 2018). This means participants endure extra work as they operate through their status as outsiders within (Wilfred & Lundgren, 2021).

Nonetheless, as outsiders within and space invaders, these Black sportswomen gain a level of knowledge that is irrelevant to their White and Black male and White female peers, and yet is pertinent to their ability to navigate these spaces that historically excluded them. White and Black men and white women in sport are afforded privilege (Adjepong, 2017; Gill, 2011; Leonard, 2017). This privilege enables individuals to operate in their day to day lives in and outside sport relatively free from judgement and discrimination rooted in White supremacy. For example, White women in sport are not subject to stereotypes embedded in racism (e.g., McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). As outsiders within, Black sportswomen acquire the means to know what to do and how to do it since, very often, they do not have the luxury to be just themselves. That said, the process of becoming “personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one’s ability to act, is essential” (Collins, 2009, p. 111). As participants learn more about social justice, including how their personal experiences have been fundamentally shaped by their social identity markers, they become empowered to self-define, thereby challenging preconceived, socially constructed racist and sexist stereotypes about Black women as a homogenous group. As Collins (2009) writes, “Black

women's path to a "feminist" consciousness often occurs within the context of antiracist social justice projects" (p. 31). Notably, though, the degree and nature of consciousness varies across Black women since they experience systemic oppression differently (Collins, 2009).

The history of this exclusion is rooted in whiteness. As a shrouded, unspoken racial identity defined by what it is not, whiteness is integral to the fabric and operationalization of American society and culture. How one dresses, speaks, acts, and works is judged based on social ideals and practices enforced by the dominant culture. A collective sentiment captured by participants was the constant need to self-police appearance, specifically hair style, and monitor behaviors in and beyond sport contexts. The need to self-police is a direct symptom of the root problem – the pervasiveness of whiteness in sport, particularly with respect to what bodies, appearances, and behaviors are acceptable in sport. As Martin (2018) argues, the problem is that Black women athletes "suffer oppression on multiple fronts and must counter them likewise. They are on the receiving end of overlapping and interdependent oppressive treatment by predominately White men who are over-represented in decision-making positions and in sports" (p. 94). These counter-hegemonic actions are respectability politics in action: the need to conform to prescribed hegemonic social norms and practices that uphold the cultural values and ideals of the majority (Higginbotham, 1993; Rhodes, 2016). For example, most participants felt the need to self-discipline in different sport contexts, such as during team meetings, or felt they could not present their natural hair. Respectability politics, as a method of body policing and surveillance, is central to these Black female athletes' experiences in sport (e.g., Destin & Dyer, 2021; Johnson, 2015).

As a result, speaking up for themselves (such as explaining their hair care needs) is part of participants' DNA, per se. In other words, activism – challenging the status quo by speaking

up against various forms of discrimination – is already part of these Black sportswomen’s lives by nature of how sport operates and who operates it. This is what Dhamoon (2011) conceptualizes as the *matrix of meaning-making* whereby power is “not ‘just’ domination, but the very interactive processes and structures in which meanings of privilege and penalty are produced, reproduced, and resisted in contingent and relational way” (p. 238). Such interactive processes include the racialization and gendering of individuals that are derivative of the social structures, in this case racism and sexism, constitute lived experiences. As such, the processes and systems that other participants are enmeshed; one is rooted in the other, one cannot be separated from the other. That said, participants’ presence in sport can serve as a form of resistance (Collins, 2009). participating in a cultural domain historically and socially packaged by and for White men, participants, as Black women athletes, redefines what it means to be Black and to be a woman. By extension, participants’ engagement in activism through sport disrupt social norms, assumptions, and practices of what it means to be an athlete.

Participants highlighted the lived realities and varied experiences of being Black and female in an institution that was not built for them. In most cases, they are the minority in their respective sports. Seeing people who look like them in various roles profoundly impacts their experiences in and beyond sport. For example, having “someone in [their] corner” (Marilyn, Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete) who shares similar experiences and who may understand the nuance of those experiences allows participants to feel supported, valued, and confident enough to continue competing. In other words, representation matters, particularly in relation to sport leadership positions (Bruening et al., 2008; Thames, 2023) and in terms of mentorship at the collegiate level (e.g., Carter & Hart, 2010). As such, enforcing the need for and positive impact of representation of Black women in sport is imperative. For

example, seeing WNBA players engage in activism for racial justice elevated some participants' confidence to engage their own form of activism. In seeing women who looked like them, participants felt inspired to emulate WNBA athletes' actions, thereby demonstrating the importance of professional athletes engaging in activism and the message they project to their audience. When professional athletes defy the social expectations set upon them by their employers, managers, coaches, teammates, and fans (and 'haters'), there is potential to simultaneously encourage the next generation of athletes to utilize their platforms to ignite social change actions.

U.S. society has positioned Black girls and women as outsiders (Collins, 2009), as oversexualized beings (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013), and as people undeserving of praise and protection. Confronting adversity, therefore, constitutes much of participants' everyday lives. For some participants, this means dealing with bullies who attacked them for their physical characteristics such as skin, height, and hair or for their ethnic background. For other participants, this means dealing with the lack of support rooted in the subjugation of people who need extra support. These experiences are clearly not without lasting consequences; facing such bullying at young ages shapes participants' outlook on the world – so much so that to engage in activism or to speak up for those who may not have the opportunity or confidence to speak up is vital since they know what it's like “to not have a voice” (Jenna, African American college basketball athlete). Using their voices to express their sociopolitical beliefs (re)affirms participant's worth. Moreover, to be forced to deal with extenuating circumstances (e.g., chronic medical issues or a family member's drug addiction) without the necessary support informs participants' knowledge about who is prioritized and who is not prioritized, or who is valued and who is not valued in and beyond sport. As a result, activism is deeply personal for participants.

Above all, participants' experiences of hardship do not deter them from their engagement in social justice activism; rather, these experiences often drive their motivation for engaging in activism. In other words, instead of feeling angry, frustrated, and disheartened at how the world views and treats them, these Black sportswomen use that anger, frustration, and discontent to challenge how the world views and treats them, and, ultimately, to make the spaces they occupy better.

Participants spoke to sport participation as it relates to intersectional identities and activism. The psychosocial, emotional, and health benefits of sport participation are widely recognized and documented (e.g., Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2010). In this case, sport participation enabled participants to develop their activist identities, by, for example, building resiliency and failing forward. These skills are then stored in participants' activism toolboxes. Participants reported that sport participation, including knowing when to speak up and when to stand down, and how to fail successfully, translated into their activism. In this sense, there is power in recognizing the power in failing. Social justice activism is not a linear nor an easy undertaking. To fail means one has tried; to not try at all is the ultimate failure.

That said, participants pointed out the limitations of sport participation as it relates to their activism engagement. Specifically, time constraints due to class, training, and competition schedules limit their availability to engage in activism. Through no fault of their own, activism engagement can be limited for participants, or they may not be as active or engaged as they would like. In this way, given that activism engagement can benefit athletes' mental and emotional wellbeing, as well as positively impact their sporting performance, why shouldn't activism engagement be encouraged, accessible, and normalized?

As Black women athletes engaging in activism, participants noted the perpetuity of activism and the brevity of sport in their lives. Contrary to their athlete identities, identifying as an activist is a voluntary life-long commitment for many participants. That some participants (and their friends and families) have an ingrained self-perception centering activism, demonstrates their tenacity in knowing who they are, what is important to them, and the values that drive their everyday practices and interactions. In this case, sport is a building block from which participants galvanize their social justice activism. Decisions are not made in a vacuum; participants choose to engage in activism because of the interacting systems and processes that constitute, counter, and govern their intersectional identities. That said, these findings highlight the critical need for White people and allies to support Black women in sport, to speak *with* them, not for them. Speaking up for and defending themselves is part of participants' everyday life in sport and broader society; their intimacy and familiarity with what it means to be a minoritized person should call into action meaningful, authentic allyship from those who are not minoritized (e.g., Howell, 2021; Schweinbenz & Harrison, 2023). We cannot rely solely on minoritized people to advocate for minoritized people.

CHAPTER V. EVERYDAY ACTIVISM

In this chapter, I discuss the higher order theme everyday activism. Activism engagement is a normalized everyday activity for these young Black women. Effectively, activism is integrated into their everyday lives. Engaging in activism comes in many forms (Cooper et al., 2019). Just like there is no “one” way to be a woman or to be an athlete, there is no one way to “do” activism. For many participants, activism is an intricate, dynamic part of their everyday lives as Black sportswomen. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, pointed out,

we can't wait for the huge names and the most iconic, visible people in the world to come and do all the work and to be the ones leading the change. We can say that Colin Kaepernick isn't this transcendent talent, but everybody knows his name, everybody knows what he stands for and yes, it's unfortunate that he doesn't have a job right now in the NFL, but that whole situation has led the NFL to start taking some steps and we saw what an impact that had. [In terms of] mental health, the way that I like to engage in activism is in my day-to-day conversations . . . that's activism.

As such, activism is not a one-time, spectacle-like action; rather, activism is ongoing, commonplace, familiar. As highlighted in the activism and intersectional identities chapter, many participants feel activism is integral to who they are as holistic individuals. Such a fundamental sense of self, not surprisingly, contributes to what and how and when participants choose to engage in activism. The axial codes describing participants’ everyday activism include the power of speaking up, solidarity, social media, and education.

The Power of Speaking Up

Engaging in everyday activism for social justice means “when you see something, say something” (Brenda, Black professional basketball athlete) because, as Jenna, an African

American college basketball athlete, noted, “we have more power than what we think we do.”

The three open codes applied are creating safe spaces, finding and using one’s voice, and sharing lived experiences.

Creating Safe Spaces

An important first step leading to social change is talking about issues and having places to talk about such issues without fear of judgement. Everyday activism includes creating safe spaces for Black women athletes and other minoritized athletes. For example, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, noted,

whatever it is about your identity or about what you do that makes you visible or something that makes you different from everybody else, which in my case is being an athlete, that's my platform to speak. Using that to not just talk to the media about the game or to talk to the press about how practice is going to how the team is going, but also asserting yourself in those outlets and in those spaces to call attention to the issues that you care about. . . . I think that's what activism is. Whatever way that you can make it fit into whatever communities that you're a part of, just doing that and playing to your strengths with it as well. I think that's what activism as. If you're a student and you go to class and you live a normal, more private life you can still send those same messages and reach whatever audience it is that you have within those communities that you have access to.

The way that I like to engage in activism is in my day-to-day conversations . . . that's activism. It doesn't take this great visibility or this unique platform to engage in activism. . . . It just takes for you to figure out how to integrate it into what you do, so if

you are an athlete and that's what you do and you happen to have the attention of the whole world and you speak about these things then you've reached all those people.

Eleanor provided a poignant example of creating a safe space for herself and her teammates.

One way that I try to be an activist, as far as mental health issues goes, is I just like to talk about it as if it were a normal thing and treat it as a small talk thing. Something I did for a long time with my team to try to encourage everyone to take advantage of our free mental health resources and our free therapy that we have access to was to come into the locker room and be like “oh my gosh I just left therapy and we talked about this this and this,” or “I’ll see you guys, have to go to therapy” so just making it less of this cringy taboo thing and just treat it like a normal, healthy thing to engage in. That can be applied to my racial identity and same thing with Type one diabetes, so just not treating them like these big scary issues that you shouldn't be talking about because you don't know enough or whatever. . . . No, this is a part of my life, it's a part of the world around us, we can talk about it and engage with it like it's there because it is there.

Echoing Eleanor, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, suggested that creating safe spaces can mean “if somebody is talking ill or being homophobic or being literally racist in front of you, I fully believe in stopping that. . . . That is a form of activism.” Jaime, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, offered insight into ways the team could create safe spaces for the local community: “Sometimes we'll have conversations on the team about things and I'll kind of just be like ‘well, maybe we can do this.’” Similarly, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete who is the vice president of a student athlete led organization, explained,

I think the way I go about activism is just simply being involved and trying to get myself into circles where people like me can't get into. Most recently, I'm part of this initiative to get Black haircare products on campus. I need a machine for that, so advocating for the fact that the nearest Black haircare store is in [Midwest major city] and even then that's not the best option. . . . I know a lot of other people they've never had to travel ten minutes to get the hair products they need, and even for me I bring the [products] to campus with me and I only live thirty minutes away, so things like that. . . being involved with a diversity and inclusion group on campus specifically for athletes. . . and it's more I think advocacy and activism work is more rooted in changing. . . I don't want to say changing minds but giving information and making people more cognizant of their ignorance especially when playing sports that are played majority by Black people.

Morgan is advocating for Black women because “there's a need and people really struggle to get hair products” in the local area of her historically White institution. Moreover, the products in the vending machine are “going to be sold at a wholesale price, so [the university] would make no profit off it.”

Creating safe spaces can occur in contexts outside of sport. For example, Farrah, a Black track and field college athlete, is vice president of her church youth group.

Getting people in and organizing the March For Our Lives with our youth group . . . we literally started from the bottom and took a whole . . . big bus, not a regular school bus, but yeah we literally did that with thirteen kids and chaperones, so I feel like I'm most proud of that because we were able to coordinate the money for the bus, the money for lodging, food, all that and I felt like that was very important and that was cool that we were able to do that.

In organizing this march, Farrah provided an opportunity for her peers to voice their opinions and experiences related to racial justice.

Participants demonstrate how they create safe spaces – both within and outside of sport contexts – as part of their everyday social justice activism. This is particularly notable for participants who attend historically White institutions wherein the needs of Black women athletes are largely overlooked.

Using One's Voice

Using one's voice involves “speaking out about something that matters to you or what you feel is wrong or needs to be changed in society” (Penelope, Black college figure skater) and “standing up for what you believe in no matter what other people may think about it” (Jamie, African American former college gymnast now cheerleader) because Black sportswomen “have a choice and have a voice” (Jenna, African American college basketball athlete). For example, Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, shared that due to her mother's drug addiction,

from a young age . . . I was always scared to speak up, scared to ask for help . . . Just scared to talk in general because I felt like either everyone around me, people wouldn't understand, or I felt like the black swan out of everyone. I wouldn't ask a question because I'd think it's too stupid because my peers around me understood the topic we're talking about, or I didn't ask for this resource or for this help because, well, I've been taught to not need help. . . . I've been taught to be on my own because no one's going to give me help.

In this case, Christina's mother's voice overshadowed Christina's voice for a long time.

However, her mother also taught her how to find her own voice through the adversity and

challenges with which life hit them. Speaking up in rehab meetings and at speaking events in her local community about the impact of drug addiction, Christina felt empowered to use her voice in other contexts, such as in academic spaces.

And then once I was surrounded by people who told me that they needed a voice like mine. . . . People are tired hearing fancy vocabulary, speaking in blanket terms that no one understands . . . people need simple, people need to hear the direct truth and that's kind of what my calling was. So as I got older transitioning mostly from high school to college, I took advantage of that. People wanted to hear my voice . . . you don't hear that a lot, but I took advantage of that, and I've been speaking up ever since. I've never had a problem speaking up for myself, but I've been speaking up more when no one's asked me to speak up. I'm not going to say never, but hopefully in the near future someone may ask me to speak up, but right now I'm going to keep speaking up, even if someone hasn't asked for help because there is someone out there who is in the same position I was in . . . they don't know how to ask for help and they've been taught to not ask for help or that help can't help you in the way that you need to be.

Notably, using one's voice also requires a willingness to listen. Christina continued:

I think what comes with having the voice is the ability to listen and not just speak. I've always been an avid listener . . . I don't listen to respond, I don't listen to rebuttal, I listen to hear, to get a different perspective because you're going to learn something new . . . anytime you listen to someone you're going to learn something that you've never heard before. Just listen to them, understand where they're coming from, understand their perspective . . . if you want to challenge it then challenge it, but my main goal is to understand why you think that way, why you said what you said to gain an understanding

. . . in some situations you're never going to understand why people think the way they think, say what they say, but just one step closer to like okay, I can kind of see why you think this, or at least now I have new insights that someone else may think is and I can understand why.

Now, Christina wants to “use [her] voice to help others.” Christina’s story about finding and using her voice echoes Jenna’s thoughts. Fundamentally, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, believes

everybody should be some type of activist . . . whatever you believe in. If you believe the sky is purple and you are out there to protest that you believe the sky is purple, everybody might not agree with you, but you have the right to say ‘I think the sky is purple and this is why I think this.’ You should have that right and I don't think that anybody should be prosecuted as long as you are peaceful and it's not violent . . . You shouldn't be arrested for going out to [use your] voice.

In “trying to create a more equal society” (Brenda, Black professional basketball athlete), this belief in “speaking about what's going on in the world that you think is wrong” (Farrah, Black track and field college athlete), rings true for Jaime, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader.

When I was on the gymnastics team that's what I took away with me. I can respect you, but I can't always agree with what you have to say because I don't believe that it aligns with what I believe will be good for the betterment of society in a way. What's unfortunate is . . . what I experienced was definitely a battle to get through a lot of the time, but I did take away a lot and it did change who I am now.

When asked what she had learned from those “battles,” Jaime noted,

it pushed myself to speak up, because I felt my freshman year was when people are just telling me what to do, trying to get me in trouble for things, and I kind of just sat back and didn't say anything for a while and then . . . my coach was always like 'you're doing so well, you should be a leader and speak up and help out a little bit.' For example, [I spoke up about] hazing. I was just like 'I don't think that's right, why are we doing that?' and [my teammates are] like, 'look that's always the thing' and I was like 'but why though? In a way we're kind of belittling them because they're new, but in a way if you want them to understand how we operate as a team, we should all be working together.'

In this instance, Jaime questioned the social norms of the team's cultural practices (i.e., hazing first years), thereby using her voice to speak up against what she believes to be unethical. As Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, advised, "don't be afraid to ask questions." Relatedly, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, is intentional with how and what she says:

I don't want to take up space . . . that's why I think I try to talk about light skin privilege and my White side as much as my Black side because I know that I do have it and I don't want Black women specifically to feel that I'm speaking for them and over them because I don't mean to be.

In many ways, activism is synonymous with confidence. As Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, asserted, activism is "having unwavering values and standing up for whatever activism we're trying to achieve regardless of who's in the room." Echoing Morgan, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, shared that "it's okay that everyone doesn't accept you, but as long as you are true to what you're fighting for and you stick

with it then it's really important.” Similarly, Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, explained,

being confident enough to speak up even if you really don't know what you're talking about. . . . I think a lot of people feel like I have to be well educated to speak up . . . you do not have to be well educated to ask a question, you do not have to be well educated to speak about your own experience with such topics, so I've learned how to speak up in different ways, whether just actually actively using my voice, sharing my opinion on somethings, reading about something that I didn't know much about . . . all of those are active ways of speaking out against oppression or anything that's hindering or holding me that and I can take away.

Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, agrees.

I'm not naturally outgoing person but I've learned to just stick to my guns and kind of whatever I feel in my heart, whatever I say, whatever I think needs to be done or anything like that, I've kind of learned to just think about it and make sure that's the decision I want and then just stick with it.

George Floyd's murder in May 2020 reignited the Black Lives Matter movement. This, in turn, incentivized some participants to begin, or restart, their activist journey. Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, for example, explained the process of preparing for her role on the student-athlete led organization created by and for athletes of color.

When George Floyd was murdered . . . I was like this is my chance to push myself and see if I can do this. I'm just gonna apply and try it. Honestly, me taking that step and pushing myself to try to see if I could be an activist that was a big almost turning point for me in my life so to speak because when I was applying for the position, I had a lot of

imposter syndrome. . . Do I know enough to do this? I read Angela Davis' autobiography in a week to make sure that I knew enough, which in hindsight it's great that I read her book, but I didn't have to read her book to be qualified to do what I do . . . but there was a lot of am I Black enough? Are they gonna let a mixed woman be on this position? Am I qualified to do this? So then I put myself out there, I tried to get it and I did get it and then I was like okay, well there's this new mental health push coming on, so let me see if I can get involved in that and I did get involved in that and then I have an opportunity to work with the juvenile diabetes research foundation and they love that I play basketball and I have diabetes and I do activism. Then I'm like 'okay I can go do that'. . . me putting myself out there as an activist and just seeing, even though I didn't quite feel qualified at the time, just still feeling like I had to do something in whatever way that I knew how showed me a lot about myself and showed me a lot about people around me.

These stories underscore the myriad ways in which participants use their voices in various local sport and non-sport contexts, thus illustrating the power of speaking up as it relates to everyday activism for social justice. As Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, highlighted,

I don't want to say little me can't really do much, but doing as much as I can . . . as I got older those words 'Black girl, you need to speak up for yourself' transition to Black woman Be the voice you know you can be. Use your voice, and that's something that stuck me through our high school, throughout college, when I'm in these spaces where I'm putting that to test, I need to speak up for myself, I need to advocate for myself.

The importance of speaking up as a Black woman is paramount. As Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, affirmed, “it's okay to say when something is not right and when it's wrong, so I think we just have to get a better hold on that in our world to make it a better place.”

Sharing Lived Experiences

Sharing lived experiences about what it is like to be a Black woman in sport and in broader U.S. society is conducive to participants' efforts in speaking up. As Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, put it,

knowing my story, my background, my history, I want somebody who is just like me or who is maybe not in the same position as me, to be able to know that there's light at the end of the tunnel.

Penelope, a Black college figure skater, shared some of her lived experiences as a Black woman in figure skating. A challenge she had was finding tights that matched her skin tone.

I posted skating pictures and my uniform and tights and everything after I'd found a good color tights that fit me and I added some comments and then some people [direct messaged] me like, ‘hey I'm scared too, where did you get those tights?’ and I will be able to tell them where to get them. So that was actually really nice. I enjoyed being able to help people out in that sense.

Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, believes that “sharing your experiences and stories and speaking up about your truth . . . is the best way to spread activism by sharing stories because I still tell stories of [mine and other people's] experiences to other people.” In so doing,

people see your point of view and see your stories and see your experiences on a situation and hoping to shed light on why they should also support where you've come from. If you support where somebody's come from, you're more likely to support who they are as a

person and a lot of people have changed their minds on Black Lives Matter by talking to a Black man about their experiences with the police, so I think in doing little things like that.

Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, provided an example of how sharing her lived experiences with police brutality empowered her to continue speaking up for causes she cares about.

I even got up in front of the people and told my story about losing a family member to police violence . . . I've never considered myself a public speaker, I hate speaking to big crowds, but having everyone attentively listening, wanting to hear my story, wanting to hear authentically me, the bravery, all that . . . I mean the countless compliments from strangers that I got who didn't even know me from the next person. The wave of love that I felt from a community who felt the exact same way that I felt. And for the first time it was more than people who just looked like me, and that right there was a true moment of unity. For the first time I felt a part of it, to be like 'these are people I hadn't known that all, but I've known for ages.' So that was my first big moment of activism.

Relatedly, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, articulated the value of sharing her lived experiences at her former university with her new coach about her medical condition.

Here at [Division 1 Midwest university] is much better. My athletic trainer was really hands on it and really took a lot of initiative and educating herself about diabetes, so I felt really supported in that sense. That was great because if I ever had to miss a few minutes of practice I had her in my corner going to the coaches like hey sit down for 10-15 minutes whatever it may be . . . and I also make clear to the coaches that I had a rough experience at [former university in Midwest], just with the culture there and managing

my diabetes so they were hyper aware of it in a sense and then that allowed them to support me a little bit better . . . so yeah definitely two very different experiences and very, very heavily influenced by my diabetes.

As such, Eleanor noted,

I think people need to understand that the most powerful tool we have is to be vulnerable and share our experiences because . . . we look at all these people that are super successful and eventually their struggle story will come out or something of like “oh, this is these are all the things that I went through and now I’ve arrived.” But, this is not to knock people that go through that because we've come a long ways in society, but I think what we need to do is share those things now while we're in it instead of waiting for everything to be presentable and nice like “oh look at all these like crazy challenges I went through and now it's fine.” No, that's not life, you're going to continue to see those challenges and they're going to knock you down and you're going to have to figure out how to get up and you're going to have to lean on other people to get up sometimes, so the more we talk about it and be real about it and let it not be this taboo thing, I think the better off we will all be. We could just be real about everything that we experienced, the good, the bad. I think that is how we're going to see change because it's not showing how these great things happen, it's showing how you overcome the challenges as you overcome them.

Given the explicit and calculated erasure of the Black experience in the U.S. – such as the recent banning of certain books in school curriculum – these Black women recognize the value and cultural significance of sharing their stories. Often, these histories are riddled with tales of confronting and overcoming adversity given the systemic harmful treatment of Black

communities in the U.S. However, these stories, blemishes and all, are integral to making change. As Farrah, a Black track and field college athlete, attested, “not a lot of people are going to advocate for the Black community so if not me then who?”

Social Connections

Social connections are bred and solidified through activism engagement given the premise of “fighting for other people” (Nora, biracial college soccer athlete). Social connections are, therefore, an outcome and form of everyday activism engagement for social justice. The axial codes applied to explain social connections include solidarity, community engagement, and family.

Solidarity

Participants discussed the meaning of building social connections with others in the context of engaging in activism since activism “is not only what you can do or teach other people, but it's also how other people remember you” (Jamie, African American college gymnast now cheerleader). Camaraderie is an important player in their quest for equity. In other words, solidarity with fellow human beings who may or may not be experiencing similar systemic oppression is the fabric to participants’ meaning of and reasons for activism engagement. As Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, noted, “I guess being a minority myself helps me to speak for other minorities.” The open codes applied are everyday interactions and the importance of empathy.

Everyday Interactions. Social connections are facilitated through everyday interactions. Participants engage in conversations with other individuals, with whom they may or may not share social identities. Participants, in turn, reported developing a level of understanding that serves as a gateway to empathy because such interactions entail active listening. Penelope, a

Black college figure skater, affirmed that “when people choose to tell their stories or tell what's going on, it's important because it opens the door to have those conversations that are difficult and that most people don't have.” Equally, when people choose to listen to said stories in everyday contexts with a degree of respect and understanding, social connection can flourish.

For example, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, explained she has

been able to engage with international student athletes, LGBTQ+ student athletes, student-athletes from different ethnic minorities and learn their perspectives and learn their stories and just having those interactions with people that are different than me and really seeing the value in it because . . . you think that you can put yourself in someone else's shoes and think, “oh yeah, I think they probably feel this way,” [but] you don't really know until you make sure that there's a space for everyone and that you're listening to everyone. . . . So seeing the value of that in front of me and actually seeing it work and seeing it matter is going to stick with me. That's going to help me really make sure that when people say that diversity equity inclusion is important and it matters to them, I've now seen what that actually looks like . . . and to move accordingly.

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, acknowledged,

I think what comes with having the voice is the ability to listen and not just speak. I've always been an avid listener . . . I don't listen to respond, I don't listen to rebuttal, I listen to hear, to get a different perspective because you're going to learn something new . . . Anytime you listen to someone, you're going to learn something that you've never heard before. . . . Just listen to them [and] understand where they're coming from, understand their perspective . . . if you want to challenge it then challenge it, but my main goal is to

understand why you think that way, why you said what you said, to gain an understanding.

Echoing Christina, Penelope, a Black college figure skater, noted,

you have to be willing to go out and listen to people who are talking about their personal experiences, whether it's going to a seminar or a speaking event or if it's your friend that you're talking to, but also if it's your friend, you also have to be aware of are [we] on a level where you can ask me questions and are they going to want to talk about it things like that, so [conversations] could go a lot of ways.

Jamie, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, explained what she has learned by

meeting new people and listening to stories. Right now, I'm in [a professor's] class and we're learning about all of that interaction and in the beginning of the semester we [talked about] storytelling. . . . And I was like how many times have I ever went to a conference or if we had a speaker, either gay athlete or a transgender athlete speak, and I really took what they were saying. So okay, when I'm in a situation, now I'm going to apply that or think that way in a sense . . . I just feel like I learned a lot from listening to others speak about their experiences which is nice.

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, talks “to people about my process and who I am and over time hopefully connect with players that I didn't think I would connect to and trying to be a better person in general.” Likewise, as an activist, connecting with people on an everyday basis is a priority for Jaime, an African American college gymnast turned cheerleader.

Sometimes [the team and I will] be out in our group and we will see other people on campus or something and we'll kind of just say “oh, how's your day?” Just being positive

people for some people because you never know what kind of day people are having, so I always try to say, “hello how's your day going?” and really listen to what people have to say. Sometimes I'll kind of just be like, “oh, hey how are you? What do you have planned for today?” or stuff like that and they'll be like “I was really having a bad day and just you asking and really caring about what I have to do today really just made my day and kind of uplifting me” . . . I don't know, that's kind of how I am. I feed from that energy . . . and it's just really nice to be on a team that cares about other people and not just themselves.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, provided a poignant example of the positive impact of social connections.

I made a promise to my [student] who actually had to stop calling the little guy he's a teenager now, he is fourteen and he's voice got deeper and he's tall, so I got to stop him little guy. I made a promise to him when we first met. I told him I would always be there for him, I was like ‘I'm not giving that up, I'll do what I have to do and make sure that I'm there for him’ and so being able to be there . . . and just being able to watch them have that accomplishment and a lot of them just having an event in that community. Some of their parents never even graduated elementary school or middle school, so having them do that and move on to high school and just them having this whole new future and opportunity with them . . . I told them I'm available, they have my phone number, they have my email.

Relatedly, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, described her reaction after attending a successful social justice event organized by the college-athlete organization.

When I saw that the work that we're doing matters was when we did our first mental health event on Zoom. The thing that stood out to me was that we get a ton of football players on the event and those are usually the guys who don't show up the things, and a lot of them were sharing about their mental health struggles and experiences and . . . I'll see a lot of football guys and a couple basketball guys even as I'm going to my weekly therapy session, I'll see some of those guys coming in and out and I'm like oh wow they're using these resources because they saw it and they saw that it would benefit them to go and they're feeling safe and vulnerable enough to engage and share like that, and so I was like wow, this is happening because I helped to organize this event and I advertised it as something that was going to be safe for everyone. . . . So when I saw that I was like this is pretty cool and this matters . . . especially for the male athletes . . . it's for everybody. When I saw male athletes engaging with a mental health resource for minority student athletes my mind was blown . . . I was like oh, I did not think we're going to get any guys on the call at all, let alone all these big football guys saying like 'man yeah I'm having a hard time . . . I was like this is really cool, I was able to contribute to building a space where people feel comfortable sharing. . . that was really, really, really cool yeah.

Participants underscored the importance of everyday interactions with peers and/or with fellow minoritized groups. These interactions served as a pathway to solidarity as part their everyday activism.

Importance of Empathy. Participants revealed that empathy is an important component of activism. For example, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete whose "life changed because someone was nice to me," shared,

I consider myself a human first before anything and [I believe in] basic rights and basic treatment of all people. And that doesn't matter who you are, what gender you identify, what race you identify, what religion you identify . . . I feel like our basic responsibility is to treat each other kindly . . . our basic responsibilities are to learn and grow from each other. We're all not the same, even I have brothers, I have a twin brother and we're not same, you know what I mean? We're not all meant to agree with each other, but we all meant to respect each other. We can agree to disagree and that's fine . . . but that doesn't mean we have to mistreat each other. So I consider myself a human first and as long as we are treating each other with just basic decency [and] just you know, doing the right thing.

Jenna continued, “we don't have to have the same life experiences for me to be able to empathize with your cause because I know what's right and what's wrong.” As such, participants understand the centrality of empathy as it relates to activism, especially empathizing with people who may look or identify different to them. For example, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, is

standing up for LGBTQ+ rights. I think it's important because a lot of people in the basketball world are part of the LGBTQ+ community, so it's important, especially since I've had a lot of teammates who were LBGTQ+. I feel like it's something that's just important in general to show support and awareness.

Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, affirmed her solidarity with trans athletes.

Transgender children can't play sport in high school, middle school, and that's a dozen kids, so I feel like these government agencies are targeting such a small group of kids when I feel like there are more important topics that they could be making laws about.

Trans inclusion [is important] because I've been seeing so much stuff about it and so many bills against them and . . . I just feel like it's pointless . . . all these bills against them are just unfair.

Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, also “really care[s] about transgender rights.” For Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, acknowledging “what others are enduring and going through, that two-hour practice you did is nowhere near equivalent to anything these people go through every day” builds empathy.

Central to these Black women athletes' activism is solidarity with fellow minoritized communities. Solidary entails everyday interactions – such as listening to other people's stories about lived experiences of discrimination – that, in turn, foster empathy.

Community Engagement

Given that “collaborative efforts are usually the best way to get to your end goal” (Morgan, biracial basketball and track and field athlete), engaging in one's community contributes to how and why activism materializes. The open codes applied here are creating community and reaching back.

Creating Community. Participants actively forge, or seek and settle in with, groups of like-minded people who share similar experiences. As Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field athlete, shared, “if you're with like-minded people all of them want to see you succeed.” Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, took on an executive board position to “work on being an activist” in a college-athlete led campus organization following the “need [for] student athletes of color to have a safe space to go to feel more at home” at her predominantly White institution. This organization provides a space for her fellow athletes to

share our experiences with racism, with microaggressions, things we wished our non-POC student athletes understood . . . being an athlete is kind of being in our own bubble on campus . . . we're not very well integrated with the general campus functioning . . . we do everything ourselves which has its pros and cons.

Creating this community allowed Eleanor to “be myself and express my different identities” and “being a part of making those spaces available to everyone is a really special feeling.” Eleanor has organized several events catered by and for college-athletes of color through this organization, such as

a conversation with the police . . . on Zoom. We had a list of questions about how the police department specifically is engaging with the community and then more general questions about police culture in the U.S. We basically had various officers from the [local city] county police department and most of them were in leadership positions, so we just had a conversation with them. We asked these questions, they gave answers and then we opened it up for Q&A at the end which was interesting . . . because we wanted it to be this raw vulnerable, almost emotional experience for everybody and the Zoom limited us in that perspective, but it did do a lot for us as far as visibility and we could show people in the community and on campus that we're actually trying to engage with our campus, with our community so that was really cool.

Another event we have done multiple times now is a mental health event. What we do is we bring one of our licensed counselors that works with student athletes, and we bring him in and he does a little spiel, a little feel good speech and then we'll do something like watch a movie or paint our feelings and we have people from [student athlete organization] and we have people from the LGBTQ+ group and we're kind of all

just there painting and talking and everything. That's like a really low-key event and a little hangout session that everyone can kind of just come in be themselves for an hour, hour and a half.

With Eleanor's leadership, the organization has

started to do things like game nights that served a similar purpose and people would come to those and just kind of have fun. Something that I've learned was there doesn't have to be some sort of big activist agenda with every event that we do . . . sometimes it's enough to just have a space there and the intention of this is for everyone to just let loose and have fun and be calm and feel safe.

Following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, got involved in

a couple of groups [with other] athletes and . . . we come out to protest. We had food, water, first aid kit, stuff like that. It was just cool to see all that happening. I got very involved with those groups and trying to come support their events.

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, and Farrah, a Black track and field athlete, went to the Black Student Athlete Summit, along with “about six hundred Black student athletes from across the country” (Farrah). Christina noted this was

a beautiful experience. [It was] an amazing experience being surrounded by athletes who look like me, who go through the same daily routines that I go through no matter the [NCAA] Division whether one, two, or three . . . and being in a safe space where people were there specifically to meet our needs, to facilitate what we needed to hear, and to advocate for us, so it went from me being the person who's trying to find ways to

advocate for people on my team to being surrounded by people who are trying to find ways to advocate for me . . . so it's kind of nice to see that . . . to be in that space.

Creating community can also exist outside of sport contexts. For example, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete “found my sense of purpose through my sorority was which is all Black women sorority. That helped me feel more in tune with my identity and feel like I could talk about those things.” Similarly, Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, joined a sorority.

To me, whenever I hear social justice, I actually think with my sorority. I’m a member of [Black sorority] and one of our missions is service to the African American community.

Everything that we do is to benefit African American community, but as well as give back . . . we give back to our own community.

Participants reported their efforts creating community within and beyond sport context as part of their everyday activism. This includes leading social justice events within college athlete-led organizations, attending conferences specific to the Black athlete experience, and joining Black sororities.

Reaching Back. Community engagement also entails leaning into the advice and insights of predecessors, as well as reaching out to one’s community to share time and advice. For instance, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, noted,

the biggest thing I've learned is not take from people, but to use the things that have already been done and make your life easier . . . use the stairs that have already been made to get to your end goal . . . finding the people who've already done the work, so I don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, explained,

I tend to go into those spaces to at least learn about whatever is being talked about so I can bring it back to my community and bring it back to people who don't go to these meetings. [For example] a lot of us who are twenty now still aren't registered to vote . . . that's something that I couldn't wait [to do]. I turned eighteen and I was so happy to fill out that ballot, even though I knew a lot of people get discouraged . . . this is one of the times where you get to look at a ballot and pick whatever you want to pick. I don't know, it's just something about being able to do that and have my vote being counted versus not counted at all, so it's times like that where I tend to use my advocacy. I'm speaking up and informing and educating people because advocacy doesn't always have to be you speaking for someone, it can be you bringing something back to your community that they didn't know and doing that is a form of advocacy because it's a form of help. . . it's a form of helping them be able to advocate for themselves.

Volunteering is another form of reaching back. For instance, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete,

did a lot of volunteering. I grew up doing a lot of volunteering through my private Catholic school and then also into high school . . . I actually did a lot now that I think about it . . . so I grew up working in schools and I've worked in elderly homes . . . and the homeless that's another one . . . I used to make goody bags and they would have cheerios and granola bar and water and some pieces of candy, and I would drive around this park that we had where it was known for having homeless people stay there. I would just pass them out. So yeah it just escalated as I aged a little bit more.

Similarly, Jamie, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, reaches back to her local community,

whether that's helping a food drive . . . or when I was in high school, I did toys for tots with my church for no reason. They needed people and it's always fun and just meeting new people. I [also] did gymnastics . . . this girl on our team, her dad ran an organization and so it was for kids with disabilities and they would go to different NHL teams in the United States and prior to the game the kids would have a game so they would play their game and then we'd go up with a food, we auction off different signed memorabilia . . . they have hats, shirts, stuff that you can sign so we usually help out with the auction . . . And meeting some of the kids and listening to them was so amazing because I have a cousin who's down syndrome and she's like pretty high functioning . . . And just seeing some of these kids really enjoy [sport] and really being excited to get some of the memorabilia because some of these are people that they looked up to and it's just so heartwarming.

Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete who is “in charge of community service with the team,” recently visited the George Floyd neighborhood in Minnesota where residents created a museum and a safe space on the street where he was actually killed and where people can come and bring things and . . . feel safe and feel heard. There were closets with donated clothing and people are growing food for people in that area.

Following this experience, Bonnie noted “it just really hit me like, wow this community life is really carrying on this man's name and his legacy.” As a result, Bonnie is reaching back to her community.

We're going to donate as a team and come up with different donation methods, they send clothes, send toiletry items that they don't have . . . I just do a lot of community service,

just a lot of different food service . . . this year we collected toiletries and donated it to one of the schools at [name of] elementary.

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, described reaching back to her community “has been part of my activism” including,

the high school I grew up in, middle school, as well elementary school, all the teachers, my old volleyball club, and the old coaches that I had . . . because they're the people that made me who I am. They're the people that have been supporting me from day one, even when they saw me as a raw athlete and I didn't see it. . . . I think that the people that have been supporting me I have to continue to keep that relationship with them because they're going to be the ones that are going to be there have my back of all else fails, so I'm learning to keep the people around that you trust and that they trust you. . . . The only way that I can do is just by staying connected with them . . . going back to my high school and visiting them when I can and going to their volleyball games, basketball games, staying in touch on social media . . . just giving them the same love that they gave me over time.

Participants highlighted their community engagement through activism. This includes creating community of like-minded individuals with whom they feel safe and reaching back to predecessors related to social justice activism and former school groups.

Family

Everyday activism involves participants' family on varying levels. This involvement in turn, builds or sometimes breaks social connections given that, as previously noted, activism is deeply personal to participants. As Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, stated, social justice is about “supporting something that is really near to all of

our lives and is something as a Black family that you experience on the daily.” The open codes generated within family include intergenerational activism, support for activism engagement, and fears or friction about activism engagement.

Intergenerational Activism. Activism engagement often is passed down through generations. The work, support, and lived experiences of family members pertaining to social justice trickle down to younger generations, in turn galvanizing participants’ activism engagement. As Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, whose “aunts back in the day protested with the Black Panthers,” affirmed,

I’m doing this for the future, but I’m also doing this for the past, so that my grandmother and aunts know that all their work hasn’t become undone, all of their work has inspired me to be the person that I am today.

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, shared that her father was “the one that told me more about being a leader, he was one that really inspired me to be the activist leader that people need.” Similarly, Farrah, a Black track and field college athlete, noted her parents are “more of the people who will go to protests instead of posting on social media.”

They’ve taken me to rallies and protests before whenever I was younger. I remember in ninth grade a bunch of kids from my church’s youth group went to the March For Our Lives protest in [a major Northeastern city] and we coordinated that. . . It was just fun, I mean sometimes I didn’t really get the concept of what everybody was marching for, but I just remember seeing a whole bunch of people and I have my little sign and I’m making up little songs and stuff.

Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field college athlete, whose mother is “a nurse by trade and is currently a director of an emergency department in [a Midwest major city],” provided an example of her mother’s lived experiences incentivizing Morgan’s activism.

My mom has always been the type of person who is the lone person at the table. I can just remember her and her campaign stories about [being] in a room full of mostly men, mostly White men, very few females and [she was] the only woman of color, the only person of color . . . I could probably remember stories around twelve and especially as I got older the detail increased. . . she even said people there were patients calling her the n word while she was a nurse . . . and they were refused to be treated by her and she's like ‘my job is literally to help you’ and she had just that internal struggle of they're really coming for my character and she has to maintain rapport while understanding that it's her job to take care of the person and they're refusing treatment, so I think it's just a very interesting set of circumstances. I was like wow that's really unnerving because that shouldn't be the norm, especially when we're getting to people who are making decisions for a lot of people that are going to emergency rooms. . . and just being able to advocate for those types of people, so I think my activism is rooted in the fact that there's such inequities at those higher levels and just wanting to get to the root . . . so why do these issues exist? But I wouldn't want to have it any other way because some people grow up and they don't even know those things exist.

Participants reported the generational connection of activism in their family. Through their older family members, participants learn more about unequal treatment, in turn aiding their decisions to engage in activism.

Support for Activism Engagement. Many participants feel supported by their family members in their everyday activism. For example, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, noted that her “mom and dad are proud . . . they support anything I feel strongly about.” Similarly, Penelope, a Black college figure skater, participated in a peaceful Black Lives Matter movement in her local area with her cousin. Her family members were also in support: “My mom and my aunt were very proud of us and encouraging us, and they're just proud to see that we're part of something and able to stand up for what we believe in.” Farrah, a Black track and field athlete college athlete, also went to a local protest with family where her father supported her activism engagement.

I went to the protest that [Midwest city schools] went to because my dad's a teacher so they had a whole bunch of teachers going down and protesting in front of the State House. I went with him for that, so I was able to see not only some of my teachers, but also a whole bunch of different races, genders, just a whole bunch of representation all fighting for the same thing.

Farrah noted her parents also “follow me on Instagram,” so they “are used to seeing my stories” related to social justice. Likewise, the family of Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, are “supportive of what I do and are in my corner for sure.” For Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, conversations with her parents about social justice help her think through activism engagement: “I was talking to my mom about [kneeling during the national anthem] and she was supportive all the way. My father he was like ‘yeah I wouldn't do it but go ahead.’” Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, mentioned her mother has been more supportive of things in recent years, but sometimes she's like, ‘ah I don't know if we should do that?’ and I'm like well, why not do it? Who else is going to do it? If I don't do

it right now, who else is going to take part in this endeavor? Who else is going to go to this conference if I can't be in that space and working with my voice?

Some participants noted their family support as they engage in social justice activism, including attending peaceful protests with family members and having open, honest conversations about social justice and activism.

Fears or Friction About Activism Engagement. Activism engagement is not without risks. Accordingly, some participants' family members are fearful, particularly when participants choose to attend a Black Lives Matter protest. For example, Farrah, a Black track and field college athlete, "didn't go to a lot of the George Floyd protests" because her "parents are still a little worrisome about what's going on." This fear is intensified in the context of Covid-19, as Penelope, a Black college figure skater, shared,

my grandmother and basically everybody else [were] very stressed about Covid, so they were just telling us "you shouldn't go to that [protest], you're going to get sick," and blah blah blah blah. They were like "you need to be safe, and you shouldn't be out there on the streets," and we're just like, "thanks for your opinion, but we're going to do what we want to do."

Prioritizing the safety of participants' wellbeing as they engage in activism is common among participants' family members. As Christina, an African American track and field athlete, explained,

Mom was worried, very scared. She was just putting metal jugs into [Christina and her friends'] back packs, I'm just like, "mom, no one's gonna do anything to us, we're just there, we're marching and walking, it's going to be a peaceful protest" and she's like "peaceful is as peaceful does, we'll see . . . they claim it's going to be peaceful [but] you

never know.” My grandmother said, “I don’t think you should go.” Mom never discouraged me and even though grandma discouraged me, she wasn’t mad at me for still going. I think that shows that they support me and are willing to let me learn and experience on my own and . . . that was nice. I don't think a lot of people would have had that same liberty of their parents and grandparents being supportive in their own ways. Of course, my mom was worried about my other friends as well . . . she didn't tell them they couldn't go; we were all eighteen at the time, so I was like “come on, let us go” and she's like “yeah, go ahead, just be safe. When the curfew comes on, come home.” But I think part of her really wanted me to go and experience just what's going on. I wasn't sheltered, but she had raised me a certain way to not have to deal with certain situations, not to have to live the way she lived or live it per se and figure out ways to avoid it, so I don't know . . . I think that's just awesome having a mother who, despite her own fears, her own worries, never tries to micromanage my life even if she thinks I’m making a mistake . . . so that was actually nice.

Moreover, because of certain political leanings inherent to activism engagement, friction can occur at times among participants and their family members. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, noted,

my Dad, he and I actually . . . it's interesting because activism is important to him, but we just have some disagreements on certain things. Not fundamental disagreements, but who should be saying what and how should these things get done and blah blah blah . . . we sometimes can disagree on that so it's a generational difference.

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, shared,

my Dad, I don't really talk to him that much anymore and most of it is because of his stance on activism. It's almost like he uses the fact that he has two women or two female children that are Black presenting in the United States and he uses that as activism, but he is a cis[gender], straight white male and he almost doesn't understand his privilege within these spaces . . . I just take issue with the fact that I'm like, "you're a White man in America, you basically have it made, why are you sitting here and being like 'Oh but my kids are Black.'" No, you uplift your kids and be like, "yes I'm in this space and I'm bringing my kids along with me." He kind of failed to do that so I'm not really a fan of him . . . to be quite frank.

Farrah, a Black track and field college athlete, noted that her "parents were helicopter parents, but now that I have my own freedom . . . [our relationship] has gotten way better."

As highlighted above, social connections are part of the fabric of these Black sportswomen's everyday activism. Solidarity with fellow minoritized groups, community engagement, and family comprise the social connections made because of, as a reason for, and through activism engagement.

Social Media

Technological developments in the twenty-first century have resulted in the unprecedented, expedited ability for social media users to engage with, react to, and co-produce knowledge alongside different people across cultures and countries. For many participants, social media – specifically Twitter and/or Instagram – is their main form of everyday activism engagement. For example, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete who "fully believe[s] in social media activism," noted she has "always posted on Instagram. If I see a social justice type of post,

I never wanted to just skip over it, so I would share it.” Similarly, Farrah, a Black college track and field athlete, explained she is

active in reposting. I don't know if you heard, but a couple of weeks ago there was this Black student from Columbus who was shot. I was reposting all the information and stuff. I wasn't able to go to [the Black Lives Matter] protests because of campus involvements here, but I was still able to spread the word to as many people as I could on my platform to know about it, so I do think I'm a little bit of an activist.

Penelope, a Black college figure skater, said she uses “Instagram mainly for my activism. I'll be scrolling out and see posts and I'll share them or view other people's posts.” Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, “didn't really set out to be an activist;” yet her presence and posts on the platform ignited others' interests in hearing her thoughts on various topics/political affairs: “I would tweet stuff on Twitter and then people just started interviewing me or asking me to be on panels and Zoom calls and stuff. [My activism] just kinda flowed through social media.” Reflecting on the use of social media as a form of everyday activism, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, spoke to the everyday social practices and cultural behaviors characteristic of younger generations in U.S. society (i.e., Generation Z).

I think as far as our generation goes, [social media] is our platform. I think I have a huge following on that platform that allows me to speak out to people and get my point across. I just think that's me, that's my generation, that's how I'm going to be able to help the youth. That's how I'm going to be able to reach them. I probably can't reach adults that way and I think I'm in a point in my life that I'm in that kid and adult [phase]. . . so I think there's somebody educating me and I educate them and the best way to educate people younger than me or the same age as me is through social media.

Participants pointed out that social media is a popular form of everyday activism for this generation of athletes who chose to engage in social justice activism. Importantly, though, there are benefits and challenges to it.

Benefits of Social Media

Participants noted many benefits of using social media in their activism. The benefits include speed and scope, educational tool for self and others, an avenue for self-expression, and finding and building community.

Speed and Scope. Participants noted how easy it is for them as athletes with busy schedules to access and use social media as a fast means of spreading relevant information about certain social justice issues across geographic boundaries. For instance, Bonnie, a Black college basketball player, said,

social media spreads for a wide range all across the country, so I know people like us [who are athletes and activists]. I know people through basketball from Australia and that is getting out to them and she's sharing and she's reposting. [Social media] just gives you more influence.

Echoing Bonnie's thoughts, Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field athlete, noted that "especially nowadays, [social media] plays a pretty big role, especially when you see [NCAA] Division 1 players being able to repost those things and gets it out to millions of people, so I think that's pretty cool." Farrah, a Black college track and field athlete, put it simply: "social media and social justice go hand in hand, at least in today's world, because it's easier."

Participants noted one of the key benefits of social media is the speed at which they can share their messages and the scope of which this message can be received.

Educational Tool. Everyday engagement on social media platforms provides a building block for information-gathering on current events and political affairs. As Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, pointed out, “some really healthy conversations with people” can occur on social media, in turn “helping to either change their minds or see bigger perspectives.” This contributes to participants’ knowledge and understanding about a social justice topic or related event. As Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, explained,

I feel like I learn a lot from social media. I know a lot of people say you shouldn’t take notes from social media, but a lot of these legislative things I learn from Twitter first and then I’ll go research outside of Titter, so I feel like I just see a lot of breaking news on Titter. I’m not watching the news on TV a lot so that’s going to be the first place I see something major.

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous volleyball athlete, noted the impact of Covid-19 whereby she had to do everything on social media . . . I had to look stuff up, I had to learn, I had to teach myself. I already took some classes about natural history classes, African American studies, American classes, but having to take that step even further on George Floyd incident that was a spark of even more information just spat at me. I was so thankful for that because through social media, that's what everyone is looking for . . . that's how people are learning now, so I think that right now my biggest thing is through social media and just trying to post because that's the main thing right now . . . people are all about that.

Moreover, participants described social media as a credible means for self-education on preparation for in-person peaceful protests. For example, Penelope, a Black college figure skater, noted,

even when I was going to go to the protest, there was a lot of pages that would show you some important things that you need to bring to a protest to stay safe and things like that, so that was actually really helpful as well.

Participants also deploy social media as an educational tool for others. For example, Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field athlete, spoke to the nature of social media as a way to provide proof of potential wrongdoings in real time: “I think there's also an educational aspect of the fact having documented evidence that [the murder of George Floyd] happened.” Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, described an instance when she used social media to share resources with someone who appeared misinformed about the murder of Breonna Taylor:

I remember I tweeted something about Breonna Taylor and this guy messaged me and he was like “oh, she was a drug dealer” or something inaccurate and wasn't true. I responded to him and was like, “actually, that's wrong, here's what happened, here's some articles you can read to verify what I'm saying.” . . . He came back [to say] “I'm so sorry, I just saw it on social media and just assumed it was true.” So it is humbling because [social media engagement] can change people's minds sometimes.

Part of educating others via social media is being responsible with what information is shared.

As Brenda highlighted,

if I see something ‘breaking news,’ I always go to Google to a more reliable source than Twitter because I don't want to retweet something or speak out of topic to the followers I have and it be misinformation. I would not like that, so whatever I say I try to make sure it's from an accurate source.

In line with being “intentional and thoughtful when it comes to posting things on social media” (Morgan, biracial college basketball and track and field athlete), Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, noted that “it's not about [the] people calling me a piece of trash [on social media]. It's about me talking to people that are probably thinking that, but don't want to say it.” This intentionality also rings true for Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete:

[Activists] take the education and then they go out and spread it to everyone. I'm not just going to split it to select a few, I'm going to spread it to the people that agree with me, the people if you disagree with me, and the people that aren't informed.

Participants described the benefit of social media as an educational tool for both themselves and for other social media usages (e.g., their followers, fans, and critics alike).

Avenue for Self-Expression. Because participants take charge of their own social media accounts (i.e., they control what is posted and when it is posted and how it is posted), the functionality of social media as an avenue of self-expression is undeniable. For instance, when asked why she chose social media as her main form of activism during the year 2020, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, responded,

I think it's because recently in the past few years social media has definitely grown and people are building their platforms to what they believe in. Say you believe in interior decorating, then your whole Instagram is now interior decorating. I think I got in that mindset of ‘this is what I want to do.’ I do [activism] for fun, so I might as well move it into my social media a little bit more.

Echoing Nora, Jamie, an African American former gymnast now college cheerleader, noted she “thinks [social media] gives people a voice, but also the people who may be scared to have a

voice like me. For example, I can retweet that and people can see how I feel.” Jamie also explained that using social media fosters her activist identity through spreading information and opinions about sociopolitical matters.

So why should I care if, at the end of day, some people aren't going to like me or about what I'm saying or what I promote or encourage, you know what I mean? So that's why I feel retweeting that stuff encourages me to be who I am and what I care about and be my truest self.

Similarly, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, said, “Twitter can be a great outlet of showing awareness that you care about the issues.” In addition, social media enables participants to actively encourage others to be involved in certain events. For example, Farrah, a Black college track and field athlete, noted,

it's just been easier to just speak up about it because I know other people will have a say on it too and just being able to put my two cents in and say I'm against this as well and this is important as well. . . . I think [my social media engagement] probably started around the [2020] election time. I was really pushing people because I wasn't able to vote then, but I was pushing my peers and my [social media] followers to vote. I'd be like, 'it's important to vote' and all this stuff.

Participants highlighted the benefits of social media as a form of activism was the ownership of one's account meant that they do not feel restricted in voicing their opinions on political matters.

Finding and Building Community. Given the ease at which participants can see and share information about issues and people they care about on social media, the opportunity to find and build community is readily available. For instance, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball

athlete, created an Instagram account for an on-campus athlete-led organization. She noted that social media engagement “helps with our sense of family within the different [student-led] groups by bringing our experiences together.” For Penelope, a Black college figure skater, social media engagement was crucial to her feeling a sense of belonging in her sport:

I’m around mostly White people in skating, but to look outside the box and social media loves to help with that because I can just search and find someone on there. So it actually led me down a path of finding a lot of organizations specifically for Black figure skaters, which I thought was amazing and for other minorities as well. I kind of went down a rabbit hole and found let's call it ‘figure skating in Harlem’ and then figure skating in Harlem led to figure skating in Detroit and they're just all around now . . . that mostly focuses on minority groups and lower economic status communities being able to participate in figure skating. It was nice and opened my eyes.

Similarly, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, shared,

usually when I search up stuff, I find other activists when it comes to Afro-indigenous women and seeing what they do. I follow their social media, and everyone is doing something different. They're all going in different directions, so it does give me the comfort of me being able to touch different sides of how they're going into themselves and see which one I want to pick.

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, shed light on her connections with other activists and her social media followers:

I had some people who gave me additional resources which was pretty cool. There's people who I met a couple of times and they went to a conference and they're like “Oh, so

you're doing this? Here's something else that could help you,” or “if you're interested here's that, here's another way to get involved.” I made some cool connections that way.

Social media as a form of everyday activism enables participants to find and build community in a way that no other medium perhaps can. With the unparalleled speed, scope, and ease at which social media spreads information, creates knowledge, and fosters meaning making, it is no surprise that many participants viewed it as an ideal and effective way to engage in activism. As highlighted above, participants underscore reasons why they believe using social media is a constructive and important mode of everyday activism. This includes, but is not limited to, self-expression, finding and building community, operating as an educational tool for themselves and their followers/fellow users.

Challenges of Social Media

Social media is not devoid of faults or frustrations, however. The challenges of social media as it relates to everyday activism for social justice include sensationalizing Black pain, the lack of substance and legitimacy, and confronting backlash.

Sensationalizing Black Pain. One of the prevailing challenges of social media relating to social justice is sensationalizing Black pain. This is particularly poignant in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement reenergized in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder in May 2020. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball player, put it,

the murder of George Floyd and stuff like that has been happening since we were brought [to the U.S.] . . . it's been going on for so long. This is not new. People saying, “this is worse than anything else must have been,” no it's not. This has been happening, but now as soon as it happens, we see it immediately and so . . . yes, we have the sharing of events to spread awareness and to try to ignite action and start people on their own personal

activism journey, but then there's also the part of it where the oversharing and the over-viewing of these horrific violent things. I feel like we have to be a little more mindful of our social media and make sure that we're not just circulating images for the shock value . . . and instead using it to promote the actual messaging that we need to see and only relying on the visual examples when needed. I have not seen the video of George Floyd being murdered. I have not seen a video since I was in high school in 2016. I think that was my first and last video I've seen of a police violence incident. It's just overwhelming . . . This is not something that we really like to see, but I do think that social media needs to be less on showing more violence that's been there for years and years and years and I feel like that part is not productive.

Consequently, Eleanor explained,

I feel a lot of the social media depictions as far as activism or awareness-raising, it leads to the sensationalizing. And people want to have the next clever take on how we should view race and how we should make progress and things like that. So I'm kind of hesitant to use social media as a primary tool for my activism.

Along the same lines, Jaime, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, underscored this problematic practice, suggesting social media

can be good, but it can also be bad. I feel like it's kind of good to see what's happening, for other people to see what's going on. But I feel like sometimes when you see those videos, depending on who's recording them, it either does the situation justice or it completely can change the perspective of who's watching it.

Participants noted one of the main dangers of social media as a tool to advocate for social justice is the normalized practice to sensationalize Black pain in a bid to garner support largely

from White audiences/social media users. This practice is problematic since it induces trauma for them as Black women activists.

Lack of Substance and Legitimacy. Occasionally, social media propagates artificial, empty content relating to certain social justice issues – in this case, the Black Lives Matter movement. As Marilyn, a Jamaica-African American professional basketball athlete, noted,

I think especially when stuff does happen, you battle with the ‘are you really showing awareness or are you just reposting something and then just letting it go?’ What is [the post] actually doing? We're in a society where, for example, on Twitter something happens and everyone posts about it, but it's the same message - not necessarily that it's good or bad, it's just basic, it's not adding to anything. Especially after George Floyd, a lot of college teams might have posted something about social justice and blah blah, but it all sounded the same and I think when we get into that, it's not the best. . . . When people were putting black squares on their social media, that was not . . . I didn't think that was really doing anything.

Echoing Marilyn, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, suggested,

these are the kinds of spaces that you *can* be an activist. It doesn't have to be who is the loudest, who is the most visible . . . that's really not what it's about. I think that the way that we use social media right now is not very conducive towards actual progress.

In this way, social media can serve as a breeding ground for hateful attitudes.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, highlighted,

it's just mind boggling . . . you go on social media and [see] the negativity in the comments that some people may feel. I'm not going to ever celebrate the death of a

single person. I feel like that is a tragedy, but then you go on social media you see people say that's what [Breonna Taylor] deserved and stuff like that . . . that is horrible.

Accordingly, avoidance of any or substantive social media engagement can occur. For example, Ruth, a biracial college basketball player, does not

really put a lot of my actual thinking of things on the internet a ton because people love to interpret things and make it into something that it's not, so I'm hesitant to do that. That's why I say social media as a concept is great, but I don't think that using it as a primary tool for activism is a smart thing to do.

Participants shared their perspectives on the fallacy of social media. Many believed social media can create false or empty narratives pertaining to social justice. Moreover, they noted that social media engagement in the context of activism has become more about who is the loudest (i.e., posting the most) in attempt to harness followers, and not necessarily who are genuine allies.

Confronting Backlash. Participants who engage in everyday activism via social media often are forced to confront negative reactions to their posts. In the context of everyday activism for social justice, participants' social media posts are political in nature; therefore, "there will be backlash" (Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete). For example, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, whose main form of activism during 2020 was social media, "posted things about Trump" on her personal social media account. As a result,

[I] got kicked out of the [organization]. It's a committee and I was a treasurer. Basically . . . a White athlete reported me. She was one of my close friends to be honest and she basically gave me a phone call and was like "hey, we've had a comment about your Instagram. Can you please stop?" And I basically was like, "I physically cannot stop . . . I

understand where they're coming from with that post, I already deleted it, but it was too late. [The post was] something like “if you still support Trump, what are you doing?” and all this type of stuff. I was really struggling with mental health at the time as well . . . I basically told her “if you don't like me for me . . . then I just don't think I want to be a part of this group anymore.” She was about to kick me out, so I kicked myself out before it could get to that point. It was also one of those things. I was in that group to do things social justice-y, like to start fundraisers, to actually do something that would help the student-athletes get involved and it was really slow for me . . . I was a part of it for a year and nothing came of it. All I did was take notes, so I was okay with it in the end because it really wasn't doing what I wanted it to do . . . But yeah I've lost that friendship and I just don't talk to a lot of people anymore.

The negative reception to her social media posts led to Nora being reprimanded by university administrators.

It just sucks how it all ended because they don't even count me as an alumnus. I never got my jersey . . . I don't want to cry. . . . I don't talk to any of them . . . I'm not allowed to access to any of my [playing] film, so that was really hard to keep playing. I still have two years of eligibility left [and] I could go play again if I want to, but . . . I got threatened to be sued for defamation after I wrote an article on my mental health and yeah it ended really really badly.

The learning in this case for Nora was

just don't let anybody change you or bully you into being silent because they really did bully me into trying to be silent and I mean it did work because I was not about to get

sued for defamation even though it wasn't defamation you know what I mean? I just don't want to be put in that position again.

Several participants discussed strategies to deal with such backlash, including ignoring it. Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, for instance, does not “really care [and] feels like I am speaking out for a good cause. If someone doesn't agree, then that's their problem not mine.” Jamie, a former college gymnast turned cheerleader, described a White teammate's response to one of her posts.

I will see some of the comments under things and I'm just like “eh,” but if someone were to ever say, “why did you post that?” I'll be like “why do you care?” . . . This is what it is and if you have a problem with it maybe you should just . . . I retweeted something and someone said something about it, she and this girl had said some very nasty things. I've never heard her say it to me. There was one time she said something about something I posted. And I was like, “why are you so upset about it?” and she said “I'm just saying you don't understand how people can take it.” [So] I said, “why are you upset about it?” and she just looked at me and goes “I'm just saying you represent the team,” and I said, “but I also represent myself. If I feel something needs to be said I'm going to say it, whether that's retweeting it or not, I'm going to say it.” She didn't know what to do with it. . . . And then I had a meeting with the coach I think the next day and she's like, “someone told me about something you posted, I don't know what they're talking about because they didn't say anything on what it was about.” So I showed her the tweet and my coach is like, “I don't see anything wrong with that.” I said, “me neither, I just think it personally hurt her because it didn't follow with her beliefs.”

One strategy Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, deployed is keeping the “hateful comments” visible for fellow activists and social media users to see.

I guess in general when it comes to activism and seeing the other comments below it, I don't delete them. I always keep them up, I want people to see them so that people can see what's actually happening . . . I think that if you delete the negative then people are only going to see love and see that it's not a current day issue., They're going to think that it's not actually happening, so I think that telling my story and showing that there are still people that are being negative is really important to wake [social media followers and sports fans] up a little bit.

There are, according to Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, people who “do care about what [Black women athletes] say.” However, the inherent nature of social media means that many people can and do participate in abusive practices with very little repercussion. As such, participants choose not to let other peoples’ comments, discourage them. One way to persist is to

be civil. . . . There will be backlash and it’s really easy to, online, be like “you’re wrong, I’m right.” But I really try to explain my stance without bashing someone’s stance, so really just trying to peacefully engage in a topic without starting huge fights (Brenda, Black professional basketball athlete).

There are several benefits and challenges to social media engagement as it relates to everyday activism. The benefits include speed and scope, educational tool for self and others, an avenue for self-expression, finding and building community. The challenges, on the other hand, include sensationalizing Black pain, the lack of substance and legitimacy, and confronting backlash.

Education

Education, both informal and formal, is the last axial code within the everyday activism higher order theme since “the more educated we become, the better we will be as a society” (Jenna, African American college basketball athlete).

Informal Education

Informal education refers to knowledge gained and shared outside of institutionalized U.S. education. The open codes include active self-education, informing others, and life’s lessons.

Active Self-Education. Learning about social identities and the societal systems in place that mediate those identities is a common thread among participants. As Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, affirmed, “educating myself is definitely the biggest form of activism when it comes to our generation.” Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, concurred: “I do like to be active and attentive to what’s going on around me and in the world.” Common mechanisms for this informal education included attending webinars and reading books. For example, Penelope, a Black college figure skater saw

a symposium of people of Black hockey players and other people in sport and I watched that. That was a really good experience. They specifically talked about activism and what it's like to play hockey and be Black, and what it's like to work in an ice arena and be Black and things like that. That was a really good moment and learning experience that I had.

Notably, self-education became a priority for some participants, particularly in the summer of 2020 following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. For example, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, chose to “go sit and listen to talks on being educated on [racial injustice].” The reignition of the Black Lives Matter movement evoked participants’ desire to

truly understand what it means to be Black and to be a woman living in the U.S, thus raising political and social consciousness. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, put it: “just trying to really learn and soak up information, so that I could understand my culture, so I understand my background, and so I could understand how the world was going to look at me.”

Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, also noted,

I feel like in school you don't have time to learn or really dive into topics. . . . I read this book by Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me* and it was probably one of my favorite books. Just him talking about his experiences as a Black male growing up which I never knew about even as I'm a Black woman. . . . That book really opened my eyes to a different looking about race and stuff like that in America in a different lens than I even thought about it, even though I've experienced it my whole life. I think that the education piece is huge.

For some participants, learning about their cultural background and ancestry is key to moving forward in their activism journey. As Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, noted,

I really want to know my Black side of my family. I don't know them very well, but I feel like that would be so influential in my own activist journey, just to know where [I'm from]. So I'm working on that with my Dad.

Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, “had to intentionally educate myself about my own culture, especially with being raised by a White woman and not a Black woman.” Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, also sought to advance her knowledge on her heritage.

I love visiting my family up North . . . They're not on a reservation, but my grandma, she took a step back from being Americanized and wanted to dive deeper into her culture and

heritage and learning the natural language. She became a professor in it, so yeah . . . I want to learn more about the actual heritage and the traditions.

Self-education as it relates to activism for social justice also involves learning through new media sources, such as YouTube and podcasts. Some participants preferred this medium since books can “get a little boring” (Ruth, Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete). For example, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, explained,

there was this one documentary on Netflix . . . it's not even a documentary, it's probably thirty minutes long and this dude just keeps getting killed and then at the end there's a Black guy. He's saying they were killed by a police officer and at the end they rolled through all the Black people who had been killed by police brutality and what they were doing when [they were killed], so for example brushing their teeth, and they lost their life. I think just not getting rooted in the trauma videos, but just understanding why we got to the situation we're in.

Similarly, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, noted,

oh, you should watch 13th. It basically discusses the 13th amendment which abolished slavery except there was a loophole in it. The loophole basically ties into mass incarceration and prison labor . . . so it really unpacks that. . . . It shows all these companies that use prison labor and how it economically benefits them and how it keeps the people that are in prison for whatever reason there . . . so it basically goes into all that which is really interesting.

For Eleanor, this active self-education was crucial:

You walk into the room and you feel different, but you don't really know the implications sometimes of what that really is until you either experience it or someone tells you or you

just make sure you find out in some way before you find out in the real world the hard way, so there was a lot of just educating myself.

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, also actively engaged in self-education through new media: “Simply just looking it up on Google, but also the keywords are the biggest thing. I guess my form to educate myself is through YouTube videos, just you can listen to a podcast.” This active self-education can, in turn, lead to increased discernment. As Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, attested, “I think now just all the stuff that's been going on I know my rights. I know what I have a right to do and not do.” Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, agrees: “that's where the education comes in, is educating yourself and realizing your rights as an athlete.”

Participants noted active self-education as pertinent to their activism. This includes reading books centering race, attending relevant online webinars, listening to podcasts, and watching documentaries or shows on new media platforms like YouTube and Netflix.

Informing Others. In their everyday activism, participants are educating others about social justice issues, specifically anti-Black racism. That is, “bringing awareness to something that is going on in [the Black] community [and] trying to bring awareness and educate people, young and old, who may not understand what it is that we are going through” (Farrah, Black college track and field athlete). Activism engagement can thus serve as a form of informal education:

There's activism that I feel that serves the purpose of increasing awareness and teaching people to think differently about things, to think critically about things just to understand better the social functioning around them and the implications of their privilege or their oppression and things like that (Eleanor, biracial college basketball athlete).

As a result, or at least in theory, “people are starting to understand people better and starting to be a little bit less violent” (Bonnie, Black college basketball athlete). This is particularly salient for participants who take it upon themselves to educate non-Black people as a means of developing a level of understanding about, and in turn empathy for, Black people. As Penelope, a Black college figure skater, who “answers my White friends” questions about the Black community and culture, noted,

if you are a different race than someone, obviously, you're not going to be able to know their experiences, so maybe having someone tell you about those. I'm not saying that you should go to every Black person and ask questions. That's not what I'm getting at, but when people do choose to tell their stories or tell what's going on, I just feel like it's important because it opens the door to have those conversations that are difficult and that most people don't have.

Informing others through such conversations “adds to their knowledge and then they'll be able to help other people down the line” (Penelope, a Black college figure skater). Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, suggested “sometimes advocating for something like an identity that you don't know personally, you got to do more research.” Previously, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, described her coach’s reaction to the Black athletes who did not want to get their hair wet in pool workouts. After “educating her on that” and once her coach “understood that, our relationship grew and [coach] became more aware.” For Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, everyday conversations with her mother about racial identity have been “challenging:”

It's interesting, for lack of a better word, to be a Black woman who was raised by a White woman and the conversations that we have gotten to have. She'll explain to me why she

may have been unaware of certain things as it pertains to racial tensions and things like that. My mom is a White Canadian in addition to being White, so she really just has a lot less context than people who are American, so having those discussions with her has been really interesting when I'm having to explain to her my experience as a Black woman and how it's different from versus a White woman. Initially, she would get a little bit defensive because she would be like 'oh my gosh, am I contributing to this?' But now she's sort of understanding more that it's a systemic thing and she's learning how she can be anti-racist and work against the systems and things like that. So explaining my experience to her and seeing how she's worked and learned to understand things helps me keep in mind, okay this is not gonna be my first time that I have a conversation with a White person that just cannot understand my experience, so how can you if you're not a Black woman? You can only imagine very little what it's like to be one. In that sense, I feel like I have a good idea of where the rest of the world is at . . . so I can learn how to navigate other conversations like that.

Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, believes the conversations she had with others at a peaceful Black Lives Matter peaceful protest in her local city generated "a positive change:"

I think the one thing from that experience [is] it hopefully showed people that when something does happen to speak about it more often, but I think once we had the conversation, we felt supported. But I think when we didn't have it, it definitely didn't feel that way.

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, serves as an executive member of the Black college athlete-led organization on campus that centers "social justice and social

activism.” This organization provides information to students and local community on various topics.

We're really big on voter registration. Everyone should be registered to vote. . . . A lot of people haven't looked at it as social justice, but it falls under social justice because voting is a social norm. At the end of the day, everyone should have right to vote, but we're at a point where everyone does not have that right to vote or at least access to obtaining that right to vote. That's something I've always been big on.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, had to explain to the public why her work colleagues at a public school in a major Midwest city were on strike.

We had no students, we had no nurses in the school, we had no librarians in school . . . the pay rate was awful, and it wasn't even just for the money, but it's everything that you put me through, you know? The general public just didn't know about all the injustices within the politics of the school system that the teachers were going through. There are teachers that have been there for years [who] had been treated wrongly and a lot of the public didn't know. So we were protesting and there are people that were protesting our protest, so we have all these facts on a board saying all these things that were promised to the teachers that they didn't get. At the end of their contract [the teachers said] “hey, we're going to fight for it because this is what you said you were going to do, now do it” . . . and so educating the public and having our union representatives go on TV to say “hey, they're saying that we did this, but these are the facts, we have the facts.” I feel like we were able to get more parents on board, having told them the facts of everything. It's like no, it's not that we don't want to work, we adore our students, we want to be there for our students, this is disrupting their education . . . but this is why we have to do it,

because if we do nothing then we're going to continue to be mistreated, you're going to get teachers that are burnt out and quit . . . we don't want to quit, you know? And so I think that once we were able to educate the public, we got most things that we wanted, so just educating them . . . and just bringing those facts to the light . . . and once they understand that, you'll feel for us as a basic human being and it's like 'hey, if I was in those shoes what would I want' so we were able to get more parents . . . Some parents bought us out donuts a hot chocolate and stuff like that, so I feel like that education part of it helped fuel the strike.

What's more, participants came up with creative ways to inform others to maximize the quality and quantity of educational moments. For example, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, explained:

During Covid there wasn't a lot for us [athletes] to do . . . I had just got to college and I obviously moved back home, but we would sit at the table and it'd be me and my mom and her husband and we would just educate. Every week we might come up with a different person and they could be Black, they could be Hispanic. . . they could be Muslim, they could be whatever, and we would say, 'okay, you got to find something about this person and educate me on and then I'm going to educate you,' so it was kind of like a game per se and we will try to come up with different facts and you could create it in your own way.

Participants described the various ways through which they inform others in the context of everyday activism. Informing others, in this case, includes providing information about the Black woman experience to those who need/want to listen. In some cases, participants had to explain the reasons why they were engaging in activism.

Life's Lessons. Participants discussed the various teachings they acquired about humanity as a result of activism engagement. For example, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, affirmed, “you don’t necessarily have to agree with someone, but you should definitely respect them.” Jenna notes the fundamentality of the “right to protest” as long as “you do it peacefully and respectfully . . . and it's not interrupting anything.” Christina, an African American college track and field athlete who participated in a local Black Lives Matter protest, spoke to the benefits of this universal respect in relation to life’s lessons.

It was like each and every one of us, we may not have understood or exactly related to the person speaking or the person to the left and to the right of us, but we gain insight. I think being in a space where you're constantly learning, you can feel everyone learning, learning more and more through real life experiences, not academia, not education, not classroom, real life experience . . . it's a different feeling . . . it's like being in your favorite class. Being in the class that you actually enjoy in that you feel like you don't have to do it, you want to do it . . . that's the feeling I love about [engaging in activism], just getting that satisfying feeling of learning something that actually is relevant. So you're not saying that stats are not relevant, but it was a nice feeling . . . it was just a real nice like . . . come back to reality when [bringing people of different races together] is actually possible.

Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, reflected on the lessons she has learned through her activism engagement.

I think just unlearning stuff is key and I think it's okay to unlearn things . . . I think as I'm realizing now cancel culture . . . some people, yeah they should be cancelled . . . people do certain stuff and I'm like “okay y'all, you're canceled” because you obviously haven't

learned from it, but as a society we don't let people do certain things and then realize or become aware how it might be toxic to themselves or to other groups. For example, I didn't realize how fatphobic in general society is because I've never been big and I've started to see myself where I'm like that's kind of fatphobic thing to think. So I'm [questioning] where did I get that from. I'm starting to watch random stuff and there's always some joke about some fat person and it's always the first thing you can say "oh they're dumb," it's always something about their weight, it's always something along those lines. I don't think I realized that until recently about stuff that I've consumed and how maybe stuff that I've done that I never realized something as bad as actually hurting others. I think we don't let people realize their own faults or be okay with this just like you're either right or wrong or we're just going to keep the status quo and I think talking about stuff especially . . . more micro aggressions and stuff like that can go a long way because it's small things in our lives that might affect people . . . I can't change this law, but even just your mindset about certain things or how you talk about others or how you think about others and you can change, then I think educating people on that could go a long way if they don't want to do it, but I think a lot of people in general want to do better and they just don't know how, you know?

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, described the importance of open-mindedness in the context of social justice activism.

It's [either] this way or no way at all. We're living in a world where it's obvious that it's not just this way because if it was just this way you wouldn't have these other multiple ways, so it's the forced closed-mindedness that makes me upset . . . when there's alternatives, other possible routes, but you're so comfortable with this one that you don't

want to change anything but changing is what's going to make you a better person. Being open-minded is what's going to make you a better person and I don't know . . . it's almost like looking at it through, not a holistic but almost empathetic way. I couldn't care less about what it is that you're not trying to change, but you're stopping your own self and let alone the people who you probably are affecting, but your own self and I don't know.

In a similar sentiment, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, suggested:

People just need to be okay with being uncomfortable and knowing what you are talking about and not just what you are just seeing in the media if that makes sense. Political views sometimes can influence activism . . . what's wrong is wrong and what's right is right, so what are your ethical views? What are your moral views? What is right and what is wrong to you? You can believe what you want to believe in politics and that's fine that everybody doesn't have that same view.

Participants shared the various ways through which informal education contributes to their everyday social justice activism. This includes active self-education, particularly through new media (e.g., YouTube), informing others, and learning life's lessons like being open-mindedness and vulnerability.

Formal Education

Formal education refers to the institutionalized secondary and higher education school system in the U.S. The open codes for formal education include application to everyday life and system critique.

Application to Everyday Life. The application of critical information and knowledge to everyday life is a common belief and practice among participants. As Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, noted, “I do want to, I guess, find ways to use the education that I’ve

learned.” Learning why and how society operates through a critical lens can serve as a form of survival for minoritized people in the U.S. Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, for example, mentioned “not only do we get the ability to learn, but using the things that we've learned to use in the real world has always been the gift.” Christina explained why education, specifically the development and application of critical thinking, is crucial as it pertains to social justice.

Young adults need to understand what critical race theory is . . . because it's such a critical time . . . the teenage years into your young adult years where your mind is kind of like “what is going on?” You're in the real world, you have limited safe spaces, and you're still changing as a person hormonally and you're evolving as a human. It's something that's relevant to today. . . . Race is a thing that is common in the world, and I think there's so much negative connotation behind the word race. It's not a negative thing, it's just a thing that exists . . . racists exist . . . it's as simple as that. Now if you want to go down the rabbit hole as to what's wrong with race or the social construct of it, that's something we get into another day, but I think understanding what race is and understanding how race has been shaped is important. I think some people when they hear critical race theory, the first thing they go to is “ah, Black people have been put down so long and it's the White people's fault.” No, that's not what we're doing. We're talking about how race affects the legal system, how race affects the educational system . . . it's literally just stating the obvious and I think that's important. . . . I wish I knew about critical race theory at least heard about it at high school, I mean there's so many people living in examples of them being affected by their race and the education system, in the legal system, in the business place at that age . . . I was seventeen working in internships

surrounded by a lot of non-POC people and me thinking, “oh I got this opportunity just the same as everyone else.” . . . No, I didn't. It was a complete difference in engagement level and I knew I was there because I had luckily got the job through a resource, so of course I wasn't going to mess it up. So it's little instances like that play a huge part because it's like why do I have to work ten times harder just to prove myself when I'm already overqualified compared to the person sitting next to me, and so I think being able to point out instances like that and then understand why it's shaped like that is important and not necessarily labeling, “oh this is wrong” and “this is right.” We can do that later when everyone's on the same consensus, but until people understand what it is, it's going to be hard to do that because . . . you have people who either don't think race is a problem, don't know how to understand race, or want to ignore it and you have that big of the gap and have people spread it and it's kind of hard to close that gap. So I think that's why I really do think it should be taught in high school if anything because . . . we're wondering about our future and race is always going to be a part of our future.

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, agrees:

Yeah, I think education matters [in relation to social justice] because there's certain ways you can present information, that you can take perspectives on the information you're given so if people are being educated on how to not be racist, you can be like “oh, you shouldn't do this because it's bad,” and leave it at that. Or you can get into a deeper subject matter or bring in people who this directly affects.

Concurrently, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, noted,

learning about these things that impact us on and White people learning about what our experiences, Black people's like or Native Americans, just having a good understanding

of as many different backgrounds as you can is important because then for the people that are going to be in leadership positions [in sport], they can then make decisions that are going to benefit more people than just those that identify with them . . . getting that to actually happen is the challenging part of it, but it doesn't diminish the importance at all.

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, who is

interested in activism for women, took an issues in feminism course my freshman year. It was taught by a non-binary professor. . . . I learned a lot in that class, especially about LGBTQ+ people of color and how they've been routinely excluded from things.

A person's lack of education prioritizing critical thinking can be detrimental to the impact of activism insofar as societal change. When talking about activism engagement, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, pointed out,

what I've learned most is some people are very uneducated. They don't know, and who am I to say that I know, maybe I don't, but some people are very uneducated on [the reasons behind engaging in activism] so definitely they need to be more educated on it. I think there's some people who have this perspective that activism is always bad and it's not or it's always good . . . I feel like they feel like it's one sided and it's not, it's very different.

Formal education also can serve as a form of empowerment. For example, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, described the impact of an invested teacher who “took the time out to really see me as a person,” and how this experience translates to her activism.

I've never been a dumb kid, I was just frustrated and angry, and a lot of things that were going on and home life was in dispute. The teacher's name was Mr. [name of teacher].

I'll never forget him. It was third grade. He comes up to me and says, "you're so smart, but you just act out," and he was like "do you know the future that you could have? You can go to the top schools [in the state], you can go anywhere you go to college, it could be anything" . . . It's not that I didn't know that the college was in the future, but it's the fact that this person saw something in me. You can hear it from your parents, but they are supposed to be nice to you . . . but there's an outside source of someone investing in you and wanting the best for you that you begin to believe in yourself. So having him invest in me and tell me "you're so smart, you could do anything that you want to get into those schools," from that point on I was an honor roll student. I graduated honors, dean's list honor roll student because that person invested in me. I began to believe in myself and at that time, like I said I was being bullied as a kid, so I was angry, and so for this person to actually see me, aside from being bullied from the rest of these kids, is amazing. When I was an educator that's what I did and to my students because it had been done to me . . . I had a young man when I was working in [public school]. And he didn't have the best reputation in school with us because people didn't give him a chance . . . And I told him I said, "we're going to be working together, I'm here for you" and I was like "I got one rule. . . I will never disrespect you, even if you disrespect me, I will never disrespect you so please don't ever disrespect me because it won't feel nice to me . . . I will fight for you, I will stand up for you." And we began to build a relationship, so much so the best student graduated as the most improved student . . . after graduation he wants to go to the navy and these are things he set out for himself because he believes in himself because I took the time out to invest in him, you know what I mean? And that's what advocating is,

so because it happened to me, I have to give it back because I know how it feels to not have it.

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, shared,

personally speaking, being able to choose what it is you want to be educated about, it gives you a sense of power because only you showing interest in what it is . . . because not only do we get the ability to learn but using the things that we've learned to use in the real world has always been the gift . . . being able to learn something, apply yourself to that something then apply both yourself and what you learn to the real world. . . . I mean it's refreshing and it's awesome. I'm happy that I don't know everything, but I always like to leave a little bit of room to know a little bit more of something. I think my school does a good job of making sure we are well-rounded athletes. I didn't really understand what it meant to be well-rounded until I actually saw that I am well-rounded . . . there's a little bit of music, a little bit of theater, a little bit of psychology, a little bit of philosophy, little science, all these different things to pull from and information to have.

Participants shared their perspectives on the role formal education has in their activism.

For some, it has provided a gateway to continue their scholarly activism. For others, it has increased their critical thinking about how society operates, in turn enabling them to apply relevant knowledge to their everyday lives.

System Critique. Although the U.S. formal education system can be useful and, at times, empowering, it can also be “racist” (Penelope, Black college figure skater), “segregated” (Eleanor, biracial college basketball athlete), and “expensive” (Marilyn, Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete). Specific to continued legislative efforts to erase certain intellectual concepts (i.e., critical race theory) and books (e.g., stories centering gender

identity and sexuality), Penelope, a Black college figure skater, noted that this deliberate erasure “keeps the blinder on. When you're not going to talk about it or discuss it or have any knowledge of what is going on with another race, academically things need to be done better.” Eleanor, a biracial college basketball player, agrees:

You can't have such a broken uneven, ununified elementary education system that is so segregated and now they're talking about not teaching critical race theory anymore in K through five. . . . No one in K through five, or K through 12 for that matter, is even learning about critical race, so I don't even know where that came from, but you can't have such an imbalance at that level and then expect our current higher education system, as it is now, to fully reach its potential and serve its full purpose. The people that get lucky that have some amount of privilege, they can make it work. . . . Yes, you have those stories of people that come from nothing and then they do all these amazing things because yes, you can win a rigged game, but you usually won't, so there's a lot that goes into that.

Similarly, Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field athlete, articulated “there's a good and bad way to educate people and when you do it in a bad way it usually just turns like more negative outcomes.”

Education is a substantial part of participants' everyday activism. Informal education includes everyday self-education, informing others, and life's lessons. Formal education, specifically the U.S. higher educational system, can provide a medium through which to learn about and apply useful, critical information and knowledge of how society operates. That said, the system itself is structurally “broken” (Eleanor, biracial college basketball athlete).

These Black sportswomen provided in depth descriptions of their everyday activism. Everyday activism relates to the power of speaking up by creating safe spaces, using one's voice, and sharing lived experiences. Attending to social connections, participants reported solidarity, community engagement, and family. The most prevalent form of everyday activism deployed by participants was social media engagement. As such, participants explained the benefits of social media, such as speed and scope and a medium of self-expression, as well as the challenges, for example sensationalizing Black pain. Lastly, participants' articulated education – both informal and formal – as part of their everyday activism.

Discussion of Everyday Activism

As Black women in sport and wider society, I frame the participants as what Puwar (2004) describes as *space invaders*. When Black women enter these constructed White and male spaces, they are perceived as intruders, as individuals who seemingly do not naturally belong or deserve a place in those spaces. To utilize this space, therefore, is to disrupt “what has been” with the intention of creating “what can or should be”. As Collins (2009) notes, a Black woman's presence in spaces from which she was historically ejected can serve as a form of activism. For example, most participants attend a historically White institution; this institution, or metaphoric space, has historically rejected and excluded individuals who look like the participants. As a result, attending to Black women students' needs is not prioritized (e.g., Brooks & Knox, 2022). As Black women athlete activists, they have invaded sport space and coopted that platform to engage social justice.

Invading sport spaces and creating new ones that are “free from surveillance and allows students to freely express themselves” (Carter Francique et al., 2017, p. 18) demonstrates participants' resistance to dominant ideologies and practices pervading sport. Similar to other

Black college athletes (Carter Francique et al., 2017), creation of *safe cultural spaces* allows the athletes in this study to acknowledge their marginalization and determine the operationalization and impact of power in their lives as athletes and as members of society. Since their sport platform provides them a public voice (Ferguson, 2023), these Black women athletes creating safe spaces is an “activist response to counter experiences of being marginalized, excluded, and isolated in higher education” (Ferguson, 2023, p. 121).

These Black women demonstrate serving the needs of the communities from which they come by utilizing spaces as sites for empowerment. Through their involvement in various on-and off-campus organizations, they create a “safe space that nurtured the everyday and specialized thought of African American women” (Collins, 2009, p. 112) – a safe space for athletes of color that was clearly non-existent until then. Participants created safe spaces that constructed new ideas and new meaning that counter what Collins (2009) describes as controlling images. Such images are socially constructed, negative visual representations of Black women from the slave era that were used to justify race, gender, and class inequality. These images endure for Black women in sport (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016). As such, participants speak up in the spaces they build as athletes, as students, and professional sportspeople. This, in and of itself, challenges the status quo. In so doing, these Black sportswomen are reconstructing these spaces to prioritize their needs and voices.

Defining Social Justice and Activism

This study is unique in showcasing how Black women athlete activists conceptualize speaking up in the context of social justice. Participants define social justice as persisting structural inequities that directly impacts certain communities and not others. Participants define activism therefore as active involvement in changing the status quo. The key word being active.

That is, to change the status quo, to make society a more just, fair society, means taking action – however, big, however small. Part of this involves using one’s voice since Black sportswomen’s voices are largely muted and disregarded by hegemonic forces in sport and wider society (e.g., Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016). Participants recognize the power of using their voices to shed light on issues they care about, as well as sharing lived experiences given that experience alone serves as legitimate knowledge and meaning making (Collins, 2009). Moreover, using one’s voice means one must be a good listener to be an effective activist. Not only do participants recognize the power of speaking up; they also acknowledge the power of listening to understand, rather than listening to reply, as others speak up in the context of activism for social justice.

As a marginalized group who are often “defined by others” (Collins, 2009, p. 36), speaking up is not a new social phenomenon among Black sportswomen. High-jumper Erosanna Robinson, Olympic gold medalist Wyomia Tyus, and the Brown University cheerleading team in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, respectively, are among those who led collective efforts against intersectional discrimination. History tells us that when Black women in sport do speak up against injustice, they often are scrutinized (e.g., Anderson, 2018; Razack & Joseph, 2021). As such, Black sportswomen are largely subjected to the issues against which they are speaking about (e.g., Ryan, 2021). And yet, this study demonstrates that participants still choose to speak up because they believe it is what is right. Therein lies their power.

Social Connections

Social connections are a vital form and an outcome of everyday activism. Sport cannot be separate from the society in which it operates (Cooper et al., 2019). Familiarization with oppression creates a unified understanding of the social inequities dictating the lives of

minoritized communities. Accordingly, building and creating social connections through everyday activism humanizes the people at the center of the activism – including participants and the individuals whom they represent and support. As activists, these Black sportswomen cultivate social connections with the people with whom they share social identities or with whom they work. In this case, tending to that connection through story-sharing and community-building has the potential to empower others, encouraging them to join the broader social justice movement (Dyke & Dixon, 2013). In doing so, participants humanize activism.

This study reveals that empathy is integral to Black sportswomen's activism engagement for social justice. Scholars continue to underscore the importance of empathy in the broader context of social justice (Chuddley Diatta, 2018; Gair, 2017; Montagno et al., 2021). Through their activism engagement in sport and non-sport contexts, participants learned about and from people in other minoritized communities, such as international student athletes, trans athletes, and athletes within the LGBTQ+ community. This, then, contributes to their overall understanding of how society operates in terms of structural power and normalized social practices. Above all, participants encompass forms of activism that center altruism; by listening to and learning from others, these Black sportswomen demonstrate an ethic of care in the context of social justice.

Athlete activism is not a normalized, accepted practice (Kluch, 2020). Exacerbated by Black woman's perpetual silencing, particularly in college sport (Bruening et al., 2013), activism engagement can contribute to feelings of isolation (e.g., Kluch, 2023). One way participants remedy this is by engaging in and creating community. Participants found community in athlete organizations, Black sororities, church groups, and online spaces (e.g., social media). Being surrounded and supported by people who look like them contributed to participants' confidence

in their activism. In other words, if Black sportswomen feel a sense of belonging through social connection in and/or outside of sport, activism engagement does not have to feel isolating or alone.

Specific to racial justice, activism engagement is often intergenerational (e.g., Cooper et al., Keaton, 2023; Weiner & Weiner, 2019). Despite history-making legislation, such as Civil Rights Act of 1965, and landmark Supreme court cases, such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, racial injustice persists. Consequently, activism engagement is a norm for some Black families wherein grandmothers, fathers, and mothers pass down knowledge and share experiences to inform younger generations. It's no surprise, then, that some family members support participants' engagement in activism since they are fighting the same fight, only in a different time in history under slightly different circumstances. Given the recent violence-based commentary aimed at Black activists speaking against anti-Black racism (e.g., Liu et al., 2021), especially activists who are athletes (Frederick et al., 2017), it is also no surprise, however, that friction erupts among family members as participants engage in activism.

Moreover, fearing the unknown, in terms of treatment of family members, is a motivating factor for activism engagement. For instance, concern rises when participants' brothers go for a run, drive a car, or head out for the day to hang with friends. This fear drives them to engage in activism. Again, this fear is arguably non-existent among White people. Although some scholarship points to the motivations for activism among U.S. college athletes, including being a role model and eliminating discrimination (Kluch, 2021), uniquely, my scholarship reveals the motivations for activism for Black sportswomen at the professional and collegiate level.

Social Media

Given the easy access to and popularity of social media (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), it is no surprise that social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, are employed by Black athletes in their everyday activism (Black et al., 2022; Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022; Cable, 2021; MacClearen & Fisher, 2021; Yan et al., 2018). Younger people dominate social media usage (PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017). As such, participants in this study using social media as everyday activism is characteristic of their generation (i.e., ages 18-25, popularized as Gen Z).

One of the main components of social media is the ability to increase online visibility by highlighting key words or phrases using a hashtag (i.e., “#”). Using a hashtag makes the topic of the social media post become easily searchable, thereby generating conversation and connection. As an historically marginalized group, participants in this study are “hashtagging from the margins” to “move their voices from the margins to the center of public discourse” (Gunn, 2015, p. 21). In so doing, participants “talk back” to hegemonic mainstream and popular discourses” (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022, p. 1) about Black women in sport and about social justice through sport. These Black sportswomen highlight the importance of social media to their everyday activism. For example, participants reported having the power to post what they want, when they want, and how they want. That is, ownership of one’s social media account allows for a unique online medium through which to express one’s political beliefs on a publicly available platform without the interference of external influences.

Using social media engagement as a form of activism, these Black women athletes also reveal the centrality of finding and building community in online spaces (Jones, 2019). For many participants, hashtagging from the margins enabled them to find like-minded, social justice-centered individuals aligned with sport organizations and minoritized athletes with shared goals, values, and beliefs related to social justice. As such, being active on social media, as it relates to

identity and social justice, can foster a sense of community for participants who otherwise may feel singled out as Black women, especially those in predominantly White sports. Although previous scholarship points to the capacity of social media as a community-builder for Black women (e.g., Gill, 2015), this study is the one of the first to showcase the importance of social media as an online community-builder for Black sportswomen engaging in activism.

By hashtagging from the margins (Gun, 2015), these Black sportswomen utilize social media as an avenue for self-expression in a bid to mobilize support. Consistent with previous scholarship (Black et al., 2022; Kitchen et al., 2021), participants “make a concerted effort to display community, social justice engagement, and the power of women” (Everbach et al., 2022, p. 153). Accordingly, social media-based activism can circumvent dominant media narratives, in turn shifting some power to those who, traditionally, have been disempowered (Everbach et al., 2022). As Welang (2018) notes, “you no longer need to be an accomplished and celebrated male erudite . . . to redefine culture. With a single tweet alone . . . you can garner fans and shake the status quo to its core. (p. 305).

That said, ironically, the ability to share information quickly and vastly is also a fundamental flaw of social media expressed by participants. Violence is normalized in most Black women’s lives in the U.S. (e.g., Willingham, 2018). Using the spectacle of anti-Black violence is traumatizing for these Black women athletes. Participants reported the circulation of traumatic images and/or videos of unarmed Black people subjected to violence at the hands of mostly White armed law enforcement perpetuates the seeming need for such images and videos to garner support from those who are not subjected to such violence (i.e., the majority White population). That is, sensationalizing Black pain on social media is an accepted online practice used to gain support from non-Black people – as if watching the dehumanization of Black bodies

is necessary to affirm Black peoples' humanity. Participants underscored one of the major adversarial elements of social media activism is the assumption that exposing and exploiting Black pain through online imagery will harness support from those who are not familiar with or know much about Black pain. Accordingly, the issue lies in *how* one uses social media as a form of activism; sharing videos and/or images of armed law enforcement physically or verbally abusing unarmed Black people is not ethical or productive.

Participants pointed out the danger of social media users posting what they believe looks 'good,' or what looks attuned with socially progressive values to attain 'likes.' Smith, Krishna, and Al-Sinan (2019) describe this as *slacktivism*. Using social media-based activism to gain more followers is inconsistent with the goal of social media activism. This practice can dilute the strength of the social justice movement. These Black women highlighted that the lack of ingenuity that social media-based activism often glorifies is problematic since the aesthetic of the message is valued more than the actual message. Hence this is why some participants believe social media may not be the best way to champion social justice. Accordingly, some participants advised other athletes to not be over-reliant on social media engagement as their main form of activism.

Social media engagement, as it relates to activism, invites reactions from followers, fellow athletes, sport fans, and sport commentators. Similar to previous research (Dickerson & Hodler, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2016; Sappington et al., 2019; Trimbur, 2019), the Black women athletes in this study experienced backlash. Participants engaging in activism through social media were subjected to online abuse. Nonetheless, participants persisted. For instance, they do not abide by requests to delete their accounts, they keep abusive comments visible for others to see, they share credible resources, they address critics with civility, and they maintain their

stance. That is, the social media-based activism of these Black women athletes was more proactive than reactive.

Education

To fight for an equitable society requires a critical understanding of what equity can look like, as well as the (un)learning the history that led to inequity (e.g., White supremacy). Participants thus seek to acknowledge their privileges and to deepen their knowledge about how the world around them operates and why. As such, education contributes to a “new consciousness that utilizes Black women’s everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African American women and stimulate resistance” (Collins, 2009, p. 32).

Informing others about what life is like as a Black woman in sport and in broader society is a normalized, almost expected practice, of participants’ everyday activism. This underscores the systemic privilege afforded to White people. Participants had to explain to coaches and teammates about their hairstyles, the meaning Black Lives Matter protests, and the realities of Black womanhood. In this case, informing others is an act of labor – a labor that is largely non-existent for their White female and Black male peers. However, participants framed this practice as an act of resistance in the context of hegemonic forces that have historically ignored Black women’s voices, experiences, and work. For the most part, participants seemed to accept this reality; informing others through informal education about the complexities of life for a Black sportswoman is a taken-for-granted ingredient to their everyday activism.

Like sport, formal education is a microcosm of wider U.S. society. Collins (2009) argues that education is a vehicle for “enhancing positive self-definitions and self-valuations in Black girls” (Collins, 2009, p. 184). Given the long history of systemic exclusion of Black women from

U.S. higher education (e.g., Arao, 2016), these Black sportswomen “use their education in a socially responsible way” (Collins, 2009, p. 189) to advance their goals within social justice activism. In this way, formal education can provide opportunities to enhance critical thinking, (un)learn history, and serve as a gateway for future careers in social justice, such as positions in diversity, equity, and inclusion. In addition, with the right people, participants reported experiences in formal education can increase confidence and self-esteem.

That said, this study illustrates participants’ collective critique of formal educational. Participants discussed the one-sided lessons about “discovering America,” the watered-down presentations of slavery, the increasing cost of attending higher-education, and the lack of classes grounded in critical race theory. The recent baseless attack on critical race theory by largely right-wing conservative politicians is propagated by the powerful privileged few (e.g., Kaufmann, 2022; Mackenzie, 2021). Institutions in U.S. society are not devoid of social systemic problems; reform of curriculum and organizational culture is thus necessary if education is to be deployed as a tool for activism for social justice (Cooper et al., 2020). Nonetheless, participants shared insights on the need for the U.S. formal educational system to center critical race theory in the curriculum. In so doing, White students may better understand their and their Black peers’ positions in society. Collins (2009) argues,

it may be more useful to assess Black women’s activism less by the ideological content of individual Black women’s belief systems—whether they hold conservative, reformist, progressive, or radical ideologies based on some predetermined criteria—and more by Black women’s collective actions within everyday life that challenge domination in these multifaceted domains. For example, a Black mother who may be unable to articulate her political ideology but who, on a daily basis, contests school policies harmful to her

children may be more an “activist” than the most highly educated Black feminist who, while she can manipulate feminist, nationalist, postmodern, and other ideologies, produces no tangible political changes in anyone’s life but her own. Rather than reducing Black women’s activism to some “essentialist” core of “authentic” Black women’s activism originating in Black feminist imaginations, this approach creates space for diverse African American women to see how their current or potential everyday activities participate in Black women’s activism. (Collins, 2009, p. 203)

In this way, the activism of these Black women athletes is complex, proactive, intentional, and everyday.

CHAPTER VI. CHALLENGES

In this chapter I discuss the higher-order theme challenges. Challenges are inevitable when one subverts the status quo. In this case, challenges refer to the various factors that hinder participants' activism engagement experience. The axial codes in this theme are barriers and labor.

Barriers

Barriers are factors that make social justice activism engagement difficult for participants. The open codes applied are lack of support, team culture, Covid-19, and personal condemnation.

Lack of Support

In this study, a lack of support towards athletes' activism engagement occurs at the meso/organizational level (i.e., the university and/or sport league level) and at the micro/individual level.

Meso/Organizational level. In the context of Black sportswomen's social justice activism, institutions offer what participants described as performative support. In theory, institutions appear to support the causes for which athletes are speaking up; however, in practice, institutions are not actively countering hegemonic sociocultural practices to stand in solidarity with the athletes they claim to protect. In other words, institutions are "speaking about social issues and Black Lives Matter, but they're using it to get money, [so] it gets twisted" (Marilyn, Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete). As Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, noted,

this campus was built by a bunch of White people. What do they know about the Black female experience? What do they know about the queer [or] international student

experience? They don't . . . we're not going to do much for our communities if we can't understand the perspectives of the people [from which] our communities are coming.

When talking about her university athletics department, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, also noted that she

knew that there would be people who were not on the Black Lives Matter train. I knew there was going to be people who definitely have voted for Trump . . . the baseball team, for example. I've been to their parties and they're just saying the n-word loud and proud like it's nothing [and] there are places you aren't welcome in the [athletics department].

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, spoke specifically to her institution's actions following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent rebirth of the Black Lives Matter protests.

I think one thing that stood out to me was my school posted this blanket statement saying they stand with the family of George Floyd. They can't really speak on the situation. I mean it was pretty much, to me, like they'd rather not have to make the post at all. Basically, they were tiptoeing around how they stood up [against systemic racism], but instead of saying "we support BLM," they said "we're gonna try our best to be more diverse," and it's like this is really what you're saying in a time like this? We are not worried about diversifying our campus . . . how about ensuring the safety of those that are already on campus, you know? It was just moments like that where I just started to take a look around and [think] this is the world we live in . . . it's one of those reality checks.

Likewise, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, shared from her college sport experience that "you don't realize how embedded [racism] is until you use try to change things, even at an institution [like a big West coast university] which seems to others as

very progressive.” As a result, institutions, and by extension broader society, tends “to forget and move on” when a racist incident occurs.

What’s more, institutions exploit the work of participants relating to social justice activism. Participants reported their respective universities masquerading as social justice supporters by publicizing the individual efforts of Black sportswomen as if they were educational experiences supported by the university. As Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, articulated, when Black athletes spoke out against systemic racism on their social media accounts, universities “just reworded things to say the same thing, but made it sound a little better.” Universities do this as if “doing it to check the box, but not really to talk about [social injustice]” (Marilyn, Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete). Marilyn provided an example:

I remember there a couple times where we were trying to make [an on-campus group for Black student athletes], but it felt like the athletic department was taking our stories and making it look nicer. I remember there was an article written. At first we were excited because [it was nice] to be recognized and to be seen, but, at the same time, it felt like they were using what we were saying or not really talking about the stuff that needs to be improved. It was kind of like “oh, see where we're progressing, [this university is] leading, we made a Black student athlete group, these student athletes are in the forefront [and] we're leading the way,” but there's always so much stuff that we were fighting against even within the athletic department. It was just an interesting combo that I had never really experienced before.

Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, shared a similar experience.

Towards the beginning [of my college sport career] it was great because I was doing the fundraiser and [the West coast university] really loved using my face and a couple of other athletes faces as their fronts of social justice. It was kind of like “Nora sets up this fundraiser for athletes to participate” and I was like no, this was a worldwide thing. We had people in Mexico and Australia doing this with us. [The university] really tried to take credit for a lot of the activism that some of us athletes did, not just me . . . they just jumped on [Black athletes] and asked them to participate in stuff or they ask our ideas to host things and my mentor at the time said, “they're just using you to put you on display for that.” I really do think it was a way for them to put on a show of “we are doing stuff, look at what our athletes are doing” as a way for them to claim it.

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, recognized why this performative support is problematic.

Now we're at a point where y'all only doing this because you know how it makes you look as a company and the school as a brand. A lot of people were so worried about protecting their friends. This was the moment where I saw a business more worried about their branded image than human lives . . . that moment was a shocker to me. I never would have thought, but here we are.

Another way in which some participants experienced a lack of support at the meso/organizational level was the fear of institutional repercussion if they chose to engage in activism. For example, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, shared that

as an athlete at the time [when Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem], I felt like we had so much to lose because you saw him and even now he's getting blacklisted out of the NFL and so I was just worrying about my education. This is the rest

of my life . . . will I be kicked out of school? Will I lose my scholarship? Is my scholarship going to be in jeopardy? Am I going to be in violation of the NCAA? I don't know what's going to happen. How am I supposed to continue?

Similarly, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, explained,

the biggest thing right now that's resonated with me or my sisters . . . they also play basketball and volleyball, and they kneel during the anthem, [is that] some people are a little, not concerned, but wondering if that's going to affect their scholarship opportunities because not all schools support peaceful protest like kneeling.

Such lack of support for her activism forced Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, to leave her university because her “faith in humanity” had dwindled and she was “burnt out for sure.” She moved abroad shortly after being threatened for legal action and was told to take her social media account down. She thus left her university without receiving her team jersey with her name and number on it. As she said, “I was really juiced to have that jersey hung up because it's my favorite number.” Nevertheless, she “wouldn't take my actions back.”

Micro/Individual Level. Given that athletes are positioned “in our own separate bubble” (Eleanor, biracial college basketball athlete), a lack of support for participants engaging in social justice activism also was evident at the micro/individual level, from teammates and/or from coaches. For example, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, shared,

two teammates kneeled with me and then over time, less people were kneeling for some reason. I do think that people talked to them, and it made them change their decision, but kneeling [after that] was very, I guess, lonely.

Jamie, an African American former gymnast now college cheerleader, also shed light on the lack of support from her teammates, specifically when political opinions collided: “[our gymnastics

team motto] was always about represent everyone, and I was like yeah, but at the same time we all aren't the same person...we're all individuals.” Specific to the rejuvenation of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in spring 2020, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, said that “some of [my teammates] were very quick to say, “this is terrible, what can I do? How can I get involved?” Some of them just didn't say anything.” She added, this “silence speaks wonders.” Relatedly, on a Zoom call with her team and coaches during Covid-19, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, provided an example of the lack of support from her White teammates.

Sometimes it's easy just to let things go because you don't want people to be uncomfortable. Just because you're making someone uncomfortable doesn't mean that you're trying to come at them or you're trying to say they're a bad person, but I think if you just let it go, I feel like you're just letting the status quo [persist]. America has a deep history of just saying “oh it's not that bad” or just forgetting about certain things. I feel like that was a big time for us to talk about race, but I think that's what why I was annoyed. I was the maddest or most upset and it didn't seem like others felt so upset, so it almost came off as if I was only one who was angry or annoyed or really advocating for it. I didn't really have any support . . . I looked like the one who is off the rails . . . yeah that's kind of how [my teammates] are, but they might have not thought about it as much at that time.

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, also shared how unsupported she felt from teammates when she engages in social justice activism.

With my teammates, it was a little bit tricky in the beginning. We did a vote before the games for us all to kneel during the Big 10 statement about human equality and it was

one vote really made a difference. We all locked arms and kneeled during the statement. . . you didn't have to stay down during the national anthem, but it was a little scary seeing people's true colors come out. These are the players that you're with every single day and these are some of the people that I trusted with my personal life and to know that they don't actually support Black Lives Matter or just complete human rights is a little scary at times.

Although some of Ruth's teammates "weren't hesitant at all" to talk about why they preferred not to kneel, others "turned [kneeling] more into a gossip moment, very behind your back talking about why it's bad or not wanting to talk about it at all." To hear "stuff like that with people you know" and teammates "being very passive aggressive" (Ruth, Afro-Indigenous college volleyball) about activism engagement can feel very "toxic" (Christina, African American college track and field athlete). When teammates choose not to support their Black teammates, it is

a little messed up because it made me take it personally from these players. I know it's not like "eff you, Nora," but I mean all of us sitting here [in support of Black Lives Matter], we'd appreciate a little bit of support. We're on a team with so many diverse individuals, it was sad to see them still not kneel or still not make a single post [or] still not do anything. I don't know. . . it was just towards the end, it was like "why aren't you supporting us?" And I think a lot of other players felt that way, but nobody speaks up (Nora, biracial college soccer athlete).

A lack of support by people in sport leadership positions, such as coaches or team captains, is palpable. As Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, affirmed,

I do think it's very easy for team leaders or team captains to overlook some of the situations that may be going on because one they don't know how to address it, two it doesn't bother or affect them, or three they feel like there's nothing they can do.

Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, noted,

in my experience coaches also appreciate what we do but . . . a coach, especially a division one coach at a power five conference. . . . That is your life, that is what you wake up and answer to every day, so I don't quite understand how they actually think of the work that we do and how important they think [activism engagement] is. What I think that coaches fail to understand is that when there are resources there that contribute to the overall person's well-being of athletes, you will see a performance improvement just naturally. When you know that when your athletes are leaving practice and they're not just going home and just wallowing in their depression and don't even know what to do with themselves. When we can support athletes more holistically, you'll see performance improvements, but [coaches] don't quite understand that. Let's say you don't see the performance improvements, it's still worth it to go engage in those resources and it's still important to have spaces like that. I think that, as athletes, once we see [that support] we're like okay yeah this is good, this makes me feel happy, this makes me feel better, I have a sense of community. The coaches don't quite understand how important that is. I don't think they understand that it really is beneficial to their agenda, even though that shouldn't be their reason for supporting [athletes engaging in social justice activism]. If you had to give them a reason, there you go. . . I think it's easy as a coach or as a leader in sports to see that your athletes are doing these great things to just sit back [and say] “wow look at them, this is so great, I'm leading a great school and my athletes are so engaged.”

I think a challenge for administrators and coaches and people is to also push themselves to engage more and to understand more [about social justice athlete activism].

Marilyn's (Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete) coach at her first university did "the bare minimum" in terms of supporting her activism engagement. Marilyn noted that coaches stayed silent around current sociopolitical events: "they were the traditional coaches. They're not going to be your friend, they're your coach, so you're never really going to talk to them about anything [related to social justice]."

A lack of support toward athletes' activism is evident at the meso/organizational level and at the micro/individual level. Examples of lack of support included participants' experiences with performative, empty support of their respective coaches and administrators. Institutions often capitalize athletes' activist efforts by claiming to be 'on trend' with socially progressive discourse and practice. At the micro/individual level, participants highlighted the lack of support from their White teammates and coaches. In most cases, when participants engaged in activism, their teammates and coaches either explicitly disagreed or refused to have any open dialogue about it.

Team Culture

When a sports team cultivates a "very highly competitive environment and very much a win at all costs, win no matter what" climate (Eleanor, biracial college basketball athlete), challenges around social justice activism ensue. Some athletes on high profile NCAA Division 1 teams are not only competing against athletes on opposing teams, but athletes on the same team are also "competing against each other" (Nora, biracial college soccer athlete). This culture of internal competition, compounded by external competition, cultivates a team climate that prioritizes sport performance above all else. As a result, this constructed team climate may

disempower athlete activists. For example, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete who has Type One diabetes, explained that at her first university she was

afraid to speak up and advocate for myself because the environment was just so intense and everything was just about sport and that was all that mattered, so anything that anybody else had going on, mentally, physically, that was going to threaten your participation in sport, there was no time for that so . . . diabetes also got grouped into that kind of stuff and that was not a good situation for me . . . that's a big reason why I left.

Team coaches largely dictate this kind of climate. Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional athlete, for example, described the team culture during her college sport career.

[Coach and I] didn't have the best relationship. That's just how the relationship always was. It was more basketball-oriented, so it wasn't really going to be anything else than that. So some people didn't really feel like they were supported when they didn't hear from the coaches speaking about [social justice].

Most college-level participants in this study compete on sport teams at historically White institutions; thus, as these women described in the activism and intersectional identities chapter, participants are forced to navigate racial dynamics within their respective sports teams pertaining to social justice activism. For example, Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, noted there was “only one African American coach among the [university] staff, whereas everyone else is White. Our head coach is White, jumps coach is White, and everyone else on the coach’s staff is White.” Engaging in social justice activism as Black women on majority White sports teams can result in marginalization. Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, believes that her activism engagement “affected the team dynamic for sure because it puts people in cliques . . . that's just how it happens when people disagree on things, which is not what I

want.” Jamie, an African American former gymnast now college cheerleader, provided an example of navigating racial dynamics and socialization in relation to activism:

You could tell on the team there were these cliques. In those clicks people had the same views all the time . . . and there was a lot of separate ones and then there was individual people like myself or another person that were just on our own. . . . I don't know, it was just weird. It never really started, up to maybe my junior year, because nothing started, really happening until then . . . especially with Trump being in office during that time. We did pride meets and then we would have a conversation about when Trump was trying to deport people. We would have conversations about that and just the things that I would hear when we weren't in the meeting . . . I was just like why now? You had all this time to say it in front of everyone if that's how you felt, but you wait until after the fact where it's going to hurt people more because you're saying it behind their backs . . . it was just always happening and I could say something, but everyone always took it the wrong way when I said something on the team in a meeting.

Navigating these racial dynamics on the gymnastics team made Jamie

think about standing up for what I think is right. You have values on what you think is right in a way for what you believe society should be. . . . And I feel like as a society we want to respect people and value everyone's experiences, but we don't actually do what we say. When I'm on my team, I can respect to you, but I can't always agree with what you have to say because I don't believe that it aligns with what I believe will be good for the betterment of society in a way. What I experienced was definitely a battle to get through a lot of the time.

Experiencing this sustained lack of support and regular collision of political opinions “pushed me to speak up to say, ‘I don't think that's right.’” Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, also described navigating racial dynamics as it relates to social justice activism.

I remember all of us Black girls [on the soccer team] were like ‘can we kneel during the national anthem? I mean you have five Black girls starting in the lineup, so we're all standing in the middle of the field like ‘why can't us and whoever else wants to kneel down?’ But our head coach at the time, who is also White, she said ‘it's either all of the team or none of the team.’ I disagree with this because the point of kneeling is it's your individual choice.

Participants highlight how a team’s culture impacts their confidence and ability to speak up for the people and issues they care about. When a culture of winning and sport performance is given precedence over the overall wellbeing of athletes, athletes face fundamental challenges related to social justice activism. Moreover, coaches implicitly contributed to participants’ marginalization by instigating social cliques. This is particularly poignant on a team in which Black women athletes are positioned as the minority.

Covid-19

In March 2020, Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic. The world ceased all everyday operations, including sport. All participants were thus unable to maximize their platform to engage in social justice activism without their daily sport practices, training, and/or competition. For example, the professional athletes competed in the *WNBA bubble* in Bradenton, Florida where players were isolated on the International Management Group campus for the season. College athletes’ seasons were either delayed, cancelled, or imbued with Covid-19 protocols, such as regular testing and social distancing. Nonetheless, participants found innovative ways to

engage in social justice activism virtually during this unprecedented time. For example, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, was part of the organizing committee that created a Zoom webinar centered on anti-Black racism. Even though these various virtual events “helped at least try to bond us,” the conversation “was awkward on Zoom so I don't think everyone gave their full answers” (Marilyn, Jamaican African American professional basketball athlete). Similarly, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, “did a conversation with the police” with her college-athlete-led campus group. This event “had such great potential, but because of Covid we had to do it on Zoom,” which “really took away a lot of the impact it could have had.” Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, was “in a bubble that [2020-2021] season playing all games in Florida, so it’s not like we could go out and do anything.” That said, Brenda and her teammates “really maximized our reach when we were only in one spot.” Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, explained the impact of Covid-19 on social justice activism more broadly.

I think a lot of people just go stir crazy honestly . . . you're locked up in your houses and you can't really meet or greet people or love on people. I think [Covid-19] allowed the police to be way more involved in things that they didn't necessarily need to be involved in and I just think it drove people crazy. Once it was time to start opening up the cities again, it turned into a lot of violence and a lot of police brutality . . . it's hard to see, it's hard to watch, but it's also really scary because we didn't know what was next for a lot of things. Now that things are starting to turn around and people are bringing awareness to [racism]. . . people are starting to understand people better and starting to be a little bit more less violent, but I do think the pandemic just drove people stir crazy [because] they just didn't have anything else to do.

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, noted that she “had to do everything on social media” because her parents “didn’t want to get sick” if she went to a Black Lives Matter protest. Similarly, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, described the implications of virtual life:

I was spiraling mentally. I tore my ACL, so I was out for that and then George Floyd died and Covid hit, so it was just a lot back-to-back. I didn't think I had been silent [about racial justice] for too long, but I didn't think I was being loud enough. I've always been loud and proud, and I've been going to protests since before George Floyd, but it wasn't something that I really felt deeply until 2020 when that happened. [My friends and I were] just talking about it and wanted to do more so I started with my Instagram. I don't have a big following, but I do have some people that do care about what I say.

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, shared “I wasn't on campus, so I was just at home in a bubble.” Accordingly, limited support was available for her in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Maybe there might have been an email or two and I just didn't see them. . . but I remember specifically one of my track coaches, he had called and said “I know these things are going on, I just want to know how you're doing”. . . so they definitely tried. I think some efforts were better than others.

Covid-19 presented a unique challenge for participants’ engagement in social justice activism. The implications of virtual life meant that participants had to engage in activism in new, creative, virtual ways. As such, the reach and impact of their activism may have suffered.

Personal Condemnation

In some cases, a lack of support toward participants' activism manifested as personal condemnation. For example, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, shared her experience of personal condemnation while kneeling during the U.S. national anthem in "one of the biggest gyms" in the Midwest.

Someone told me to "stand up," someone else said "stand up you piece of trash," and there were other murmurs and comments [that] I totally tuned out. I drowned it all out. My teammate kneeled as soon as they said that. Then the coach [of the opposing team] didn't say anything [to me after] though. That was kind of surprising because these are your people, these are the people that support you so why haven't you said anything personally? It was pretty surprising. I didn't want to make any reaction so I couldn't see who it was.

Ruth noted,

my heart dropped a little bit when that happened. I was more scared if anything for my safety because people like that . . . if they're able to just shout something like that then they're capable of other things as well, so I think just my safety as a Black woman in general and as a Black Afro-Indigenous woman, I think it's pretty scary.

Similarly, while participating in a strike for equal pay with her colleagues, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, also experienced personal condemnation.

During the strike we got flipped off. He was out there protesting [our] protest and I was like why are you protesting a protest? You don't have better things to do than come out here to protest the protests? But I thought if I can protest [then] he can too, and here's what it is, I'm just going to protest . . . I'm gonna mosey on and continue to protest. People were getting angry . . . we're not here for him, we're here to protest, you know

what I mean? So [his protest against our protest] took away from our cause, so let's just continue to fight for what we believe in. We're on the street and people were flipping us off and cursing us out and just not being nice to us.

A lack of support is not unfamiliar to Black women athletes who engage in social justice activism. Sometimes this appears in the form of personal condemnation against one's character or one's political voice or actions.

Labor

Engaging in social justice activism as a Black women athlete at the professional or collegiate level takes time, energy, resources, and planning. In other words, activism is labor – labor that is largely overlooked, undervalued, and most of the time, unpaid. Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, shared, “it takes a lot of time to dedicate yourself to [activism] while I’m still trying to figure myself out as a human being.” The open codes applied here are organizing and this bridge called my back.

Organizing

Participants were involved in creating university or community sponsored events or groups related to social justice. Examples of these are Black athlete organizations, social justice-centered webinars, or community fundraisers to generate interest about a cause close to participants' hearts or to create a space for fellow minoritized athletes to talk through their unique experiences. For example, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, noted,

here at [Division 3 Midwest institution], we want to start a Black student athlete group.

We are playing around with how we would even do that, so we are looking at what other

institutions and okay so what did they do there? And what was successful for them? And how can we use that here?

Likewise, Jamie, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, noted she and her teammates are “brainstorming things like ‘what could we do that we would enjoy’? It doesn't matter, we'll have fun no matter where we go, but what can we do that help the community?”

Similarly, Farrah, a Black college track and field athlete, was part of the organizing team in her local church group that were raising money for Black Lives Matter.

We started with bake sales . . . we did car washes, we did just any money [making] thing that children can do. Then we went in during a service one day to speak about it. I did most of the speaking beforehand, and then we went in front of the congregation again and spoke about [our] experiences and stuff like that.

Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, also shed light on the organizing behind social justice activism.

The campaign Say Her Name was originated by Kimberlé Crenshaw. The league worked with Breonna Taylor's mother prior to the [2020-2021] season . . . and she decided it was appropriate or accepted us wearing her name. Everyone wore her name on our jerseys . . . it was just a way to highlight her case and each game we highlighted a different woman that was like unjustifiably murdered by police.

Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete who serves on the executive board of a college-athlete group, organized a Zoom event with the local police department in the summer of 2020.

One major challenge was

getting people to come to our events sometimes. Although our engagement has been pretty good, it's still not excellent because we're busy and tired. Our events are usually in

the evenings because that's when we can count on enough people to be free to even go, but then it's at 7:30 at night so do people want to go back to campus? Do people want to stay on campus for another hour? Yes, they do want these things, people are asking for these events to be there, but [us athletes] are also just being spread so thin, so it's like do I take part of my rest time to do this thing for an hour and a half or do I just go home early? It's very easy to not engage with something even when you know you would enjoy it and you know would benefit you. . . so people do like what we do and they like engaging with it, but that's still a challenge.

Participants underscored the often-overlooked level of organizing involved in activism engagement, especially as athletes with busy schedules and limited resources. Such organizing takes time, thoughtfulness, collaboration, and energy.

This Bridge Called My Back

Black women athletes' backs are the bridges building alliances, allies, and awareness around social justice. They often carry the burden of doing the necessary work required to make life less difficult and safer for themselves and their communities. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, explained,

Something that has been on my mind lately is . . . it feels like as a Black woman, we're almost expected to be the ones to fill that role [of an activist], to make sure that these things are happening. That's not always the case, but I'm noticing it a little bit more . . . so it's almost like, I don't know if pressure is the right word, but it's like I hope that I'm doing as good of a job as what everybody thinks I'm supposed to be doing because I'm this Black woman . . . it's interesting and it's hard to describe. I think within the Black community itself, that is our role in a sense. It is something that I definitely have

observed and felt myself, but as far as giving a reason for why that is I feel like there definitely is a reason I just don't know if I can articulate it.

Eleanor provided an example of this expectation related to an online event she organized with her university-affiliated group for minoritized athletes that “two hundred plus student athletes” attended:

The main thing that we got out of the conversation with the police was that we wanted to treat that event as the start of us building a friendly rapport of sorts with the police department. But one thing that I remember was, I think an audience member asked, “what are your suggestions for how we can continue to fix this?” The police officer’s response was “oh, well it starts with events like this, it starts with you guys wanting to engage with us blah blah blah.” Well, okay we put this event on and we're here and I think that it is starting with us, so we kind of hoped to see some more from them after that and I don't really think that necessarily happened. They did come on campus and we had some marches for various things and the police were there leading the march and they were helping to control traffic and things like that, but I really do think that it should not be on groups like [college-athlete group] to do that work and to initiate those processes. I still think we should do it and I think that there's a space and [that] it's valuable, but I don't think that it's our sole responsibility to do things like that.

Relatedly, Marilyn, a Jamaican African American professional basketball athlete, created a text messaging group for fellow Black athletes during Covid when “some people didn't feel supported on their team:”

I reached out to other Black athletes that I was friends with and I made a Group Me with like all Black athletes [so] we started a Black student athlete group . . . and we worked

with it a lot. I think the group was more [a space to talk] after George Floyd to about our feelings stuff like that . . . then after having these conversations and seeing how a lot of people felt the same way or felt unsupported, we felt we needed to have a student athlete group for people coming up so if something like [George Floyd] does happen again, which unfortunately it probably will, maybe [future Black athletes] have some support that we didn't have and it'll be a better place. So we ended up making it a formal group which was hard because we were doing it remotely. We had maybe one event or two events we tried to do . . . it's just hard . . . we're still student athletes and we're trying and we want to do it, but there's only so much we can do, you know? But it ended up being an official group on campus under the athletic department.

Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, also gave an example demonstrating the labor of speaking up falling on the backs of Black women: “it wasn't until one of the Black female athletes on my team talked to our head coach about [racism] and then we had a talk which was I think good.” In her attempt to sustain her social justice activism, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, shared that she is

trying to figure out what is the next thing [whether that's] pride month or Asian American heritage month [or] what's happening currently. People are always moving on to the next so I'm trying balance how can I push it all together and just hold it up.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, noted the emotional labor involved when engaging in activism.

You don't react in anger. I react in love. . . . if someone's arguing with you, even if you know you're right, you don't argue back, you just say, ‘okay, I respect it.’ That's just us respecting differences of opinions . . . I can't change who you are, but I'm going to say,

‘this is how I feel’ [and] you say, ‘this is how you feel’ and even if I don't agree. . . . I’m still going to be here doing what I have to do, I hope that you don't interfere with anything that I’m doing, but I’m out here spreading love and positivity to people to hopefully change their mind . . . you know? You won't be able to change everyone.

Engaging in social justice activism entails labor that often is overlooked and undervalued by those who do not engage in activism. Activism engagement often falls on the backs of Black women athletes since no one else within the sport context is willing to carry that weight. As a result, social justice activism presents unique challenges for Black women athletes given that activism is largely rooted in their lived experiences of systemic, intersectional oppression with the goal of social liberation. As Black sportswomen, participants confronted challenges as they engage in social justice activism – challenges that are not apparent for their male and non-Black peers. Activism engagement also requires pragmatic organizing, collaboratively and/or individually, to achieve set goals. Being an activist thus comes with challenges. For example, activism engagement can be exhausting, particularly for Black women athletes who concurrently experience, navigate, and fight racism. For example, Marilyn, a Jamaica-African American professional basketball athlete, noted “burn out” is common when engaging in social justice activism since “trying to tell your story . . . is definitely an emotional story most of the time.” Consequently, one can “feel exhausted afterwards” (Ruth, Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete).

Discussion of Challenges

The Black Lives Matter movement characterized the summer of 2020 in the United States following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Hill et al., 2020). Nationwide, peaceful protests centered the history and impact of systemic racism towards

the Black community and demanded social and political reform. Accordingly, many organizations, and business, including universities, felt the need to enter the national conversation when anti-Black racism discourse was trending. By posting statements on their websites and/or social media platforms in support of protecting Black lives for fear of losing their credibility within society, institutions seeming solidified their positions as allies. However, as participants articulated, such organizations and institutions largely contribute to and benefit from the oppression of Black people (e.g., Omi & Winant, 2015); they were more concerned about protecting the image and brand of the university than they were about protecting the lives and wellbeing of the athletes who contribute to the university's image and brand (e.g., Cooper et al., 2020; Ezell, 2021; Fountain, 2022). As participants noted, often university support for racial justice was performative given the lack of demonstratable evidence to suggest otherwise.

Performative White allyship – defined as “a form of inauthentic support” (Kutlaca & Radke, 2022, p. 3) through the practice of *empty gestures* (Blair, 2021) – is dangerous and detrimental to making genuine social change (Hesford, 2021). Activism extends beyond online presence and posting, (Phillips, 2020): the experiences and insights of some college-level participants are consistent with scholarship suggesting that universities claim to support their minoritized athletes who chose to engage in social justice activism, but do not actually provide the necessary support, including resources, allyship, and emotional support (e.g., Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022; Kaufman, 2008; McCoy, 2022). In other words, institutions do not do what they purport to do, which is to protect and support their athletes. This common practice of not supporting athletes who are engaging in activism perpetuates the popular idea that athlete activism is not normal nor needed. It also reinforces the misconception that Black women athletes do not have a voice, that they should ‘just stick to sports.’ This misconception is rooted

in the idea that Black women athletes have no right to speak up against those with more power. Moreover, that some participants were fearful of the repercussions of their activism engagement underscores what and who is prioritized within higher education. Winning and sport performance is paramount at many NCAA institutions; therefore, athlete activism engagement by Black women athletes is viewed as subversive by institutions, athletic departments, team leaders, teammates, and the wider public.

Because activism engagement is considered disruptive and unnecessary in and outside of sport circles, it is no surprise that teammates, coaches, and fans did not actively support participants' activism. Research points to the lack of support by White women toward their Black colleagues in higher education (e.g., Showunmi, 2023). Activism engagement often entails taking risks and breaking rules, including acknowledging one's privilege and using it to protect those afforded less privilege. As such, as outsider within (Collins, 2009), the fear of losing one's privilege, or the unwillingness to understand the depths of systemic oppression, inhibited participants' teammates and coaches' ability to support their social justice activism. What's more, race and racism are socially stigmatized (e.g., Howarth, 2006; Lenhardt, 2004). In a color-blind society (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), to talk about race and racism is to acknowledge its existence and to face the complex realities of how they operate. This can be deeply uncomfortable for individuals who never had to think about their race since whiteness is unmarked in U.S. society (Frankenberg, 2008). Accordingly, some participants were forced to take matters into their own hands to create safe spaces for Black athletes to talk about anti-Black racism, police brutality, and social (in)justice. This furthers the cultural expectations on Black women to address racism. That is, in the aftermath of the murder of unarmed Black Americans, including Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, by armed law enforcement, participants' White teammates and coaches were

unwilling, or perhaps not ready, to talk openly and honestly about the realities of systemic racism, thereby exacerbating Black sportswomen's feelings of isolation when engaging in social justice activism. This is particularly evident for participants who attend historically White institutions (Jolly & Chepyator-Thomson, 2022).

In addition, nobody is always privileged or always oppressed (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1983). As outsiders within, these Black women athletes on majority White teams who are engaging in social justice activism were forced to navigate the racial dynamics of their team. This navigation speaks to the reality that those who don't identify as Black Women are not subjected to systemic oppression, and therefore do not feel inclined to engage in activism. In this context, participants are effectively rendered less powerful than their White peers. Their voices pertaining to social justice activism, compounded by social attitudes of sport as an apolitical utopian, often are dismissed. That said, by using their privileged positions in sport, these Black women athletes talk back to dominant social attitudes and practices by engaging in various forms of activism.

Covid-19 was a challenge for these Black sportswomen trying to spread the fundamental messages of their social justice activism. Arguably, meaningful communication – whether symbolic or verbal – is key for activism engagement to be realized. During this time, some participants had to find innovative ways to ensure activism maintenance through virtual means. For example, hosting a Zoom webinar focusing on racial justice was not easy, especially given the 'heaviness' of such topics. As such, Covid-19 represented a challenge for participants; human connection is integral to social justice activism. That is, social justice activism may not be fully achieved without in-person interaction. That's not to say activism engagement is not valid or impactful in virtual spaces; if anything, the pandemic proved participants could adapt to life

under such circumstances and continue their activism (e.g., Elfman, 2021). It is to say, however, that effective activism engagement can best materialize when individuals are physically in a room/space together to discuss social justice wherein verbal and non-verbal communication is more easily achieved.

Although there is growing scholarship focused on the organizational efforts of athletes related to social justice (e.g., Gilbert, 2016; Yan et al., 2018), this study is one of the first to highlight the labor Black women athletes espouse when engaging in social justice activism. As previously noted, activism engagement is not an easy endeavor, not least in the confines of institutions that uphold the social oppression of the people at the center of social justice activism. Participants provided a window into the behind-the-scenes social practices and common strategies involved in activism engagement. The emotional labor relating to social justice activism is largely overlooked and the physical labor is undervalued, particularly considering the already time-constrained schedules of professional and college athletes.

The cultural assumption that Black women will willingly take on the burden of fighting for racial justice is indicative of the history of Black women's active roles in leading social justice movements (Barnett, 1993; Collins, 2009). That's said, not all Black women athletes choose to engage in activism and not all activists are Black women athletes (Leppard, 2022). Those who *do* choose to engage in activism are forced to deal with unique challenges on account of promoting social justice as outlined by participants. This, in turn, positions them further as outsiders within (Collins, 2009). More importantly, though, it facilitates their sociopolitical consciousness development in driving change.

Nonetheless, as Black women athletes, participants possess power in choosing what is perceived as right; participants have a choice to not engage in social justice activism. Given the

inevitable backlash and potential repercussions, the easier and less risk-taking choice would be to *not* engage in social justice activism, to not disrupt the status quo, to not cause havoc and ruffle feathers, to not speak up when socialized to quiet down. However, participants choose the less clean, less easy option; they choose to engage in social justice activism despite the (un)known persistent obstacles because they believe it is the right thing to do, thereby cementing their role and power as agents of change.

CHAPTER VII. CULTIVATING A BETTER FUTURE

In this chapter, I discuss the theme cultivating a better future. There are “such inequities” (Morgan, biracial basketball and track and field college athlete) in the U.S. that significant and sustainable “change is needed to push the needle forward” (Eleanor, biracial college basketball athlete). Participants revealed that because “history repeats itself” (Ruth, Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete), their activism principally involves critiquing the status quo and taking direct, intentional action to creating a better future. In other words, the state of U.S. society is, from participants’ perspectives, in need of meaningful, sustainable change. Participants choose to engage in activism so that society is in a better state than when they entered it. As Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, put it, activism “is what I’m doing, this is why I’m doing this, this is something I feel strongly about and I’m doing this for my kids’ future, for my grandkids’ future.” The axial codes applied are dismantling oppressive systems and resist and persist.

Dismantling Oppressive Systems

Participants highlighted the various ways through which oppressive systems can be dismantled since they have “the lived experience [of being a Black woman] in the United States” (Morgan, biracial college basketball and track and field athlete). Cultivating a better future in the context of social justice activism means changing society from what is to what should or can be. Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, pointed out that change “probably won’t happen in my lifetime, so there’s always going to be someone to fight for.” Such change-making is not comfortable . . . it can feel good, or it can feel bad, happy, or sad. It's just an uncomfortable feeling or taking a step doing something that other people may not be

brave enough to do. . . so it could be a variety, it's mixed emotions. (Penelope, Black college figure skater)

The open codes applied here are active involvement in protests, taking action, and intentionality.

Active Involvement in Protests

Participants demonstrated their version of cultivating a better future by active involvement in peaceful protests in and beyond sport contexts. Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, for example, chose to kneel during the U.S. national anthem during the 2021-2022 season:

I didn't know what [kneeling] meant or what it was, but I knew I want[ed] to do it. When I kneel during the anthem . . . I hope people don't think that I'm kneeling just for Black Lives Matter. . . I'm hoping that people understand that I'm kneeling for human rights in general and I think that everyone needs to be equal. I want people to see why I'm doing it . . . I want people to get angry and upset with me. I want people to get happy that I'm doing something. A lot of people think that kneeling is against the military and veterans, but it's more about bringing awareness, bringing attention to [social injustice]; it's not kneeling against something, it's kneeling with a cause.

Ruth noted that when she is kneeling, which “hurts my knee for a long time,” she is “just looking down, not really looking around and trying to pay attention. I just pay my respects in general.”

As “the only one on my team” who kneeled, Ruth tried to

teach other people not to be disrespectful during the anthem . . . not being on the phone, not talking, just because people they have a story with their backgrounds, so I think being respectful of all of us is important.

Active involvement in protests outside of sport contexts also were discussed by participants. For example, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, “protested in downtown [major Midwest city] to make Juneteenth a holiday to be seen and just to try to raise awareness to everything that social injustice is that has happened.” Jenna participated in a union strike over low wages at the public school where she worked because

there are teachers that have been there for years that had been treated wrong. A lot of the public didn't know, so we were protesting and there were people protesting our protest, so we had all these facts on a board saying all these things that were promised to the teachers that they didn't get, so at the end of day we're going to fight for it because this is what you said you were going to do, now do it.

Participation in peaceful Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 were a commonality among participants. Participating in these protests are what some participants believe to be one way to dismantle existing oppressive systems, in this case systemic racism, to cultivate a better future. Moreover, participants' sport seasons came to a sudden halt in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The time and energy to be actively involved in peaceful protests was thus available. For Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, attending a Black Lives Matter protest was her “first big moment of activism.”

I went to my first Black Lives Matter protest in June 2020. I think that was one of the first times I realized what my passions were. I've never been keen to hear someone speak, the keynote speaker, my ADHD is through the roof, but I guess what clicked was when people I hadn't even heard of before in my city who are activists, when I heard them get up there and talk about their experiences while also talking about facts behind police brutality and what's going on in the rest of the police department. Hearing these people

talk and hearing how they engaged with an audience and hearing how, in a way, it didn't even sound like a plea or a begging. . . it was almost as if something needs to be done. . . something needs to be done. Them using their voice to get everyone on the same page and bring everyone together right there, that was like a moment of. . . it was like I was looking at Beyoncé. I was in awe. . . it took that moment for me to realize what I've always kind of been battling in my head. I want to get more involved in [activism], and now I gotta get involved so that was one of the main moments.

Importantly, for Christina, such protest involvement

cemented what I really wanted to do in my career. So much was going on and this is another time where businesses, money, brand, and image are being put before human lives, so that cemented what I wanted to do in the world [which is] protect human lives.

Similarly, Penelope, a Black college figure skater, noted active involvement in a Black Lives Matter protest “was one of the most empowering moments of my life. . . it sends you chills.”

Penelope attended the protest

back home in [Midwest state] around my birthday. I chose to go to the protest. I thought that was more important than seeing [friends and family] for my birthday. I could see them any other time. That was one thing that I've never experienced that I thought I would feel. . . I wanted to do that, you know what I mean? I was in [major Midwest city] when the George Floyd situation happened, and it was me and my younger cousin. So me and her both went and walked the streets for a long time, maybe sixty miles or something. We walked in March with the huge group of people and protest for George Floyd. I feel like marches and protests [are] something you would hear about in a history book, you know I mean? Before that situation happened, I didn't feel like it was a pressing thing that

we see would see all the time. So to be able to be a part of that really meant a lot to me and supporting a cause that I stood for. Before the George Floyd situation happened, obviously racism is still a thing, but everybody wasn't on it or they weren't aware, so in that moment it just felt like the perfect opportunity to be able to speak up for something that was wrong.

The protest Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, attended in 2020 at the height of Black Lives Matter movement following George Floyd's murder was a different experience.

That one ended up being that gas mask one. It was the first really bad one and we had a cop who started hitting and throwing gas and stuff in people's faces right away. I was in it for a little bit and the girl that I came with, she was very nervous, and wanted me to leave with her because we lived down the block so we were just gonna walk home and she wanted me to leave it there, but I was like no, this is such a big part of history. I genuinely feel like I will be okay...I just felt like I needed to stay...I want to stay here, this was so big to me just because I think we've only seen these major disastrous protests online and so to see it happening right in front of me, [it was] crazy. It was just a worldly in-person experience I have never had before because the one [years before] was not like that at all.

Black Lives Matter protests took place on university campuses, as well. For example, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, participated in a peaceful march at her university that was organized by the athletes of color group of which she is an executive member.

One march that we did in spring last year with the football team . . . we just wanted to lead something and have our voices heard and be seen in the community. We coordinated with police officers and they planned out the route that they were going to lead...and

made sure that it was safe for us to walk . . . and that was maybe a forty-five minute or so march that we did.

Participants revealed that participating in such peaceful protests can be emotionally, psychologically, and physically draining, so much so that “tuning out and drowning all the noise and comments all out” is necessary (Ruth, Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete). Since, “each protest is different” (Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete), dismantling oppressive systems is not an easy undertaking. In some cases, involvement in Black Lives Matter protests was a traumatic and frightening experience. For example, Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, said that the protest

was around a time where [local and state government] had instilled a curfew because there was a lot of riots going on in the downtown area. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the police were there early and they pretty much ambushed us and tear gassed everyone who was there. . . it could have been worse. No one was killed, no one was at least majorly critically injured, but it was the first time I was panicked like that. . . it was a scary experience. It wasn't my first run in with the law, but at that moment I feared for my life just because of tension . . . just because I didn't know if I was going to meet someone who hated what was going on and hated me. I mean they didn't even know me but could've just taken their anger out on me just because they could, because in their eyes I was breaking the law. All of those thoughts are running through my head that wouldn't usually run to my head. . . you can't really know until it directly affects you in that moment and so after that I said to myself ‘this is something I've got to learn more about. . . I need to immerse myself in this because if it could happen to me, it could happen to anybody who looks like me.

Nora, a biracial soccer college athlete, who “got more involved on a serious level with [Black Lives matter] protests as [she] got older,” shared a similar experience at a Black Lives Matter protest in June 2020.

The one that I did really early on where they started gassing and doing all . . . I have live [footage] on my Instagram of it in three different live clips . . . basically the police coming on both sides. In 2015 in [major west coast city], I remember my friend gave us a ride out dropped us off around the block and then we took the train back and we came with signs. I was blessed to be a part of it, but I watched a video of me and I’m such a kid, you don’t say no justice, no peace with a smile on your face. [My friends and I] were helping people who were bleeding and we saw a girl who got hit in the face. So [we were] mainly just checking and making sure that people were okay ‘cause yeah there are some people who were extremely hurt, but I mean it’s just like that . . . cops are going crazy, they were going crazy, so yeah I was very scared. So looking back on it, I’m happy I got to experience [protest involvement]. I mean it was just one of my first experiences of actually being in the field, I guess you could call it, in the middle of it all and fortunately it wasn’t extreme, but yeah it was just fun to get involved.

For Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, the experience was somber.

At one protest we went to, it was more of a walk and there was more anger and sadness because . . . we kneeled for nine minutes or something, however long George Floyd was on the ground and couldn’t breathe. I think that was very emotional and sad to think of, actually knowing how long and being on one knee or whatever and just being there and

you're not even being pressed in the ground like that. . . it's hard to do that for that long so I think that's where there were some sadness and anger.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, shed light on the physical and mental demands of protest involvement.

The hard part is that we've walked for a long time so physical endurance, and just being out there, you know I mean? It's a mental thing of being an athlete and saying "okay, I'm tired, but why am I doing this? I'm doing this so that we can succeed and win."

Penelope's, (a Black college figure skater) experience in Black Lives Matter protest stands in contrast to Nora's and Christina's:

I didn't know what to expect, but I just did it and it happened to turn out great. The police were guiding. . . I don't know, it was something different about that protest compared to other protests because with those other protests you saw people getting gas and things like that and the police brutality and everything like that. I feel like I was meant to be there and to stay safe, [although] I don't know if I went to another protest that it would be the same thing.

Protests are public events attended by many people "of different races" (Christina, African American track and field college athlete) coming together to ensure "our world will be okay" (Morgan, biracial college basketball and track and field athlete). As a result, participants evidenced a collective sense of hope and unity. As Penelope, a Black college figure skater, affirmed, "you're just there for a bigger cause and to see how many people turned out, whether they're Black, White, whatever, it doesn't really matter. We are all standing up for humanity and that was powerful." Christina, an African American track and field college athlete, shared similar insights:

It was not just people of color, it was everyone [at the Black Lives Matter protest]. I even got up in front of the people and told my story about losing a family member to police violence. . . and I've never considered myself a public speaker, I hate speaking to big crowds, but having everyone attentively listening, wanting to hear my story, wanting to hear authentically me. . . the bravery [and] the countless compliments from strangers that I got from people who didn't even know me, the wave of love that I felt from a community who felt the exact same way that I felt. For the first time, it was more than people who looked like me and that right there was a true moment of unity. . . that was community. For the first time I felt a part of [community with] these are people I hadn't known at all, but I feel like I've known for ages.

Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, also reflected on a Black Lives Matter protest in her local city where “there were more than just Black people there and it's just good to see that people that aren't Black are also taking a stand and agree that this is wrong and what is going on is wrong.” This “feeling of hope” was paramount for Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, with regards to continuing to fight for what she believes is right.

I can't fathom a description for the first time [I felt this]. I didn't see a difference . . . there was obvious difference in skin tones and cultural backgrounds, but for the first time we were all there for the same thing. It was like each and every one of us, we may not have understood or exactly relate to the person speaking or the person to the left and to the right of us, but we gained insight. I think being in a space where you're constantly learning, you can feel everyone learning, learning more and more through real life experiences, not academia, not education, not classroom, real life experience. . . . It's a different feeling. . . . It's like being in your favorite class, being in the class that you

actually enjoy in that you feel like you don't have to do it, you want to do it. . . . That's the feeling I love about being in class is just getting that satisfying feeling [of] learning something that actually is relevant, so it was a nice feeling. I'm not going to compare it to being in Hawaii, but. . . it is a moment of hope, that's really what it was . . . a feeling that hope just makes me feel all warm inside so that's the best way to describe it. . . Just feeling warm inside and watching everyone come together and for the first time, at least in my life, everyone is authentically them. . . . No one's portraying this person, no one is visibly uncomfortable, no one is at least without reason, no one is scared, shy, don't want to speak up. People are hearing and listening there in the moment. . . . They are in the moment.

Relatedly, Marilyn, a Jamaican-African American professional basketball athlete, described one Black Lives Matter protest was

not sad, but more positive in a weird way. I think it might have been because it's where we went, it wasn't like a predominantly Black space, it was Black and White, and other people being there and you feel like a community [because] people care about it.

Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, noted that marching in a peaceful protest for Black Lives Matter was

awesome in terms of it wasn't just people that looked like me that marched, you know? Looking around and then even when they gave speeches, they addressed the people that didn't look like me and thanked them, and I think that was one of those things that is inspiring. It was just such a taken back moment to see that these are people who don't look like me and who can go around [with] these privileges that I don't have and they can act like it doesn't exist and it doesn't matter, but they see a problem and they're willing to

hold themselves accountable and hold the people in their community accountable. I think that's so beautiful. I was very touched and very moved by the people that were fighting who didn't look like me. They stepped to the front to ensure that the protesters that looked like me did not get hurt and that's saying something, that's even acknowledging that that in itself is a problem you know what I mean? I felt speechless and you're just happy and you're filled with . . . just overjoyed and you find yourself hugging people . . . it was one of those things . . . it's a beautiful experience . . . it's a humbling experience because you find out that not all people are evil or mean or malicious. . . that there really are good people out there and that's why we do what we do.

In this way, White allyship matters in relation to dismantling oppressive systems. As Jenna further explicated,

even if I only see one ally that doesn't look like me out there [protesting], it is a win because this means that they see the problem too and it's not just us taking it personal or maybe exaggerating or making a big deal. They see the problem too and they're willing to step outside of themselves, step outside sometimes the way that they've been brought up and voice their opinions and say 'hey this isn't right.' I think that is the most beautiful thing . . . being a human that's what it's about.

Participants detailed their rich experiences engaging in activism through active involvement in protests concerned with equal pay and with Black Lives Matter. Some experiences were anxiety-inducing on account of police actions, while others inspired hope. Nonetheless, active involvement in protests is one primary way through which participants attempted to dismantle oppressive systems so as to cultivate a better future.

Taking Action

Dismantling oppressive systems to cultivate a better future often involves taking action in support of what one believes is right or against what is wrong. This differs from active involvement in protests because it is everyday action; the protest involvement described by participants was one or two days. Taking action refers to actions taken daily to dismantle oppressive systems. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, simply put it, “we need action at every level.” Participants articulated that dismantling oppressive systems requires walking the walk, not just talking the talk to ensure “people can see and know what you’re fighting for” (Brenda, Black professional basketball athlete). In other words, “leading by example” (Ruth, Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete) means taking direct action against hegemonic forces because doing something is better than doing nothing. As Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, said,

if enough good people don't do anything, they're just as bad as the bad people, you know what I mean? I feel like you can't complain if you do nothing . . . why are you complaining? You didn't go out and protest. You didn't allocate funds to this cause. Why are you complaining? What did you do? What else are you doing? Are you making phone calls on the on the phone line? Are you actually out there protesting? Are you raising funds for this, you know what I mean? Are you making use of your social media platforms to get that information out? It's one of those things that you can say all these words, but where's your action to backup those words? I can say everything under the sun. . . but action, people often follow actions. So you can say that, but you didn't do anything about it, so why should I do anything if you didn't do anything. I did it, I said this, so come on let's go, let's get it done stuff. That's activism.

Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, affirmed,

We have always wanted to do [activism], but now that we're also an athlete with a platform, and a lot of us are pretty successful athletes that know people are watching. . . now I don't feel like I'm just talking the talk, I feel like I'm actually doing something.

For Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, engaging in community service is her version of taking action as she is “able to bring other people there and embody what it's like to be a true leader.”

I just was talking to our [team] staff and they were like, ‘what are some of the things you'd like to do?’ and I was like, ‘I like to do community service, I like to serve.’

[University] is really big on service, so I just got put into that role [as community service leader] which wasn't an issue for me because that's what I like to do. I would just come up with different ideas that we could do to serve our community.

Relatedly, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, discussed her role as a camp counselor.

This summer I'm working on a diversity and inclusion board as a camp counselor for a campus that's predominantly White. The camp wants to diversify and have new younger members. [The manager] said to me in my interview, ‘I want camp to look like the real world,’ and so I said, ‘you do that by having the camp counselors that look like these kids because then that way they feel accepted.’

Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, “did some calls and writing letters to those officials in [Midwest U.S. state]” following the murder of Breonna Taylor in March 2020. Jamie, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, illustrated taking action by “decorating everything rainbow . . . mostly for LGBTQ+ community” during a team meet. Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete,

did a lot of volunteering. I grew up doing a lot of volunteering through my school and then also into high school. I actually did a lot now that I think about it . . . so I grew up working in schools and I've worked in elderly homes. . . . And the homeless, that's another one. I used to make goody bags and they would have cheerios and granola bar and water and some pieces of candy and I would drive around this park that we had where it was known for having homeless people stay there and I would just pass them out. . . . I got a kick out of it. I drove past one I would put out my window I was like 'please let me help you,' so yeah it just escalated as I aged a little bit more.

As such, taking action is aimed at dismantling oppressive systems for many participants. As Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, said,

I'm going to advocate if there's a cause and this is the elder sibling in me . . . anything that I feel like anybody has been mistreated and their basic human rights have been violated, I am all for the cause, I will support, I will get a board and write something on it and march with you.

Echoing Jenna, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, suggested,

I feel you can't lead if you're just sitting there thinking about the best way to do it and how am I going to make sure that I'm making everybody happy. You're not going to do that, so just do what you know is a good decision and stick with it.

In taking action, some participants conceive of themselves as leaders given their experiences in sport and activism engagement. For instance, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, who chose to kneel during the national anthem during the 2021-2022 season, noted that she has "found ways that I can be a leader myself [by] being passionate about social

justice. . . I think that's good enough.” Similarly, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, stated,

I think I’m a leader naturally in life. I’m not going to always follow the crowd, I’m not going to do something just because you said do it...I’m going to lead, and sometimes the best leaders are listeners, so you have to be able to listen to lead.

Relatedly, understanding the value of being an ally as it relates to activism is a key component of being a good activist who seeks to cultivate a better future. For example, Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, noted she feels

a leader in some areas that I have experienced with my racial identity, being a Type one diabetic, with mental health, so I feel like I can lead in those areas. But I don't identify as or in the LGBTQ+ spaces. I don't feel necessarily comfortable or qualified to lead in those areas, but I do want to be a follower so what that looks like is just understanding the basic notions of their most important issues as well as I can. I think people should lead in how you feel comfortable and qualified to do so, and if you don't feel comfortable or qualified to lead in a certain area then just be a good follower and that is enough. . . some people don't have to be leading everywhere [and] doing everything. . . that's not how life works.

Participants described their efforts to dismantle oppressive systems by taking action in their everyday lives as Black sportswomen. Such actions included local community service, leadership roles at sport camps, volunteering, contacting local government following the murder of Breonna Taylor, showing allyship with fellow minoritized groups, and demonstrating leadership skills.

Intentionality

In “showing what you support and who you support and why you support them” (Nora, biracial college soccer player), being purposeful is important in the context of cultivating a better future. Introspectively, Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, suggested “we have to just be honest with ourselves and who we want to be as adults, so you have to just look in the mirror and be like ‘I’m wrong today, I’m right today.’” In a similar vein, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete who values “shelter, food, water . . . just basic things that we need to live, that people should not be denied,” noted “would I be okay with saying I didn’t do anything, or would I be okay for saying ‘yeah I lost my scholarship, but I lost it for a good reason and this is what I did?’” These questions guide participants in their activism.

Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, prioritizes activism engagement because it

brings a lot of joy. I am a giver; I’d rather give than receive. . . . It just makes me feel good knowing that I can help somebody else feel good or feel better who are less fortunate than me. If I can have it, you can too. . . showing especially kids that there's light at the end of the tunnel and you just got to work for whatever it is that you want. I believe that anybody can do anything, and everybody's just put on different journeys and different paths to do them. Little do people know that you really bring these people joy by coming and doing what you're doing, and I think that's the biggest part for me is seeing how happy they are, bringing the joy by coming by or whatever it is that I’m doing.

Similarly, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, loves activism engagement as she believes she is “finding herself.” By way of finding herself, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, was intentional with whom she socializes.

I cut ties with people who weren't meeting my needs because there was a lot of people from my hometown to still have. . . I want to say covert racists basically which is a really strong word, but I think it's what it needs to be used.

Intentionality is also about knowing one's values and understanding the multiplicity of activism engagement is key to dismantling oppressive systems. As Eleanor, a biracial college basketball athlete, explained,

I feel like people put pressure on themselves especially when it comes to activism to being a visible activist. I think people put a lot of pressure on themselves to be visible and to be this known leader. . . that is not necessary at all and it's not helpful. If the goal of activism is to be seen and visible, that should not be anybody's goal. If anything, people that do well with those kinds of roles of being seen and being out there, the goal is to garner attention and to actually get things done, but if people are sitting saying "man, no one has seen me do these things, what can I do?" No, it's not about if anybody sees, it's about how you actually living your life, how are you engaging with the people that you know and things like that.

Penelope, a Black college figure skater, is intentional with her consumer practices: "when it comes to environment, I more so buy products I think are environmentally friendly."

Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, is purposeful with the form her activism.

I do write Black Lives Matter on my wrist just with a big sharpie. I do it all myself [and] sometimes I forget to do before the game, so I do during warm up to bring attention to [racial injustice] because that's what I'm most aware of and most known for, but I do want to find other ways to also navigate how else I can be an activist. I just have my tiny little wrist, so how can I incorporate it on the shoes? You can't see it, so I guess that's the

time when I think about what's next, what can I do next so . . . I definitely want to do something cool, at least maybe on my headband, that'd be nice. Then other times I would write on a ribbon or for breast cancer awareness month. I wrote a pink little ribbon on.

Participants revealed that at the core of cultivating a better future is dismantling oppressive systems. As such, active involvement in peaceful protests, taking action, and intentionality are all necessities if a better, brighter future is to be achieved.

Committed To the Cause

The axial code committed to the cause captures participants' consistency and continual fight against the status quo to cultivate a better future. In other words, their efforts toward social justice are never not done. The open codes applied here include usable past, bigger than sport, and empowering the next generation.

Usable Past

Participants discussed a retrospective reconstruction of the past to serve the needs of the present with respect to social justice (Brooks, 1981; Martyn, 2004). For example, Ruth, an Afro-Indigenous college volleyball athlete, noted that "it's a little scary because we're hoping that things are getting better but really, I wouldn't say it's not, but it's just in a different form."

Specific to U.S. history and the people who contributed to the decision-making characterizing that history, Morgan, a biracial college basketball and track and field athlete, explains,

understanding the history of why we are where we're at and how much work still needs to go forward and trying to make the spaces people occupy more, I don't want to say convenient for them, but more befitting to their experiences, and understanding that the people who are making our laws don't understand those experiences to the fullest extent.

So as far as social justice . . . there's not a one size that's for all of these people who have very different experiences from the people making our laws.

Having “the lived experience of the United States” as a Black woman and understanding “why we're in the situation we're in . . . because we decided to take people put on a boat and literally make them property” (Morgan, biracial college basketball and track and field athlete) serves as building block from which to engage in activism. Jenna, an African American former college basketball athlete, examined how the past informs her present relating to her activism.

My great grandmother passed away last year. She was 93. The things that she saw in her lifetime are things that I could not imagine. I cannot imagine going to a water fountain and someone telling me that I couldn't drink there . . . I cannot imagine having to go to a segregated school. . . . I cannot imagine not being able to go to college, you know what I mean? So, for us and the things that we were able to accomplish in our lifetime. . . . I was the first person in my family to graduate [with an] undergraduate degree and for her to see me play basketball, for her to see her great grandchildren be able to live out her wildest dreams is something that I hope to inspire and have whenever or if I ever do have children.

For Jenna, her activism is rooted in looking back to look forward.

I think that to properly bring children in the world, you have to hope that the world is better place . . . so I am definitely hopeful for the future just based off of where we come from, just hearing stories, [and] hanging out my grandmother. Her sisters and the age range from 65 to 67. . . they didn't get to go to college and stuff like that, they had to work and just the jobs that [African American women] work now . . . lawyers and stuff like that. Even me going from my second master's degree and just having a life and being

able to travel and do all these things that they didn't have you know. It's just a beautiful thing.

For Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, preventing the historic pattern of human loss is a fundamental motivation: “my main goal is to protect human lives because we've lost too many.”

Some participants revealed the knowledge learned from their family members' experiences, and from their own previous lived experiences about the apparent inescapability of oppressive systems that dictate the quality of life for many. In this case, the past serves as an important prerequisite to activism engagement. In knowing that has happened and why it happened, participants gain valuable knowledge of what needs fixed and how it can be fixed.

Activism Beyond Sport

The activism beyond sport reflects participants' belief that activism extends beyond their involvement in sport, that their participation in sport merely serves as a platform to engage activism. Brenda, a Black professional basketball athlete, for example, captured this sentiment stating, “we are playing in something bigger than ourselves, so [activism] was just kind of like this is much bigger than sport.” When discussing social justice, Morgan, a biracial basketball and track and field athlete, commented,

what can I do right now as a 21-year-old sitting in the middle of nowhere [in the Midwest] to try to combat these things and change minds so that ten, fifteen years down the road I'm not the only one in the boardroom?

Nora, a biracial college soccer player, highlighted,

the people and the plants and the environment, you're always gonna have something that people are always going to be mad about. People are going to be illegally spilling oil into

oceans or littering and that's forever gonna be an issue. We're not gonna get to a point where a person just stops, or everybody just stops littering. . . little things like that. For abortion, it feels like we're going backwards in time, so what does that say for the future you know what I mean? I just think it'll be a long way to go because socially we have a lot of different aspects that need helping.

Activism engagement extends beyond sport; therefore, participants acknowledge and accept that they may not live to see a better future “where everybody's treated fairly” (Jenna, African American college basketball athlete). For example, Nora said,

if [social justice] will be achieved, I think it will be many, many, many, many, many, many, many years. I do not think I will be alive nor my children nor my children's children. I just think we have such a far way to go.

Echoing Nora’s thoughts, Jenna, an African American former college basketball athlete, noted that social justice is

not gonna happen in my lifetime. I’m a millennial and my generation kind of kicked things off right? Hopefully we can live to see it, but that's why we do what we do. . . maybe I have kids one day and I want them to grow up in a world where they can be anything they want to be. If my daughter chooses to identify as my son, it should be okay to do that. If my child wants to go play in a predominantly White neighborhood on a team, she should have not have to fear for her life when she goes to hang out with her friends. Those are things that should be normalized, and hopefully we can get there one day. I have a niece who will be one in about two months, and I want for her life to be as unproblematic as possible. . . That is the goal, it is my hope. I’m optimistic that one day we'll get there, but I don't know that we'll get there in my lifetime.

That said, because social justice is “like a pendulum” (Marilyn, Jamaican African American professional basketball athlete), the small wins matter. For example, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, shared,

I do believe that social justice can be achieved in certain aspects and areas. So say an issue is solved over here in a HR Department or justice is achieved for that one person, then heck yeah, that is justice. That holds a precedent for the next person hopefully, but I think it's such a spider web of connections. is the water [in Flint, Michigan] going to be fixed anytime soon? Until that's fixed, I don't think social justice will ever be, you know what I mean? It sounds little, but it's been happening for so long and nothing's been done.

Christina, an African American college track and field athlete, discussed her future as a lawyer and her contributions to cultivating a better future.

Small changes are happening everywhere, and that right there, I guess, is enough for me to know that I'm doing the right thing. Forget the money, we'll worry about money when the money comes, but right now this is so much more satisfying than a dollar amount and you can't put a dollar on the human life at all, so I'm never going to try to do that. I do want to get paid for my services, not in a way that it involves a monetary donation. I want to get paid in crime rates going down. I want to get paid in immigration resources being available to those who really need it. I want to get paid in reform happening in prisons in our legal system. . . . That's the kind of payment I'm looking for. I can't speak for everybody else, but I want to go into these spaces knowing that there is going to be change made.

Participants revealed that, although they likely will not see the fruits of their labor, activism engagement extends beyond the realm of sport. For them, persisting in activism engagement serves a larger purpose in ensuring the future is better for the next generation.

Empowering the Next Generation

This code reflects participants' desire to empower the next generation through their social justice activism since the "youth are important right now in our search for change" (Nora, biracial college soccer athlete). A key component of participants' activism engagement is empowering the next generation to be "being a decent human" (Jenna, African American college basketball athlete). By leading by example, participants encourage their younger peers to emulate such behaviors to "make sure twenty, thirty years from now that this world will be okay" (Penelope, Black college figure skater). Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, suggested that the next generation

are our 'next up' honestly. Some of the stuff they've seen in our world is awful. There are some kids who have never known a world without a mask, and there are some kids who come into this world with police brutality, so now kids are terrified of the police. And it's not just kids . . . I'm terrified too, but I believe that they are our future. That sounds so cliché, but they are. So who do we want them to be, whether they are White, Black, Asian, whatever they identify as. Kids are like sponges . . . what they see is what they will do, so if somebody sees that the police is beating up somebody and they become a police officer, what do you think they're gonna do? They're gonna to do the same thing, so we have to teach them and show them that it is okay to love everybody, no matter what they look like, no matter what they identify.

Bonnie, continued to explain,

I believe that the people behind me, the children, everybody, that's the future. I think I have to bring them up and it takes a village to raise a family. You might not be my direct child, but I know that what I'm doing you are watching, so I believe that the way I walk is going to be the way that somebody else might want to walk one day and what am I showing you, who I am today is the person that I want to be next week next month, a year from now, so I just need to be consistent in that.

Marilyn, a Jamaican-American professional basketball athlete, was a member of an athlete group that aimed to cater to the next generation of athletes.

I think the biggest thing was we were excited because we felt like okay, I'm not going to really see the fruits of my labor with this group, but hopefully in five years from now they'll [reap the benefits of] our mission that was to have a safe space for Black student athletes to talk and make friends.

Farrah, a Black track and field college athlete, said she is "proud seeing younger people advocating for themselves." Similarly, Jenna, an African American college basketball athlete, commented on witnessing several former students engage in activism for better learning conditions at their inner-city public school.

These kids are seeing that activism can happen at any age and so therefore they're like 'no we don't have to stand for this.' I think that's so inspiring to watch kids or in grade school or high school to be able to be like 'we don't have to stand for this' and as long as I can do it peacefully, it's cool to see that because often people tell children this isn't a standard children's places, it has nothing to do with children. But it does, it's their future, it's how they're living right now, so why don't they have a voice. Watching them do that was super, super inspiring and great. Yes, this is why we do that.

Jenna continued to share her why empowering the next generation of athletes is important.

I'm so proud of my little brother . . . if he could have been out there [at the protest], he would have been out there and it's just about educating him and just telling him that you can be the change.

In the name of empowering the next generation, Jenna is

gonna get this [picture of her at a Juneteenth protest] blown up because it's a crowd picture and . . . I see myself within the crowd. I'm so going to get this blown up and then if I ever have kids or my nieces and nephews [and they'll ask] 'what's that?' and I'll say, 'I protested for Juneteenth, now Juneteenth is a holiday, I was part of that movement to make Juneteenth a holiday.' I feel like us realizing that we have more power than what we think we do is something that's so great.

For some participants, empowering the next generation means creating sport spaces for children that do not currently exist. For example, Nora, a biracial college soccer athlete, has been working with and coaching kids for several years.

My goal, which is kind of how I would turn to my athlete activist [identity], is I love coaching children and I love children in general. People call me a kid and it's perfect because I get along with them better. Anyways, I got big over here in the area in regard to coaching the kids. . . . Nobody wants to coach the three to seven year olds and I'm like 'I'll do it.' So for a few years, I worked summer camps and since then I've coached the youngest of the young and I love it. What I would like to do is get back involved with coaching in this area . . . I used to coach the kids with the parents with the Telsas, [but] I want to coach the kids whose parents aren't home all day, and this physical activity is the only thing they're getting other than school, so that's more my interest is the school the

prison pipeline. My main thing is helping children find better outlets. I genuinely think if me and my brother didn't have our physical outlets, we would be in completely different places. . . I'm bipolar and he's severely ADHD [and we] hated school. . . . If we didn't do our sports, how would we have paid for our college? So I want to help give other kids that opportunity because I know I would not have if my parents didn't throw me in. I've worked with some free all-day camps and stuff like that and I want to build something where kids can come play because that's all they have.

Bonnie, a Black college basketball athlete, who coaches youth basketball regularly believes

“giving and social justice go hand in hand,” explains she wants to

start my own . . . I don't know if it'll be an adoption agency, but I want to do something for kids . . . give them a safe space [and] obviously continuing to serve in any way that I can. That is my major goal, something for kids that gives them the safe space . . . better than a group home, better than an adoption agency [that is] less systematic.

Specific to her role as a coach, Bonnie noted,

I want my players to live out their dreams honestly. I want them to do whatever they want to do and I want to push them as hard as they want to be pushed, so you want to be a doctor? That's what I will push you to be while you play basketball, you know? I want to give everything that I have to these players, and I just want them to be their best selves at the end of the day and know that I'm right there for anything that they want to do, anything they want to do I'm going to support it.

Jamie, an African American former college gymnast now cheerleader, works at a youth summer camp every year. Jamie described activism engagement with respect to empowering the next generation.

[Kids] don't know any better, so you'd hear things sometimes. Some of the stories that I got from them at school, for example 'this girl does this' and I said, 'well, maybe if she does that you can stand up for her.' Teaching them, that gives me joy or when I'm at camp some people came here by themselves, they didn't come with teams, so [saying to the kids] 'how about you be that person to go over there and like make friends with them.' I follow the camp's account on Instagram, and they go to gymnastics camp all over the country to get people to sign up for camp and they always put pictures. These two girls are from two opposite ends of the country and they're friends. They're out at this meeting, they're hugging and so excited to see each other and go out to dinner and it was one of those things of, well she came to camp by herself, and she made this connection with this girl who came with the team and it's just very good to see. We're teaching these kids like no matter what, when you leave camp, you take that joy with you and you spread joy with other people and don't let people get other people down and if you see that, you can help them out. That's what we do which is fun. . . but also not everyone's going to be nice, and kind of, not push what I personally believe on other people, but in a way try to change some things that they may not think about sometimes, especially when I'm dealing with kids.

Participants discussed the importance of empowering the next generation of athletes and children who share similar social identities and experiences with participants. By demonstrating to their younger peers the need for and benefit of social justice activism, participants contribute to cultivating a better future for those they seek to empower. Moreover, participants acknowledge that, given the structural nature of the systems they seek to dismantle, they may never see or experience the positive outcomes of their efforts towards social justice. This reality

does not stop them, however, from choosing to engage in activism, thereby evidencing their commitment to the cause.

Discussion of Cultivating a Better Future

Cultivating a better future, one that is socially just and politically unprejudiced, is imperative to participants. Through their efforts to dismantle oppressive systems that disproportionately impact the communities from they come, participants demonstrate their deep commitment to ensuring the spaces they occupy, including sport, become better than when they found them. Social justice activism is, therefore, greater than sport; the risks, the impact, the goals supersede sport participation. This does not invalidate or minimize sport participation; it merely underscores the complex nuances of being a Black woman in sport and how sport participation can be used as a platform for Black women to project their voices and their power as agents of change. In so doing, participants empower the next generation of Black women athletes. In many ways, participants are looking back to look forward. By understanding what life was like for many Black people in the United States, and for Black women in particular, they acquire an understanding of what life is (to an extent, *still*) like for Black people, what it should be like, and how to bridge that gap between the past, present, and future. That is, participants attain knowledge and political consciousness (Collins, 2009) on what has been, what is, and what could be. Learning from the past in turn assisted in developing their activist identities.

Active involvements in peaceful protests are “public acts of resistance” for participants (Kluch, 2020, p. 583). These acts are symbolic activism, consisting of “symbolic actions [that] are highly visible and disruptive because they stand in direct opposition to what is demanded from their perpetrators within the given space and, subsequently, provoke critical reflection, discussion, debate, and positive change” (Cooper et al., 2019, p. 168). Such change may be

perceived as an unnecessary or, indeed, as a threat by some who are afforded privilege in society. In this way, participants are deeply cognizant of the sociopolitical climate in which they operate as Black women athletes engaging in activism (Edwards, 2017). Moreover, this study is unique in its findings related to the Black women athletes' experiences as they engage in protests and demand social justice. For instance, participants reflected on the ability to transfer physical and cognitive skills gained through sport participation – such as, physical stamina, teamwork, and psychological focus – to other social justice contexts. Above all, participants highlight their commitment to dismantling oppressive systems by actively participating in in-person, peaceful protests, in turn sometimes jeopardizing their safety.

Although not part of everyday life, protest involvement is an important everyday activity for some participants, despite pervading stigma around such activism engagement (Kluch, 2023). Peaceful protesting beyond the confines of sport – that is, marching a route or picketing on the streets in major or local city/neighborhood, typically with other people, to showcase solidarity and demand equity - is a not an uncommon feature of the Black athlete experience (e.g., Edwards, 2017; McCoy, 2022). Some participants “didn’t know what to expect” (Penelope, Black college figure skater) upon arriving at or getting involved in protests; the fact that they chose to get involved anyway, despite any anticipation or reservations, establishes participants’ power to cultivate a better future through their commitment to the cause. Change within society will not happen overnight; however, participants’ efforts and experiences in activism emphasize the value in and importance of change pertaining to social justice.

Participants were willing to risk their safety and (potentially) their sport and academic scholarships, social capital, and status on their team. This willingness to take risks for a better future points to the notion that politics are lived reality and inevitable component to Black

sportswomen's lives. That is, sport cannot be separated from the society in which it operates (Cooper et al., 2019); therefore, athletes cannot be separated from society, and thus the politics, in which they live, train, work, and compete. The results of this study support scholarship refuting the popular claim that sport and society should be and are divorced from one another, when, in reality, they are inextricably connected, especially for Black women (e.g., Leath & Chavous, 2017). To say that sport and politics should not mix in the context of social justice activism often comes from a position of privilege since with privilege, particularly racial privilege, comes with an ability to live life fear-and-care-free.

Specific to the energized Black Lives Matter movement in spring and summer 2020, some participants described the feeling of hope and unity among people at the protests. Seeing people who looked them, but more so who didn't look like them, at peaceful protests was significant. As such, White allyship is important in relation to social justice activism. Participants who attended these peaceful protests realized that those who are afforded more privilege and power than them (i.e., non-Black people) care about dismantling a system from which non-Black people largely benefit, while others endure. This matters, because dismantling systems to cultivate a better future should not lie solely on the shoulders of minoritized individuals. That said, the purpose and nature of White allyship as it relates to racial justice can be problematic (e.g., Howell, 2021; Kluch et al., 2022; Schweinbenz & Harrison, 2023). For example, White college athletes engaging in racial justice activism may inadvertently reinforce social hierarchy through failure to acknowledge the structural operationalization of racial privilege (Kluch et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the athletes in this study viewed allies at various Black Lives Matter protests as contributing to a collective sense of hope and unity toward social justice. As Ruth, an Afro-

Indigenous college volleyball athlete, pointed out, “as long I know that you're supporting me that's all that really matters.”

Notably, participants make the choice to engage in activism knowing that they, more than likely, will not see the fruits of their labor. That is, they may not see this better future. So what does that say about them? To empower the next generation in this context means to be seen engaging in activism (visibility), to serve as a support system for youth, and/or to educate youth through everyday interactions and conversations about behavior, specifically toward others. This stance was evidenced through these Black women athletes’ experiences as youth camp counselors and coaches, with some aiming for careers in youth sport. Participants’ actions and experiences in social justice activism align with this type of change through their willingness to be role models for, engage with, and support younger people as they navigate the complexities of being marginalized or racialized individuals. Consistent with feminist cultural studies, participants center their own lived experiences in sport and in wider society to assist in their, and others’ social liberation (Probyn, 2016).

In the context of activism for social justice, this study explores taking action as leadership. Participants argued that activism is not just talking about what change needs to occur for social justice to be accomplished, but also contributing to that change by “doing,” whatever that may be for each person given their access to resources, time, and support. In this case, taking action means to do something no one else is willing to do or has done. In putting ideas into practice, participants manifest social justice by embodying leadership. For example, making phone calls and writing letters to local and national officials urging justice be met following Breonna Taylor’s murder; volunteering to help the unhoused population; and working as diversity and inclusion officers at youth summer camps. As such, these Black women’s

leadership is heterogenous. Moreover, these Black women are challenging dominant ideals that leadership is a male preserve.

This study, therefore, demonstrates the power participants possess, share with others, and use to empower others. In many ways, participants embody the popular saying within feminist circles that ‘empowered women empower women.’ In this case, however, participants’ power goes beyond just empowering other women; their empowerment of others crosses racial, age, and gender identity boundaries. The idea of empowerment has been contested in recent years, specifically within the ideological framework of White feminism that privileges heteronormativity, sustains hegemonic social norms and practices under White patriarchy, and fundamentally upholds White supremacy (Zakaria, 2021). The question at hand is: who exactly is empowered and by what measure, and who, in turn, is rendered with less power or disempowered? (e.g., Arat, 2011). That said, these Black women athletes assert their agency in using their experiences with discrimination to work toward a better society. For example, participants’ activism engagement is rooted in their desire to be role models (Kluch, 2022) and ensure the next generation of Black athletes are heard and protected. They fundamentally seek to cultivate a better future, a future wherein safe spaces exist for Black athletes and the wider Black community to share their concerns and vulnerabilities, as well as to speak up about the discrimination they are forced to confront without fear of judgment or social repercussions (Kaufman, 2008). In this way, these Black women athletes illustrate their agency in creating a better world through their direct actions against dominant forces, their willingness to use their experiences with discrimination to drive activism engagement, and their power to stand up and speak out, even if/when they do it alone.

CHAPTER VIII. CONCLUSION

This study is a response to a significant gap in the scholarship concerning Black female athlete activism. Black women in sport are “seldom studied in any serious and sustained way” (Simien et al., 2019, p. 422). This study thus calls attention to Black women’s multifaceted experiences with raced and gendered practices that constitute them by centering Black women athletes’ experiences told by Black women athletes (cf. Bruening, 2005; Smith, 1992). I acknowledge these athletes as co-contributors and subjects, not objects, of this study. I incorporated a feminist cultural studies analysis, informed by Black feminist thought and intersectionality, to explore these Black sportswomen’s experiences with and motivations for activism for social justice. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination into how Black sportswomen define and understand social justice and the diverse ways in which they approach activism. Using a feminist methodology prevented the privileging of a single story and disrupted traditional ideas of knowledge production by centering the collective voice of the participants. Employing an intersectional framework precluded gender from being the sole category of analysis when considering the meanings, experiences, and motivations of activism. Instead, focusing on these women’s varied social identities and lived experiences that provide the catalyst for activism engagement allowed for a rich, complicated understanding of how these Black female athletes define social justice and the ways through which they seek to achieve. In this way, the heterogeneity of athletes’ participation in sport served as a strength in this study. In this conclusion, I explicate the major findings from the current study, propose a new wave of athlete activism, and outline practical implications to support Black sportswomen’s activism engagement.

Major Findings

This study sought to answer three primary research questions to better understand how Black women athletes define social justice and activism, their efforts and experiences of activism engagement, and their motivations to engage in activism. These findings offer new insights, as well as extends previous knowledge in relation to Black women in sport and athlete activism.

Defining Social Justice and Activism

This study is unique in its contribution to existing knowledge by focusing on how Black sportswomen define and understand social justice and activism. Athletes' multifaceted, lived experiences provided unique insight into what social justice and activism means to them. As they described, social justice is about acknowledging and addressing the structural inequities that exist in broader U.S. society. In most cases, people who, historically, are situated as outsiders are disproportionality affected by these inequities since "structures are about how violence gets directed towards some bodies and not others" (Ahmed, 2018, p. 62). These women understand that their social locations directly impact how society views and treats them. All the athletes, as Black women, had experienced some forms of discrimination in their lives in and/or beyond sport; they know what it means to be a Black woman in a society that privileges and upholds White patriarchy. They also are situated in sport, an institution that, historically, privileges the actions, voices, and values of White men. Through their varied lived experiences in sport and in broader society (Bruening, 2005), these Black women athletes' activist identities are, in turn, amplified. This knowledge and experience inform their understandings of social justice, of what a fair and just society entails, and how to achieve it. Activism, then, is taking direct action against the forces ensuring structural inequities remain. These women understood that inaction maintains the status quo, something they considered unacceptable; therefore, activism involves

creating change in whatever form to whatever degree because doing something is better than doing nothing.

Moreover, these women understand social justice and activism by internalizing the lived experiences of family members and observing the social justice efforts of professional Black athletes. Similar to George-Williams' (2019) work, one antecedent for activism for these Black women is family. Participants learned about the workings and impact of systemic oppression from their mothers, fathers, aunts, and grandmothers who have experienced social injustice. Activism, in this sense, is intergenerational for these Black women athletes. Although social and political progress has been made in relation to securing the rights of and protection for historically marginalized communities, such as Title IX and affirmative action, these data affirm that, specific to racial justice, the fight continues. This sustained fight lays bare the ongoing reality that, in the history of activism, Black women are "the visionaries, building blocks, hedge of protection, and the force with which to be reckoned" (George-Williams, 2019, p. 134). Participants also understand social justice and activism through observing professional Black athletes engage in activism. In so doing, these women were able to gain insight into, and confidence for, using sport as a platform for advocacy. This further supports the notion that sport serves as an optimal site for activism engagement at the professional level (Cunningham et al., 2021) and that these athletes' activism is framed by their social positionalities (Leppard, 2022).

Participants' definition of social justice is consistent with previous scholarship (e.g., Constantine, 2007; Karl & Kasser, 2009) in that social justice is a fundamental valuing of equity in resources, rights, and treatment for historically marginalized individuals and groups of people. For these women, social justice at the micro/individual level is about relearning and unlearning social norms and attitudes to encourage deeper understandings of biases and bigotry. At the

macro/structural level, social justice means acknowledging the harmful errors of the current state of society, for example the criminal justice system, and addressing how to correct those errors in sustainable, achievable ways. Put simply, these athletes define social justice as confronting persisting structural inequities, cultural policies, social practices that directly impacts certain communities and not others. As such, participants possess a positive attitude toward activism (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). The definitions of activism by these Black women are consistent with Kluch's (2020) findings whereby activism meant "actively working towards a change they perceived as needed in society" (p. 577). Based on their definition of social justice, these athletes define activism as active involvement in changing the status quo; the key word here being active. Social justice, according to participants, cannot be achieved without intentional sustained action, however big, however small.

Although previous research reveals definitions of activism at the college sport level (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018; Kaufman & Wolf, 2010), this study is unique in documenting how Black women athletes at the collegiate and professional level specifically define social justice and activism. More to the point, these Black women's definitions are framed within their rich understandings and experiences of being cast as the negative other. Nonetheless, their experiences suggest that "possibilities for activism exist even within such multiple structures of domination (Collins, 1986, p. 23).

Experiences Engaging in Social Justice Activism

This study revealed the myriad experiences of Black female athletes engaging in social justice activism. Importantly, activism is a part of these women's everyday lives. Every day they use their voices to speak up for themselves or others in the spaces they occupy; they engage in and provide support for their communities through volunteering and/or social events; they

educate themselves through formal and informal learning that facilitates critical thinking; and they deploy social media as their main platform to show solidarity and educate others about issues close to their heart.

As such, this study supports the notion that athlete activists are heterogenous (Leppard, 2022) and that Black athlete activism is not homogenous (Cooper et al., 2019). Athletes in this study come from various social positionalities and cultural backgrounds. They all reported experiencing forms of discrimination. The nature of those experiences differed, however. These varied experiences of similar oppressive systems made for a rich entry point into activism. Athletes in this study engaged in scholarly activism, grassroots activism, sport-based activism, and symbolic activism (cf. Cooper et al, 2019). The diversity of activism engagement is indicative of participants' unique stories, passions, and experiences, thereby affirming that, just like there is no "one" way to be a Black woman in sport, there is no "one" way to do activism.

These women are positioned as outsiders within (Collins, 2009) and as space invaders (Puwar, 2004). This status is "not fixed nor immobile" (Ratna, 2018, p. 111), however. In using their outsider within voices and by invading sport spaces, participants overtly challenge dominant hierarchies within sport and beyond. In the context of higher education, particularly at historically White institutions, the perpetual invisibility of Black women athletes is not new (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016). However, this study is unique in asserting their formidable visibility. Being an outsider within provides these Black women athletes with a unique vantage point and unique knowledge that allows them to be successful space invaders.

Consistent with Brooks and Knox's (2022) findings, participants who attended historically White institutions reported feeling marginalized and unsupported by their White teammates and coaches when engaging in activism, thereby putting them at risk of mental health

issues, such as anxiety, depression, or emotional burnout. Participants also reported on the empty gestures and inactions made by their universities related to social justice. Aligning with Bunch and Cianfrone's (2022) findings, performative action by universities involved using the social justice work of these Black women in a bid to prove they are socially progressive and politically on trend. In addition, findings of this study showed that institutions use Black sportswomen as their social justice poster child to somewhat enhance social and cultural credibility. In other words, the overall wellbeing, protection, and genuine support of Black women athletes who engage in activism are not driving the decision-making process behind universities' allyship; rather, the decision-making is driven by prospects for social clout and financial gain. This behavior is deeply problematic. Positioning Black women athletes' social justice efforts as an outcome of an institution's purported inclusive environment minimizes the courage, resilience, and labor of these Black women athletes. It also overlooks the ethic of care embodied by participants.

This study extends previous scholarship on social media-based athlete activism at the professional and collegiate level (Epstein & Kisska-Schulze, 2016; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015; Yan et al., 2018), as well as studies on resistance to athlete activism via social media (Frederick et al., 2017; Smith & Bryce, 2019; Sanderson et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2018; Dickerson & Hodler, 2019). What makes the present findings stand out, however, is who is using social media and how it is being used. This study provides new insights into Black women athletes' social media engagement in the context of social justice and the operationalization of social media by Black women athletes to mobilize support. Given the accessibility coupled with the ownership of one's account, social media-based activism constitutes these Black women athletes' everyday activism. Their social media use in the context of social justice is not

sporadic; instead, it is consistent and habitual. They are not using social media only when a social injustice event happens; they are using it even when nothing happens. They are using social media as a platform through which to share their knowledge and stories related to social justice, build connections with like-minded individuals, and as a tool for self-education. As such, consistent with Kluch's (2020) work, participants' articulations of the role social media has in their activism "shifts the paradigm from a focus on activism that is marked by high visibility and overt acts of activism to more subtle, situational forms of activism that are woven carefully into the fabric that makes up these athletes' everyday lives" (p. 584). These Black women athletes thus represent an entirely new generation of athlete activists who are aware of the political power their social position as athletes affords and, in turn, leverage this power through online spaces to generate conversation, co-create knowledge, and, ultimately, speak up for the people and issues they care about.

Participation in peaceful, public protests was another central part of these Black women athletes' experiences in activism. This study is one of the first to focus on such public political action by Black women athletes at the professional and collegiate level. Most of these women engaged in Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020 in their nearest cities and through their 2020-2021 sport season, others participated in Juneteenth and equal pay protests. Some protests were traumatic for participants as they witnessed firsthand police treatment toward protestors alongside the emotional intensity circumferent to the circumstances. In most cases, though, participants' experiences in protests were positive and impactful. For example, the presence of White allies at such protests mattered; seeing people who did not look like them actively resist hegemonic social practices enabled these women to feel a sense of hope that society can and will be better. Above all, active involvement in these protests affirmed the

willingness and determination of these Black women to practice what they preach; to take direct, transformative action toward meaningful change to the current state of society.

Importantly, although recent scholarship underscores Black male college athlete activism labor (e.g., Ferguson & Davis, 2019), findings of this study revealed the labor involved in these Black women athletes' activism engagement – a key component of social justice work that is often and easily forgotten. Given the histories of Black women in the fight for freedom, participants reported feeling a certain kind of pressure from their community to be the ones to lead and organize social justice initiatives in their respective sporting contexts. This cultural expectation stands to place these athletes at dangerous crossroads between meeting sporting commitments/performances, doing social justice work, maintaining meaningful social relationships, and looking after their own mental, emotional, and physical health. In other words, although they continue to succeed in various areas of their lives, these women are at risk of burnout (e.g., Gorski, 2018; 2019), especially when confronting perpetual negative reactions to their activism engagement.

These data reveal that participants' nuanced experiences engaging in activism are not all good yet not all bad. Ultimately, participants establish their social power as cultural game-changers in the athlete activism arena. As Neville and Hamer (2006) attest, developing a “political consciousness and becoming active is a process that takes patience, a desire to learn through participation and from others, the belief that every contribution is a significant one” (p. 8). Given that sport is and be can a “source of potential power for [B]lack people” (Edwards, 2017, p. 95), these data situate participants' place in athlete activism history as agents of change in their respective sport and non-sport contexts.

Motivations to Engage in Social Justice Activism

Studies focusing on college and professional athlete activism have highlighted the social opportunity and responsibility connected to activism engagement given athletes' positions in society (Agyemang et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2021). Unique in its sample and findings, this study revealed that activism is deeply personal for these Black women athletes. Their varied experiences of discrimination and social marginalization fuels their motivation to engage in activism. Participants reported knowing what it's like to feel alone, to feel like their voice had been rendered silent, and to confront systems that were not built to protect them. Experiencing hardship, compounded by their knowledge of predecessors' struggles, initially motivates them to engage in social justice activism. Amid ever-present racial inequities spotlighted by the 2020 reignition of the Black Lives Matter movement, fear for their siblings' and future family's lives sustains motivation. These motivating factors support scholarship contending that sport, and its athletes, does not operate in a vacuum (Cooper et al., 2019; Crooks et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2021; Di Marco, 2021; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Accordingly, cultivating a better future for the next generation of Black communities, especially fellow minoritized athletes, is an overarching goal and motivator for these Black women athletes.

Participants explained the need for a better future since not much has changed in terms of achieving and sustaining social justice. As such, to make change – however small, however slow – requires a politically consciousness commitment to look ahead to ensure that society is a place wherein their sisters, brothers, cousins, future children, and fellow Black athletes feel protected, supported, and empowered. These women engage in activism because they believe in the importance of creating a safer, more just society. Given their lived, first-hand experiences with systemic oppression and everyday discrimination, coupled with the favored platform they hold as athletes, participants identify the power of and value in engaging in activism (Mac Intosh et al.,

2020). To claim the seeming political neutrality of sport or that sport should be divorced from societal issues often comes from a position of privilege. In other words, those who profess sport as an apolitical terrain, devoid and detached from systemic ills, are not impacted by the politics; their lives and livelihoods are secure because they benefit from the systems that were made by and for them. Sport can be, and a lot of the time is, just sport; however, for the people whose lives, safety, and wellbeing are the center of the politics, sport can be more than just sport. When literal lives are at stake, why shouldn't sport and politics mix?

What's more, these Black women athletes have a choice to *not* engage in activism; if anything, disengaging from political matters is the accepted, largely rewarded standards of behavior for professional and college athletes driven by the popular belief that "sport and politics are fundamentally incompatible" (Sappington et al., 2019, p. 2). In the era of binary, partisan political parties and policies fueled by right-wing divisive rhetoric, the fervent argument that politics and sport should not and do not mix serves as a reminder and a reason as to why many athletes choose to 'just stick to sports.' For example, right-wing sport media writer Clay Travis (2018) argues that sport, at one time the "national connective tissue" and the place to go to "escape the serious things in life," is suddenly now "politics by another name" (p. 17). Travis is not alone in believing that politics is an unwanted intrusion (e.g., Brown, 2020) and that when politics overshadow sport, it's a problem. Tennis star Novak Djokovic, for example, shared similar sentiments when he condemned Wimbledon organizers for banning Russian athletes from competing at the esteemed competition following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia (Martin, 2022). Moreover, political leaders normalizing racism and sexism encouraged hateful rhetoric toward Black athletes engaging in peaceful activism. Specifically, early on his in presidency, Donald Trump vocalized his problematic and, quite frankly, impertinent stance on Black athletes

peacefully protesting racial injustice (Stapleton, 2017). As the leader of the ‘free’ world at that time, Trump’s attitude toward Black athlete activists set a precedent moving forward for both critics and supporters of athletes.

However, these women assert their power in choosing to engage in activism. Disengaging and avoiding enmeshing politics into their sport is perhaps the easiest, less controversial, less risky option; these data suggest these women are aware of the power they possess and how to use this power for the greater good. Similar to the Black athletes interviewed by Armstrong (2007), these Black women athletes’ consciousness, resonant sense of self, and glaring ability to unapologetically resist institutional challenges faced is palpable. Demonstrating the kind of people they are, participants revealed that, although they likely will not see the fruits of their labor, their activism engagement extends beyond the realm of sport. For them, persisting in activism engagement serves a larger purpose in ensuring the future is better for the next generation.

In addition, this study supports previous research strongly suggesting that activism engagement does not hinder sporting performance (Hawkins et al. 2022). Importantly, active involvement in organizations, activities, and panels, for example, contribute to participants’ overall sense of purpose and fulfillment, thereby increasing mental, social, and emotional wellbeing on a holistic level (Brooks & Knox, 2022). Athletes are humans; they have values, beliefs, and ideas about the world. Who they are cannot be separated from what they do (i.e., Black women in sport). Participants affirmed that activism engagement helped develop their sense of purpose and self beyond their respective sport worlds; using their voices, engaging in different community activities, and organizing various events centering social justice through institutional or sport league-affiliated groups contributed to participants’ overall mental and

emotional wellbeing. This involvement in activism-adjacent groups and events enabled participants to feel more in tune with their identities, thereby providing the impetus to sustain activism engagement.

A New Wave of Athlete Activism

This study is a partial response to the lack of documented evidence and examination of Black women athletes' role in social justice activism. Edwards (2017) presented his theorizing about the four waves of Black athlete activism in 2017. At the time of writing, he contended that in the fourth wave, beginning in 2005, Black professional and collegiate athletes are “more politically active and outspoken” (p. 163) concerning racial and non-racial issues. The findings of this study, however, lead me to propose a fifth wave of Black athlete activism led by Black women: using power to empower. Recent Black sportswomen's political commentary on social justice issues has set the trajectory of political conversations and development, and legislation moving forward. This recent activism by Black sportswomen serves as the backbone of this new proposed wave. Based on the findings of this study, this new wave is centered by the work and voices of Black women athletes who recognize their capacity to inspire and influence in relation to social justice activism. In so doing, these athletes uplift and encourage others to use their own voices to incite change.

Echoing Williams (2022), the year 2020 is the marker of this fifth wave framed by Covid-19 and mediated murders of unarmed Black people by armed police. Delineating this new this wave is the rise in Black women professional and collegiate athletes calling attention to various social justice issues. For example, Olympian Gwenn Berry raised her fist during the U.S. national anthem at the 2019 Pan American Games (Crockett Jr., 2019). Members of WNBA wore bullet-holed white t-shirts with Jacob Blake's name across the front, signaling the unlawful

shooting of unarmed Blake who by police in Wisconsin in August 2020 (Voepel, 2020). Olympian medalist Raven Saunders raised her arms into an 'X' at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in an effort to represent those who are marginalized due to the interlocking nature of oppression (Morse, 2021). These examples along with my data emphasize Black women athlete's role as trailblazers and social justice leaders.

Importantly, what distinguishes this fifth wave from the previous four is the sociopolitical context in which it occurs. This wave is characterized by the increasing social media engagement by athletes and political activists, political leaders being openly racist and sexist, a deeply divided political system, a rise in transphobia, Covid-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, and attacks on bodily autonomy such as abortion rights. The confluence of these factors thus makes for an entirely new generation of Black athlete activists, including the women in this study.

It is well documented that the U.S. is a nation built upon the exploitation of and violence against Black people (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Heerman, 2016) compounded by the proliferation of whiteness (Roediger, 2001). As a result, the United States is also a nation built upon the subjugation of and violence against women, particularly Black women (e.g., Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Willingham, 2018). It is no surprise, then, that systemic racism and sexism, persists. Accordingly, this current generation of Black women athlete activists are demonstrating their disruptive power in utilizing social media platforms, organizing, collaborating, and connecting with like-minded individuals; standing in solidarity with fellow minoritized athletes; and, ultimately, unapologetically vocalizing their stories and personal values to ensure the deconstruction of oppressive systems so that the next generation of Black individuals, athletes or otherwise, can live their lives safely and authentically.

The impact of social media cannot be overlooked in relation to Black athlete activism. These Black women athletes underscored the importance of having this platform wherein they can write and share what they want, when they want. They also explained they use social media to spread information and to connect with like-minded individuals and sport organizations. In this way, social media is an everyday activism tool, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Relatedly, participants highlighted the labor and energy involved in adapting to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic by organizing virtual social justice-related events that felt meaningful to them. Concurrently, participants also noted the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement during this time. Because most professional and college sport competitions and training were halted temporarily, many athletes were able to attend in person peaceful protests in their local neighborhoods and/or in nearby cities, including these Black women athletes. Attending these protests enhanced participants' knowledge of what it means to be a Black woman in the U.S. and enabled them to feel hope in humanity. Moreover, the rising attacks on bodily autonomy and transphobia through national political legislation and, more generally, public discourse, impacts this new wave of Black women athlete activism profoundly. As minoritized individuals, these Black women understand the politics of such legislation that fuel their activism engagement. That is, they noted who has the power to make these decisions, why are these decisions being made, and who is disproportionately affected by them. The sociopolitical climate therefore greatly influences this fifth wave of Black athlete activism – a wave that is categorically led by Black women athletes, like the participants in this study.

What's more, since this fifth wave is inclusive of Black college women athletes, the implications of the new Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policy should be considered. NIL is a new phenomenon that arose from athlete protests and activism impacting the current wave of

Black athlete activism. Fundamentally, NIL is part of the landscape of U.S. college athlete today that did not exist previously.

Before NIL, college athletes legally were not permitted to earn money outside of their scholarship packages. This new policy, however, enables college athletes to profit off their name and face. The increased media attention to women's college sport recently - such as games shown more frequently, games shown on more popular channels, and better marketing - has led to increased viewership. For example, the audience for the recent NCAA women's final, which was aired live on ABC, averaged at 9.92 million, peaking at 12.6 million (Adgate, 2023). These numbers mark the event as the most watched college basketball game in history, men's or women's. In other words, when women's sport is given the airtime on popular TV and streaming stations, people watch. This then leads to more visibility, more public/fan interest, and greater likelihood of NIL deals. Black female athletes' ability to earn money, therefore, has increased. For example, star basketball athlete Angel Reese at Louisiana State University drove her team to victory to win the NCAA women's championship in March 2023. Reese, who has now acquired 2.1 million followers on Instagram, has an NIL valuation of \$1.3 million (Williams, 2023). Reese's case demonstrates the impact of NIL; companies investing in Black sportswomen by partnering with them to endorse products puts Black sportswomen's names and images out there. Athletes, in turn, garner a larger audience.

Results of this study demonstrate that Black women in college sport have a more prominent presence in this new wave of Black athlete activism than in previous waves because they are doing activist work to wider audiences than before, thanks in large part to social media (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2021). Black female college athletes today can make a lasting impact using their celebrity and social capital, including engaging in social justice activism through what

companies, organizations, or charities they choose to partner with, what commercials they agree to do, and what clothing they are given as part of their NIL endorsement deals. Such NIL deals can provide an even bigger platform for Black women athletes from which to speak.

That said, with this platform comes potential or perceived risk. In other words, earning money outside of NCAA jurisdiction always means there's a chance of not being offered or losing endorsement deals if Black women athletes engage in social justice activism and if that activism does not align with the values of sponsors. However, driven by consumer behavior and ideology, recent data shows that companies and organizations are keen to endorse athletes who stand up for shared social and political beliefs, such as environmental issues and social inequality (Christovich, 2021). That is, the corporate world is recognizing the value and power of athletes engaging in social justice activism from a moral and commercial standpoint. Fundamentally, NIL is a unique component to this new wave of athlete activism led by Black women.

Future Practical Implications

The Black women athletes in this study are passionate about their social justice efforts. They also, however, noted the many challenges they face as Black women athletes and as activists. As such, it is important to develop strategies to support athlete activists, especially those with racialized identities. In turn, these strategies can empower Black women athletes in their activist efforts.

Sport should complement activism engagement. Politics are a profound reality of society, and therefore of society; athletes should not be penalized, ridiculed, or ostracized for standing up for what and who they believe in in a non-violent way. There are several steps that can be taken to support athlete activism.

At the institutional level, universities and professional sport leagues should create and implement policies underscoring athletes' right to engage in activism, thereby reducing the fear/risk of repercussion. These policies would, in theory, protect and prioritize athletes' voices. Such policies could include an explicit statement on the expectations of institutions and leagues to protect and support athletes' right to peacefully protest; these policies would also include information on their strategies in place if backlash to protests ensues; and these policies could include mandatory training for staff and stakeholders to support activism. The professional Black women athletes interviewed in this study had institutional support for their activism engagement. They reported the collaborative efforts of the teams in the league and the league's decision-makers enabling team members to be actively engaged in these social justice efforts. Taking inspiration from the WNBA's leadership circles, university athletic administrators can regularly sit down with college-athletes to discuss what activist causes are important to athletes and strategize how best to engage in activism in a peaceful, meaningful way that will empower athletes and their fans/followers.

Universities and professional sport leagues should also incorporate cultural competence training for all athletic department staff, as well as non-sport faculty and staff (Cooper et al., 2020); Jolly et al., 2020). These professional development trainings would center race, ethnicity, gender identity, class, ability, and sexual orientation and how these may impact athletes' lives. As Hartmann, Manning, and Green (2022) write, social change is "always hard; concrete, societal change through sport in other societal domains typically requires other, non-sport actors, activists, organizations, and resources" (p. 562). Another step to support Black women athlete activists at the institution level could be to hire more Black women coaches and administrators. Given that Black female athletes make up 5% of all college athletes at all divisions (NCAA,

2022), participants reported the importance of representation of Black women in sport leadership positions; more specifically, they noted the positive impact this had, or could have, on their experiences both within and beyond sport. The under-representation of racial minorities in coaching and in sport leadership positions (Lapchick, 2022) thus calls for institutions to expand their job pools to create more opportunity for athletic mentorship for Black women athletes (Borland & Bruening, 2010). As such, universities could employ someone who has the necessary professional training and experience for Black women athletes to go to if they want help with activism engagement. This person, for example, could develop and support education aimed at social media usage for activist goals. In so doing, athletes may feel more comfortable and confident in their activism engagement when provided the necessary tools. Moreover, this position would differ from a diversity, equity, and inclusion position because the role would focus solely on supporting Black women athletes.

At the individual level, the strategies suggested here echo those of Brooks and Knox (2022) and of Norwood (2019). As participants' experiences revealed, more White allies are needed to engage in social justice activism. When people feel valued, supported, and part of a community, they feel more able to navigate the world. Although progress is evident in this regard - for example during Covid-19 academics and sportspeople alike were invited to join professional development webinars on race and ethnicity or gender identity - we cannot rely solely on Black women athletes to be social justice advocates. To make society a better place for everyone, marginalized individuals cannot and should not take on that burden alone. As such, individuals in the sport realm should actively pursue and invest time in educational opportunities to understand systemic inequalities given that "trainings, workshops, and readings may help members of privileged groups understand the impact and realities of living with intersecting,

marginalized identities” (Brooks & Knox, 2022, p. 9). In this way, culturally competent employees can support Black women athlete activists by helping them develop a community event or online webinar; advocating to those more senior for more financial resources for their social justice efforts; or simply being there and listening to their stories, anxieties, and ideas. Coaches, in particular, should recognize their Black women athletes’ humanity. As Brooks and Knox (2022) suggest, “get to know them. Spend time and ask questions dedicated to understanding their backgrounds, interests, values, and experiences beyond athletics” (p. 8). Participants reported activism engagement contributed significantly to their overall wellbeing, in turn, boosting sporting performance. That is, although sport is a major part of who they are, it’s not *all* of who they are. If coaches understand the importance of athlete activism engagement and know how they can help, Black women athletes may feel less alone.

To that end, the Black women athletes in this study demonstrate their power by recognizing the value of politicizing sport. They use their positions within sport to center and demystify social struggles in powerful ways (Hartmann et al., 2020). As such, these Black women athletes humanize the people at the center of these issues in powerful, meaningful ways. These Black women athletes assert their eminence in the iconography of athlete activism. Accordingly, we should celebrate Black women athletes who chose to engage in activism, not diminishing or demonizing them. Without them, society would suffer – as would sport. We should actively seek educational opportunities to understand their stories. We should notice how Black women athletes are working to make the world better. We should center their experiences that inform their social justice efforts. We should protect them using our privileges and resources. And, above all, we should support and join them in their activism engagement.

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APPENDIX A. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Can you describe your journey to professional/college sport?
2. So many people dream of being a professional/college athlete. Can you describe what it's like to be in the on the [enter team]?
3. What is your racial identity?
4. What is your gender identity?
5. Do you consider yourself an activist or athlete activist? Why?
6. How do you define activism?
7. How do you define social justice specific to the United States?
8. What led to your involvement in social justice protests?
9. Can you talk about and give examples of your social justice activities/actions (individually or with your team/league/community)?
10. What were the outcomes?
11. What are your goals with/in social justice?
12. What causes are near and dear to your heart? Why?
13. What does it mean to/for you to protest for social justice?
14. What were the reactions from others?
 - a. How were you treated after your engagement in activism?
 - i. Teammates?
 - ii. Coaches?
 - iii. Family?
15. How did your engagement in activism affect your sporting performance, if at all?
16. Do you plan to continue to engage in activism for social justice? Why/why not?

17. If so, what do you see in your future as a social justice activist?
18. If not, how will you move forward having done this kind of work?
19. Is there anything you'd like to add that you'd like to highlight or discuss further?

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Athlete Activism: Exploring the Efforts and Experiences of Black Sportswomen

Engaging in Social Justice Activism

Researcher: Emma Calow, Ph.D. candidate, American Culture Studies

Advisor: Vikki Krane, Professor, Human Movement, Sport & Leisure Studies

Study Purpose and Procedure

You are being asked to participate in a research project as part of my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of Black sportswomen as they engage in activism for social justice.

Your involvement in this study includes participating in 1-2 interview sessions. The first session is likely to last between 60-90 minutes. It will focus on your journey to and within sport and your experiences engaging in activism. This initial interview will be audio-recorded and occur through Zoom. Please be aware that electronic communication may not be 100% secure.

Within two weeks of completing the first interview session, you may be contacted again by the researcher for a second interview. This follow-up session will allow time to clarify and elaborate on discussions from the first interview. The second interview is to ensure your story is being understood the way you prefer. I anticipate it will last 10-20 minutes and it will be conducted via e-mail or zoom. Each of the interview sessions will be transcribed word for word.

You have the choice whether to keep your identity confidential or use your real name. If you prefer confidentiality, any identifying information you provide in the interviews will be protected to the best ability of the researcher:

- You will be referred to with a pseudonym in all printed and digital materials (e.g., transcripts)
- This pseudonym will be used in any public reporting about the study (e.g., journal articles, conference presentations)
- Members of your team will not receive information about your participation in this study
- Any information that could identify you, your team, or other people will be removed or coded in printed and digital transcripts and public reporting of this study

If you want to use your real name, you can tell me that at the beginning of the meeting for your first interview. In this case, your name and your team name(s) will appear in study documents and public reporting. I will, however, still use code name for other people mentioned during your interview.

The researcher and advisor will be the only people listening to the audio-recordings and reading the original transcripts. The electronic consent forms, digital recordings of the interviews, and all other files related to this study will be stored on password protected computers located in a secure locked office on BGSU campus and on a password protected laptop in a locked personal home office. Interview audio-recordings and digital transcripts will be uploaded onto the researcher's Zoom account. The researcher will then transfer these files onto a password protected personal laptop, deleting them from their Zoom account. Every audio-recorded session and original transcript will be deleted immediately after the study is completed.

For your added protection, please see instructions below on how to clear your browser history following your interview:

Google chrome:

<https://support.google.com/chrome/answer/95589?hl=en&co=GENIE.Platform%3DAndroid>

Apple Mac and Safari: <https://support.apple.com/guide/safari/clear-your-browsing-history-sfri47acf5d6/mac>

Additional Consent Information

Your involvement in this study will help the researcher understand Black sportswomen involvement in activism and social justice. Importantly, the benefits of this study include enabling the researcher to learn about your experiences engaging in activism for social justice. This information can be used to contribute to efforts of dismantling racism, sexism, and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in the wider society. You also may benefit from being able to talk about your experiences in sport and having this opportunity to tell your story about your activism for social justice.

Risk of participation is not expected to be any greater than that experienced in daily life. My procedure is designed to protect your confidentiality if that is what you want; any information that could link you or your team to this study will be removed or coded in all printed products. Should any topics in the interviews make you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to respond and to move on to the next question. You also may withdraw your consent or end participation at any point during the project. If you choose to withdraw from the study, it will not affect your relationships with the researchers or Bowling Green State University.

Additional questions or concerns about this study may be directed to me, Emma Calow (419-819-2402, ecalow@bgsu.edu), or my advisor, Vikki Krane (419-372-7233, ykrane@bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716, irb@bgsu.edu).

Please sign below once you have read all of the above information and agree to participate in this study.

“I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.”

Participant Signature

Date: