

LOOKING INTO THE STANDS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE WHITE FAN AND THE BLACK ATHLETE

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Exercise and Sport Science in the Sport Administration Program at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Chapel Hill
2020

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ABSTRACT

Saadia Raquel Timpson: Looking into the stands: An analysis of the relationship between the
White fan and the Black athlete
(Under the direction of Barbara Osborne)

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the effects of a racially homogenous fan base on the overall black student-athlete experience; it will serve to fill the holes that currently exist surrounding the interplay between racism and fandom. Just like other students, student athletes are expected to deal with all the demands that come with attending a college or university. However, meeting these expectations becomes extremely difficult to do with limited flexibility and time. Student athletes are operating daily on exhaustive schedules that include classes, practices, training sessions, and film, all of which make it tremendously challenging for them to utilize many of the campus resources offered, like student-oriented counseling and workshops, to aid in their transition (Jordan, 2009). Much of the responsibility then falls on the athletic department to ensure all their student-athletes, specifically racial minorities, are competing in athletic environments that are welcoming, supportive, and comfortable.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Shortly after finding a seat in front of the television, a commercial comes on promoting the release of your favorite apparel company's new shoe design. The scene begins with a dirty and worn-down basketball rolling down a narrow, cracked, concrete path; the cracks found on this path run so deep you can feel the despair and defeat attempting to seep out from within. Immediately a large foot stops the rolling ball, just as the sun peeks out from behind the daunting clouds above, and one of your favorite professional basketball players reaches down to pick up the ball. Neighborhood kids emerge from the shadows and swarm around their idol, spewing endless strings of admiration for this professional athlete who has managed the unthinkable... he has made it. The stand-out NBA player then leans down and reassures all the kids around him that they can, too, achieve their wildest dreams with a little hard work, dedication, and of course a shining new pair of the newest [insert apparel company here] shoes.

Although this was merely a hypothetical depiction of an advertisement, the narrative exhibited common tropes seen in this industry (Oladapo, 2018). For frequent consumers of sport, the narrative above seems all-too familiar: the black man who used sports to achieve 'the impossible'. Marketing leaders, and others who are in positions that allow them to impact consumers' perceptions, have readily adopted this as the preferred narrative for explaining away the successes of black athletes. At first glance, the black athlete is seemingly placed in a heroic role where he serves as a brand ambassador. The story typically unravels in a way where a business, corporation, or highly influential being is ultimately to thank for the upward mobility of the black athlete. In an industry largely comprised of black athletes who

generate the revenue and white coaches/administrators who profit as beneficiaries (Taylor, 1997), this misleading narrative is generally one of patriarchal benevolence.

Few will argue that placing black athletes in positions where opportunity runs rampant is a negative thing. In fact, most would agree that sports have afforded unimaginable opportunities to black people (Dyson, 1993), even in a world where racism is seemingly embedded into its core. Regardless, this begs the question of who is deserving of the credit for the advancement of the black athlete? Who is more deserving of the praise? Is it the black athlete who invested in their dream or is it the corporate and powerful white America who truly made an investment in this athlete? Both are eagerly waiting to witness and benefit from the profits of their investments.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the effects of a racially homogenous fan base on the overall black student-athlete experience; it will serve to fill the holes that currently exist surrounding the interplay between racism and fandom. Just like other students, student athletes are expected to deal with all the demands that come with attending a college or university. However, meeting these expectations becomes extremely difficult to do with limited flexibility and time. Student athletes are operating daily on exhaustive schedules that include classes, practices, training sessions, and film, all of which make it tremendously challenging for them to utilize many of the campus resources offered, like student-oriented counseling and workshops, to aid in their transition (Jordan, 2009). Much of the responsibility then falls on the athletic department to ensure all their student-athletes, but especially student-athletes belonging to marginalized groups, are competing in athletic environments that are welcoming, supportive, and comfortable.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How do interactions with fans impact the overall student-athlete experience?

2) In what ways does race effect or influence fan/athlete interactions?

3) What actions can the university take to lessen the likelihood of negative racial interactions between player and fan?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

On the official website the NCAA is defined as “a member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes.” Nowhere in their definition does the NCAA mention wins and losses, revenue generation, or any of the other extraneous pieces that have grown to consume the intercollegiate athletic landscape. The market is constantly expanding, viewership and fandom are at all-time highs. However, amid all the excitement, the foundation of college athletics has begun to deteriorate. This study is a necessary part of the conversation when working towards re-prioritizing the well-being of the student-athlete.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

PART 1: RACE RELATIONS IN SPORT

Race is a complicated subject because of its abstract nature; it is a socially constructed phenomenon that produces very real repercussions. Self-proclaimed dominant groups benefit socially, financially, and politically simply by using unrelated phenotypic traits to separate themselves from those they have branded as inferior (Krieger, 2000). Black and brown bodies have no choice but to experience race as something they can ‘feel’, a feeling birthed from systemic and institutionalized systems that were built with the intent to oppress some while advancing others. In matters dealing with race, there are always opposing forces where superiority, prejudice, and power meet exclusion, subordination, and subjugation (Hylton, 2018).

Before achieving a deeper understanding of the relationship between the white fan and the black athlete it is necessary to revisit the history of the white athlete’s dominion in sport. Participation in sports has been, and continues to be, a pastime and leisure activity for white people, where they are either playing or consuming sports in a voluntary and light-hearted manner (Hylton, 2005). The same cannot be said for the countless black bodies that were required to participate in physical activity, or ‘sport’, for the purposes of entertaining their white superiors. For slaves, having the opportunity to participate in physical activity, instead of laborious house and field work, was an escape and coping mechanism not extended often and to many (Wiggins, 2003).

Much of the research focused on the start of black participation in sport is extremely inconsistent due to the erasure of black history; new names and stories are introduced frequently as letters and

volumes are uncovered. Although these claims have since been disproven, the decision to integrate college athletics was rooted in the assumption that black athletes exhibited remarkable and unique athletic superiority, a kind of athleticism that could transcend racial division (Wiggins, 1989). The cause for this relatively significant influx of black athletes into intercollegiate athletic space was the shift in emphasis from sports such as boating and tennis to others such as track and football (Henderson, 1949). Even with the civil war and segregation happening in the surrounding environment, black participation quickly became attractive to stakeholders and decision-makers who were impressed with their athletic exceptionalism.

Harry Edwards, in his work entitled “The Crisis of black athletes on the eve of the 21st century” posits that there are three main causes for the push of black youth into sports specific careers, with the first being: long-standing, ill-informed, and widely-held racist presumptions of innate, race-linked athletic superiority (Edwards, 2000). The dehumanization of the black body is far from a novel practice; for years the black body has been viewed as superhuman and animalistic, requiring civilized intervention in order to function in society (Uchacz, 1998). In 1886, a writer and commentator had the following to say about Peter Jackson, 6’1 and 221 lbs., who is still considered to be one of the greatest heavyweights of all time:

‘There was something of the lazy, indolent strength of a great cat about him. The lithe grace of his sprawling limbs, their loose suppleness, the easy way big muscles rippled and ran under the satiny skin as he moved- these things suggested it. And then too there was the proud, challenging poise of the kinky-haired, handsome head on the massive neck set like a column in the wide shoulders, chocolate brown, and just now, shining with a faint sweat induced by the hot noonday sun...’ (Henderson, 1949)

In 1994, Tiger Woods was considered of the greatest golfers of his generation, but even in the midst of successes one of his white counterparts, Jack Nicklaus, publicly stated that Woods would never succeed at the highest level due to his inherited muscle structure (Hatfield,

1996). While the black man is praised for his innate and physical prowess, he is also combatted with fear due to an assumption that his physical superiority will allow him to pose as an unconquerable threat to his white peers (Andrews, 1996). The National Basketball Association is marketed in a way that works to make the overly scrutinized black male become less threatening for the white consumer, with the end goal being profit. The black player/white spectator dichotomy is a strategic method used to mitigate white fear, aka “threat management” (Hughes, 2004).

However, even after the implementation of this strategic method, some black athletes still feel the presence and repercussions of their race daily. In the midst of a record-breaking season long performance, Cam Newton, drafted to the Carolina Panthers as the first overall pick in the 2011 NFL draft, found himself on the receiving end of strong criticism coming from Panthers fans who publicly issued disapproval of his on-field celebrations. Their criticisms were originally positioned as a condemnation of unsportsmanlike conduct, but they quickly transformed into something else. White fans were not seeking apologies for Newton’s flashy play or perceived arrogance, but instead were attempting to monitor and police his blackness (Boyd-Pates, 2016). Its also important to note that this kind of policing of athletes does not happen in just any sport nor does it happen to just any athlete; celebratory laps around the soccer field immediately after a scored goal are expected and accepted, however, similar behavior in the NFL or NBA would never be tolerated (Simons, 2003).

A study was conducted at a NCAA university whose athletes compete within the Bowl Championship Series; a division comprised of the six most elite NCAA conferences. The participants selected, who all competed on high visibility teams (e.g. men’s/women’s basketball and football), were asked to speak about their awareness, mindset, and responsibility as it

pertains to race. A participant stated that the visual difference in color will always create hesitation and discomfort and that race will always be relevant in the world because “if they put you on a scale and base you off your race, race will always matter” (Agyemang, 2010, p.425). The black athlete is frequently juxtaposed against the black gang member to depict a scenario where there are only two real paths for the black man: a life of crime, or a successful life as an athlete (Brooks & Blackman, 2011). It is fair to consider this stereotype of black existence as a contemporary spin off from the field slave versus house slave narrative (Hughes, 2004) where the line drawn is meant to separate the black race. Blacks enter the athletic space in hopes of receiving the respect and expanded opportunity while whites encourage their participation in hopes of gaining entertainment, racial reconciliation and profit (Hoberman, 1997). In fear of allowing remarkable talent to go to waste, professional team owners, coaches, administrators and other powerful figures in the industry extend generous accommodations to black athletes in exchange for their services and participation (Comeaux, 2018).

Although white decision makers bringing black students on campus may be fueled by good-natured motive, many fail to realize they are establishing a position of superiority over these athletes by suggesting that their assistance is necessary for the athletes to advance. The white savior motif is a recurring theme that posits a white person (e.g. individual, organization, owner) fulfills their noble duty by saving a black person from threatening or dire situations, propelling them in a way the black person was simply incapable of doing without their intervention (Schultz, 2014). Hughes states that the NBA believes they are doing a good thing by creating a pathway for these black boys to move from the outside (streets) to the inside (supervised and regulated court) where their behaviors can be monitored and managed (Hughes,

2004). Integrating athletics gave blacks an avenue to find success in a way that was determined to be both acceptable and achievable (Edwards, 2000).

The white savior motif has become normalized to a point where the film industry has adopted it as a popular theme. Sport, with its preferred ‘colorblind’ approach (Hartmann, 2007) creates an ideal backdrop for the development of these false narratives where blacks need saving by white figures of authority like coaches, owners, or boosters. Some notable cinematic examples include, *The Blind Side* (2009), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *Glory Road* (2006), and *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950). These films typically stand on the principle that whiteness is the normal and American way of living. The white characters, typically white men, become the focal point of the plot where their good deeds never go unnoticed, all the while the black athlete gets pushed deeper into the margins of a film originally positioned as a narrative of racial inequity. Oftentimes these movies are set in previous decades to suggest that the racial issues depicted are merely images of the past. This framing encourages white viewers to believe that racism no longer exists within sport (Hughes, 2004). Very rarely are these sport films written in a way that vilifies the white characters. When white authority figures are placed into a heroic role, the collective memory of the viewers shifts to a distorted and reimagined version of this nation’s past; a version that places white men at the forefront of the plight for racial equality (Schultz, 2014). Overrepresentation of black athletes in film and media perpetuates racist attitudes concerning the legitimacy of blacks as professional, pigeonholing them into athletics (Hardin, 2004).

The overrepresentation of black athletes, specifically within football and basketball, isn’t unique to media and film. A study was conducted at the University of Pennsylvania in 2013 and updated in 2016; Harper investigated racial representation and graduation rates of black athletes

in intercollegiate athletics. This study included Division 1 schools belonging to the Power 5 conferences (SEC, ACC, PAC-12, Big 10, Big 12) were studied, this was done intentionally since all NCAA football and basketball champions since the late 1980s belonged to one of these 5 powerhouse conferences. The pre-existing and published research on black male athletes is the most troublesome when coming from one of these 65 sites. The disproportionality on college campuses, as reflected in the study is extremely problematic: 56.3% of players on Power 5 NCAA football teams and 60.8% of players on NCAA Power 5 basketball teams are black. Amongst all Power 5 schools, the difference in representation of black males in athletics, compared to the student body makeup ranges anywhere from a 26% difference at Boston College to 72.2% difference at Mississippi State University (Harper, 2016). There is not a single Power 5 school whose student-athlete racial composition is in alignment with the larger university. It is also important to note that the overrepresentation usually takes place in basketball and football; very rarely will you see black athletes disproportionately represented in Olympic sports (Sailes, 1991). This means black athletes comprise the overwhelming majority on teams that are responsible for producing revenue, which lends support to the argument that black athletes are being financially exploited (McWilliams, 2018).

In a study focused on exploring the existence of clustering within academic majors amongst college football players, we learn black male athletes are graduating at alarmingly low rates, oftentimes with degrees that are less competitive in occupational settings and hold less legitimacy from an academic standpoint. (Schneider et.al., 2010). John Singer completed a study that worked to provide the industry with a better understanding of how racism affects black student athletes. He used purposeful sampling to acquire a group of athletes that fit the following criteria: 1) Black football players with eligibility 2) Black football players from big-time highly

visible sports programs that were willing to participate. The findings from this study introduced two recurring themes: lack of opportunity to be in major decision-making roles within sport and differential treatment. Some of the participants shared stories of their education being deprioritized in comparison to their white teammates, they were often last to choose classes and as a result, ended up in classes that were completely unrelated to their career aspirations (Singer, 2010). The forcing of black athletes into less challenging or respected academic silos may be responsible for the difficult transition so many athletes grapple with. Black athletes are socialized into thinking that their only real chance to achieve upward mobility is through basketball and football, where their perceived athletic superiority will be rewarded, at the expense of potentially sacrificing education (Beamon, 2008).

Matters of racial representation have been explored in the literature because of statistics that cannot be ignored, yet much of the discourse is centered solely on the incongruent representation instead of focusing on its effects. Racial over or under representation is a problem in sports, but less known about how it affects the athlete, the coach, or the fan. In a study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA the experiences of racially marginalized students were explored. They surveyed a variety of minority students on campus and discovered that 1 in 5 black students experienced exclusion. Black students were also 22.7% more likely to report incidents of racial discrimination than other minority groups (Hurtado, 2012). Amid showers of praise, it's easy to elevate student athletes to an invincible position, but it is important to remember that underneath the sports gear remains a black body that is no different than the less accepted ones surrounding them. Black athletes are equally as likely to find themselves victimized by racial discrimination; in some cases, they can be even more susceptible due to their uninterrupted positioning under white surveillance (Comeaux, 2018).

Too often, diversity and inclusion standards are satisfied by placing a handful of blacks into select roles, but scanty representation is not always enough when working to notably impact the athlete experience. While participation numbers for black athletes in some collegiate sports are disproportionately high, accessibility is not available in all sides of college sport. Only 22.3% of head coaches, 13.9% of Division 1 athletics directors (Moyle, 2018), and 7.9% of college presidents are black (Seltzer, 2017); if one were to ever question the immensity of dearth in racial representation, the numbers speak for themselves. The lack of representation is also evident amongst fans: close to 80% of all NCAA men's basketball and football fans identify as white (Thompson, 2014). In a Sports Illustrated article focused on the NBA appropriating black culture, a black player, when asked about race and the inaccessibility of sport consumption, responded: "You go diving into the stands after a ball, and you land on some investment banker's cell phone. Meanwhile, the fellas you grew up with can't afford a ticket to get in. Yeah, you think about those things" (Taylor, 1996 pg. 1). This speaks directly to the institutionalized obstacles that hinder blacks and other racial minorities from interacting with the sporting industry as freely as their white counterparts.

PART 2: WHITE FANDOM AND NEW RACISM

The sporting industry, like the world that surrounds it, has always fallen victim to the pervasive nature of racism, Race relations, in general, are undoubtedly changing, but change should not be confused with progress. Blacks have traditionally used their involvement in sport as a platform upon which they work to resist the social subjugation of the black community (Brooks & Blackman, 2011). Even through incredible amounts of backlash, activism has found its way into sport for many years now. Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar are two of the many noteworthy names that have utilized their elevated platform to speak out against the racial

injustices of the world surrounding them; these athletes only received this elevated platform because their unprecedented performance athletically awarded them with the respect necessary for them to speak outwardly against injustice. In 2016, Colin Kaepernick captured the attention of America by publicly entering the conversation on race and police brutality. His sideline protests dominated headlines and sparked national discourse that called into question the duality of the black athlete, which resulted in his brief dismissal from the league (Whack, 2018). In the NFL, 70% of the players are black while 83% of fans are white. The controversy over player protests stems from white fans that were not happy about black players using their platform in the NFL to push the Black Lives Matter agenda, which was reflected in the immediate decline in both viewership and attendance (Bates, 2017). NYU historian, Jeffrey Sammons, said the following when asked about the policing of black athletes “they can’t be defiant or opponents of the system. They know they can’t succeed without living up to expectations and being humble, unassuming, and supportive of the established order” (Whack, 2018).

The current landscape of the sports industry breeds power structures where a disproportionate number of blacks are given access to sport but with the ultimate expectation being that they will entertain the more dominant population. Although participation is voluntary, a troublesome relationship still exists where black athletes are indebted to white fans. Freedman (2017) argues that white fans give a ‘pass’ to a black athlete, and this pass can include scholarship and education, the opportunity to play their sport, fame, and the potential of becoming wealthy, but this pass comes with provisions. For a black athlete to receive the benefits of acceptance from their white fans, they must agree to their stipulations: they must remain grateful for these opportunities, even if that means creating distance between themselves and other blacks who have not been elevated to this honorary status (Cleland & Cashmore,

2013). White fans have dominated the industry for many years and have adopted sporting events as preferred social outings where there is an ingroup (white, affluent, oftentimes male) and an outgroup which includes everyone else (Phua, 2010). The progressing commercialization of sporting events, paired with increased admission costs, suggests that the sporting industry is tailoring its activity to more affluent and ‘civilized’ attendees (Cleland & Cashmore, 2013). Black attendance at sporting events outside of basketball and football is virtually non-existent and as leagues continue to adopt pay-per-view and subscription options, black viewership is on a steady decline (Edwards, 2000). The deliberate practice of limiting the opportunity of some, in order to monopolize the advantage for others is a form of social closure between a dominant group and those they regard as inferior (Murphy, 1988).

Two British sociologists, Jamie Cleland and Ellis Cashmore, investigated fans’ attitudes, views, and opinions on the extent racism exists in British soccer. They administered surveys to 2,500 fans, all of which were to be answered anonymously. Cleland and Cashmore hoped that anonymity would encourage participants to feel less inhibited, thus resulting in them opening up and being more transparent about the sometimes-sensitive subject of race. The online survey was administered in two phases: the first phase inquired about the effectiveness of the anti-racist initiative the league recently adopted to help reduce racist attitudes exhibited by fans towards players, specifically on social media sites. The second phase asked participants to speak directly to a time where they witnessed or experienced forms of racism firsthand. The theoretical framework used in this study is called ‘habitus’ which explains the internalized dispositions, tastes, habits, rules, and perceptions by a collective of people. Although inherent qualities are person-specific, habitus suggest that one’s community, social group, and family largely contribute to these dispositions. The results of this study were telling, many white fans

highlighted how ‘white habitus’ has operated historically in sport. Some white fans did not feel that they were inherently racist, however, they admitted that sport provided a space where racist and offensive banter is not only permitted but expected and rewarded. A specific white fan had the following to say about racism and fandom:

“At best, the white fan begrudgingly tolerates the political engagement of the black athlete. More commonly, though, the white fan treats it as ingratitude, arrogance, defiance, all those variations on the theme of uppity. In my own decades as a fan, I’ve heard those attitudes expressed in the stands and in the bars and on the sports-radio call-ins. Admiration can turn into condemnation in a hot second. And not even condemnation is exactly the right word. What the white fan expresses is something more like the primal cry of the spurned lover” (Freedman, 2017).

They may not feel that their actions or choice of words should be considered racist at all, they feel that they are simply following the same notions of whiteness that have been exhibited by their families, social groups, and communities for generations. Fans who do not condone any form of racism feel that their counterparts, who indulge in this kind of banter, do so because their intentions remain pure. There seems to be an undertone of ignorance where the definition of racism and its effects have been ambiguous and widely misunderstood (Cleland & Cashmore, 2013).

Race is understood to be an arbitrarily and socially constructed phenomena, regardless of its political and social effects (Omi & Winant, 1994). The insidious nature of race deceives in ways that would suggest racial injustice is a thing of the past; many whites feel that race is simply not a factor in how they live their everyday lives (Collins, 2005). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva coined the term ‘white habitus’, which can be used to describe the socialization process during which whites’ tastes, beliefs, feelings, and views on racial matters are developed (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). White habitus promotes unanimity amongst whites while promoting negative stereotypes and views about non-whites, all done with the intention of appearing objective. This is new

racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). New racism requires a more covert expression of racial discrimination, where coded language is used in order to adhere to more liberal and socially acceptable expectations (Ansell, 1997). New racism is frequently seen in a wide variety of settings.

The way that white fans have chosen to interact with black athletes, historically, exemplifies the persistent nature of white power (King, 2007). New racism encourages participants to deny all claims of racism by promoting the idea that racism no longer exists, all while they are actively working to undercut and slow the progress of anti-racist protest (Collins, 2005). This colorblind ideology helps white fans to interact with and support black athletes: they are comfortably living under the assumption that the metaphorical 'playing field' has been leveled, therefore the success that someone finds is solely determined by his or her poor choices (Ferber, 2007).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

There is a breadth of literature focused on fandom, just as there is a plethora of research focused on the black student athlete experience; this study aims to fill the gap in research concerning the interplay between the two. Explanatory research was used to assess the causal relationship between hegemonic white fandom and the experiences of black athletes. Gaining access to high level college athletes is a difficult feat, so establishing rapport with both the athletes and their coaches/administrators is essential in order to conduct and complete a study of this caliber successfully (Singer, 2010). To account for the expected variety in student-athlete experiences, the research was conducted qualitatively by way of interviews. Interviews are face-to-face verbal exchanges where the interviewer asks questions and carries conversation to acquire information from and to gain a better understanding of the interviewee; this is the preferred research methodology when research objectives center on understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, and values (Rowley, 2012). Researchers oftentimes choose in-depth interviews in efforts to encourage transparency between themselves and their participants (Douglas, 1985).

Criterion sampling is a method used when purposefully selecting participants based on their satisfying of predetermined criteria (Patton, 1990); this was done intentionally in effort to reveal major system weaknesses that result in certain individuals becoming targets of opportunity for systemic improvement (Singer, 2006). Like the study done by Agyemang et. al (2010), all participants were required to satisfy the two following criteria: 1) must be a black male athlete

who still has athletic eligibility or just recently exhausted their eligibility within the last 5 years, and 2) must compete, or have competed, on a men's basketball team in a Power 5 conference.

Although the literature review commented on the experiences of both black basketball players and football players, this study focuses only basketball players due to their heightened visibility under white surveillance and their susceptibility to exploitation; 60% of all college basketball players, regardless of their competitive performance, have a marginal revenue product that's worth surpassing their scholarship cap (Lane, 2012). This means that, irrespective of their on-court productivity, 60% of college basketball players are not being compensated fairly for the product they are providing their university, that being their athletic talent. Hughes (2004) entitled "BLACK ENTERTAINERS, WHITE SPECTATORS" states that, on average, 10,452 fans attend men's basketball games at universities in the Power 5 conferences. With concern for tangential conversation to dominate the interview, they were semi-structured; a completely unstructured interview sometimes elicits responses that do not closely align with the research questions at hand (Rabionet, 2011).

Similar to the Melendez (2008) study, which sought to better understand the psychosocial and emotional realities of the black college athlete experience, my initial interview questions highlighted three main areas of the student-athlete experience: interactions with fans (physically and digitally), racialized interactions, and suggestions, if any, for how to make the intercollegiate landscape more supportive and comfortable for black athletes during competition.

I made sure to conduct interviews in a way the interviewees felt settled and in control of their narrative, their voices were allowed to lead and dominate the exchange, hoping that their sense of control would encourage trust. A limitation in conducting research by way of interview is that findings may not be considered generalizable because all data collected is highly person-specific,

however, an interviewer knows they have reached an appropriate sample size when stories and personal accounts from many of the participants begin to share similar themes (Boyce, 2006). Before each interview, participants were given a brief overview of what to expect, a reminder that their participation was completely voluntary, and the agency to choose or skip questions at any point during the interview. I also explained why they had been chosen, the expected duration of the interview, and assured them that their information would remain confidential. In order to preserve the confidentiality of the athletes, their university, name, conference, and graduation year was omitted from the findings. I required written or oral documentation of each participant's informed consent to the study before conducting any interviews (Boyce, 2006).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As mentioned above, this exploratory research aimed to further investigate three areas of focus, with the first being interactions between fan and player. The investigator posed questions that required participants to think about their interactions with fans on and off the court, pre/post game, and in person/on social media to ensure that all access points between fan and player were addressed and discussed. Due to unanticipated effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, securing interviews with athletes was slightly more difficult than originally expected. As a result of rescheduling and cancellations, there were only five participants in this study, however the smaller number allowed the researcher to take a deeper, more thoughtful, dive into the experiences of the athletes who were still able to participate.

There was an athlete from each of the Power 5 conferences represented in this study. Some of the participants were still current athletes, while others had just recently exhausted their eligibility before continuing their basketball careers professionally. The participants were all black males; however, they offered a richness in diversity as it related to their age, size, position, talent level, financial status, and familial background. A few of the participants had the opportunity to compete in more than one of the Power 5 conferences and were able to compare their experiences and how they varied based on opponents and location; the ways in which they experienced racism was heavily influenced by the schools they attended and the schools they competed against.

The interviews were semi-structured but largely dominated by the athlete. Although each interview was person-specific depending on the athlete, the researcher worked from a list of

interview questions to ensure all research questions were addressed and all recurring themes were uncovered (See Appendix A). The themes associated with each research question were pulled directly from the literature review because they were commonly used throughout many of the related works concerning black athletes and their experiences (See Table A).

PLAYER- FAN INTERACTIONS

Participants were first asked, very broadly, to describe their playing environment before college compared to their playing environment while competing on the collegiate level. This question was posed in reference to Research Question 1, with representation, support, comfortability, access being the themes of focus. It was intended to encourage participants to begin thinking about fan interactions not just from a general sense, but also how those interactions have varied over time based on location, talent pool, and access level. Many of the athletes described their first real introduction to playing on the collegiate level as ‘culture shock’. One participant said the following when asked to speak about how his high school fan base differed from college:

Yeah, I went to a predominately black high school, so I mean high school sports in the community is really big and I went to a public school, so I’m used to seeing 80% of the crowd being black. A lot of different students, whether it’s the 60 year old grandpa from the community or the guy from your biology class, I was used to seeing majority black kids, black students, and black adults as well. And I mean obviously when you get to college it’s a completely different atmosphere, especially with our fan base. Our fan base is all old people, bunch of old white guys. might see a speckle in the student section, behind the bench the family section, and the recruits there’s pretty much no black people in the stands, but that’s like the only black people you see. (Participant A)

Another athlete said the following when asked to compare both playing environments. He shares testimony from both his experience and that of his older brother who played football, another highly visible sport, also at the Power 5 level:

You go to a lot of prestigious schools that are majority white populations and the support, the fans are majority white and most times it's a culture shock. I know for me; I honestly say I had never been around that many white people in my life, so it was a culture shock. My brother played in the NFL for 8 years. He went to [power 5 school] so that's a school with a lot more white people than there is at [SCHOOL]. So you know it was a culture shock for him when we're coming from North Chicago and he's going to [power 5 school] and he's got to learn to talk a certain way or carry himself a certain way, so you don't want to make people uncomfortable. Cause you're an athlete, you can't show some sort of resistance. You have to show some sort of submitting to the perception of you being a threat so it's very tough at times. And it's interesting seeing the difference between conferences, the different cultures, the different types of environments, the support systems are very different. (Participant B)

The affordability of ticket prices was a recurring theme throughout each interview, when one participant was asked if his family attends home games he said "Nah my family never came to the game, you know. We poor". Most fan interactions took place between player and donor because donors can consistently afford tickets. Athletes spoke about the different levels of access awarded to donors depending on their giving level. Some of the athletes were required to interact with high level donors pre and post- game, during halftime, and even on the road. One of the athletes stated the following:

I mean in high school, you know, you got so much family that can come to the game. It's a lot of people in your area that can come to the game. It's different than college because you have all these guys coming from all over the place to this one school and it may be guys from across seas and their family may not be able to come to the game. You have these fans... can I say white people?

I mean that's it basically, I'm going to say my school, [SCHOOL], is like dominant white. You don't see too many black people. They can't afford tickets and stuff like that unless they're like boosters and stuff. Boosters buy season tickets and they donate money; you don't really see black people coming to the game because they can't afford it. And these white people are big time [SCHOOL] fans and they can afford it, so they come to the game.

It was different in high school because, you know, tickets may be \$5, plus where I stay at and my school is in the projects, you know what I'm saying? So, you have all these adults and younger kids who don't have much that can just walk to the games like walk across the street to the game, sometimes they may get in free, it depends their situation. (Participant C)

Discussions regarding socioeconomic disadvantage were the inevitable byproducts of any conversation involving boosters and fundraising. The following explains this sentiment:

The typical fan, of course, is Caucasian. You have your diehard fans, your boosters, the ones that are always there and sit in the same seat... mainly the ones who got the money because they can afford it. It would range from the older people who have what they call 'old money' that love sports most of the time. Even if they don't love sports, they're coming for the company or to come drink and have a good time. That's what your typical fan would look like other than students. (Participant E)

Race is not to be confused with class, however, oftentimes issues of class ultimately become racialized. The following statement speaks to the access level awarded to donors at his specific university, but also how his interactions varied depending on donor's race:

A few boosters will travel with you on a road game and I would say out of all those boosters there's one black guy that we had that I remember specifically cause he always used to speak to us. We had one black booster at that level that used to sit courtside at our games. (Participant A)

In every interview, participants mentioned how most of their fans are boosters, donors, or 'diehards' who are willing to do whatever it takes to support their teams--- even if that means jeopardizing the eligibility of the student athlete:

Over my four years I grew so much with fans like people like booster you know, outside boosters that want to give you money, but you can't take it. Willing to do anything, like 'hey if you ever need a job' you know what I'm saying, the fans want to be there for you, especially if they see you're trying to do the right thing. (Participant B)

Even though some fans were willing to do whatever they could to support the athletes, sometimes the support offered came with a sense of entitlement and control. These fans felt that the athletes were indebted to them, as if the athletes owed them something in return for the financial support they extended to the program. This created a dynamic where fans are empowered while athletes were not:

When it comes to the other stuff, if I speak on it or I have an opinion on it now I'm stepping outside of my boundaries. It's another form of control and prejudice, you can play ball and stuff, but you don't need to be talking about politics, you don't need to be talking about reform. You have a lot of diehards who are prideful in the university, they're up on you one day. SCHOOL fans they're all like this, they're up on you one day but if you miss one, they want to rip your head off. Twitter is unbelievable, the things they say about kids.

As mentioned above, social media offers a completely different setting where fans can engage with athletes, but in an unfiltered and unidentifiable manner. While some of the athletes have had only positive interactions with fans on social media, the same can't be said for all:

My freshman year I had a teammate, and honestly if you go onto twitter and search his name you can see so many disgusting tweets about 'why does he have a scholarship?', 'why are you here?', 'why did we even recruit you?'" mentioning him, the coaches, the entire team in one tweet and talking bad about one player singling him out. And as players, we're human. After games we're going to get on twitter to see our highlights to see what we did wrong, we are going to search our names, we are going to see what people are saying about us, we're human. But for the athlete there is no remorse.
(Participant C)

Some athletes have deliberately avoided fan interactions on social media. One participant stated the following when asked why he chooses not to engage:

Fans can be ruthless. They say whatever they want behind the screen but as soon as you see them in person, they're afraid to talk to you 1) because you're African American, 2) they think you're going to hurt them, say something to them. Whatever. So, I just don't engage with fans on social media. I have engaged with and retweeted positive stuff to say thank you though. (Participant E)

To better understand the relationship between athlete and fan, all participants were asked to compare how their fans would describe them as a person versus how they would describe themselves. The way one is perceived plays a significant role in how they choose to identify; the goal of this question was to determine if there was a disconnect in alignment between how the athletes identify and how their fans perceive them. Many stated that their fans consider them one-dimensional in nature, only acknowledging them as an athlete instead of an a multi-dimensional individual:

I feel like a lot of fans see you as a benefit to the program, they just see you as “Participant A, the basketball player”. I mean, the most important thing is, long as you winning as many games as possible. Bringing in as many fans, bringing in as much money as you can. A lot of times they see you as that, more like a cash cow in a way for the university.

Participant A introduced another a theme that reappeared throughout the interview process— many of the athletes felt that the respect they received from their fans was heavily contingent on their performance in the game that day.

RACE RELATIONS

Although the discrepancy in racial representation between fans and athletes in Division 1 men’s basketball is an obvious reality, personal accounts shared by the athletes worsened this reality. This portion of the interview focused on how race affects player and fan interaction, all responses will be in reference to Research Question 2 and its associated themes: threat management, representation, patriarchal benevolence, and the White Savior complex. Participants found themselves on the receiving end of undeserved and racist forms of harassment during their time competing collegiately. One athlete shared the anecdote below when speaking about his experience at an away game:

I remember a game last year when we were playing [school in conference] and the tension in the building was high. My teammate had hit a game winning shot and I had taken a charge to seal the game. At the end of the game, the fans were so upset they started throwing cups and throwing water bottles and ice and stuff at me and my teammates. But guess what? It didn’t make the news, it wasn’t on SportsCenter. It was insane, crazy but that’s what you get. (Participant C)

In order to protect the identity of this participant, his institution, conference, and opponent has been intentionally omitted from his statement, however, this athlete emphasized the racialized and discriminatory nature of this experience. The personal account below is another example of racism manifesting itself in fandom:

We played at --- I didn't tell the media this after the game but I did tell them there was a vulgar comment. I'm on the bench and we're starting to come back into the game. I stand up to go cheer and a fan tells me "Sit down nigger, sit down" so I go in and hit the game winner. Game time. But you deal with that throughout the whole process and you know, it's amazing to think as an athlete they want us to speak out to be public figures, but we are so limited depending on who we are. (Participant C)

Racism deceives in ways where it becomes easy to consider it a thing of the past. Using white habitus as a theoretical framework requires racism to be understood as both an intentional and unintentional practice, something that can happen both consciously and subconsciously. Although some athletes shared stories where they were overtly and undeniably discriminated against, most of their experiences dealt with covert forms of racism. For example, one athlete said the following when asked how fans would describe him. He speaks to the assumptions made by fans regarding his ability to speak properly, while also addressing how the duality of the athlete is often ignored:

But honestly, I feel like I'm looked at as a competitor. I've gotten the comment of 'you speak well' I get that all the time. I would say more than anything they see me as a well-rounded athlete, someone who is multifaceted. I'm not just an athlete. (Participant C)

The White Savior complex, introduced in the literature review, is a term attached to whites who act to help non-whites but in a way that can be viewed as self-serving. Dominant figures in this position are constantly looking for ways that they can use their elevated status, access to resources, money etc. to catapult the black athlete into an unimaginable opportunity they might not have if not for their intervention and assistance. This relationship between black player and white fan births power structures where the givers assume control over the takers. Although the following statement was provided by a participant who spoke very highly of his fan interactions, his account confirmed the existence of patriarchal benevolence between player and fan:

Most people at SCHOOL know my story, they know my background and what I come from. So you know they like damn, ‘he been through all this, I really want to help this guy’ because black kids we don’t get that opportunity to show fans what we can really do because you know sometimes guys who are really good don’t get to play in front of these fans and get the opportunity. (Participant B)

LOOKING AHEAD: WHERE CAN WE IMPROVE?

All the interviews were guided by testimonies and recounts from the athletes. Participants were asked to think back to all fan interactions, and especially those where race was a significant factor. By reliving and sharing these experiences, they had to think deeper about how these interactions influenced their overall experience while competing. The goal of this research was to enhance the student athlete experience; in order to achieve this, it was important to give the athletes a voice to offer suggestions for how the system can be improved; the interview ended with conversation in reference to Research Question 3 and it’s themes: resources, programs, responsibility. Before opening for suggestions, athletes were first asked to speak about any programs, or resources currently being offered to black student-athletes on their campus to make them feel supported or comfortable in their playing environment. None of their universities offered such programs. When one of the athletes was asked if he felt that those programs were necessary, he responded:

You don’t have no whites on your team for real, so I feel like we making you look good, we are winning these games for y’all, you not out here. I feel like we deserve more than what we get, y’all could do more. (Participant B)

When asked who should be responsible for implementing these programs, one participant suggested the following:

I think it really falls on the NCAA. For example, we have programs for leadership, for studying abroad, I think it’s only right to have something set up for minorities or international students where they feel some togetherness and can talk about their issues. Everybody doesn’t go through the same things and everyone doesn’t have the same perspectives. (Participant C)

Togetherness was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. All participants stressed the importance of fostering a sense of community and feeling closer to that community each time they competed. They spoke about how integral the game day environment was and the indescribable feeling that comes from feeling fully supported. Overall, they enjoyed their collegiate playing environments, however Participant D hesitated when asked why his favorite games and his favorite fan interactions were all during high school:

That's a great question. You know what, I was discussing this with my uncle, I think. I don't know it's a great question because I feel like in college it's more of a regiment. I mean for me, because we can only speak for ourselves, I feel like in college there's more of a regiment where you're playing for somebody instead of something.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of a racially homogenous fan base on the overall black student-athlete experience; it aims to analyze the interplay between racism and fandom. In order to achieve this, the researcher first had to understand race and fandom from a historical context. The literature review introduced themes such as the hyper-surveillance of black athletes, the white savior complex, disproportionate racial representation between players and fans, policing of black athletes, the inaccessibility of collegiate sporting events, and white fandom.

The theoretical framework used as the lens through which the researcher views the behavior and actions of white fans is called 'White Habitus, which refers to socialization process in which whites' perceptions, feelings, and views on racial matters are developed. These views are typically shared amongst the dominant group, even if done subconsciously. White Habitus suggests that whites use spatial self-isolation as a tool to promote a sense of group belonging and solidarity amongst each other; this grouping encourages whites to formulate and share negative views about nonwhites. One of the many consequences of White Habitus is that it results in obliviousness as it relates to racial matters; this ignorance supports colorblind ideologies that ignore the structural inequalities effecting nonwhites in this country. My research proposes that the relationship between the white fan and black athlete is a microcosm of the larger dynamic at play. The social segregation and racial isolation of whites has allowed them to maintain control over the college game day environment, determining who has access to their universities, athletes, and experiences. Although the racist tendencies white fans exhibit are usually delivered

in a covert, subtle, and unintentional manner, racism of any kind should not be tolerated.

Through personal accounts shared by the athletes, we learned about some of the ways White Habitus effects the black athlete and his interactions with the dominant group.

Intercollegiate athletics, as a space, often denies or minimizes that existence of racial tension. Many of the microaggressions displayed from white sport administrator to white fan are overlooked or ignored because they have become a normalized part the process. Every participant in the study first mentioned their donors when asked to speak about their fanbase, words like “white”, “old”, “man” were used in almost all the interviews. I intentionally posed the question vaguely because I wanted the athletes to talk about any and every kind of fan they’ve interacted with, not just the fans in the stands—from the random fan at the grocery store, to the little boy who hasn’t missed a camp signup, to the guy who rushes home from work for night games just to catch tip off, to the custodian who has been cleaning the floor they play on while supporting their program for the last 35 years. I wanted them to talk about all their interactions, I was curious to see how these interactions varied based on age, race, and region. Some praised their fans while others shared their negative experiences, but almost everyone’s ‘typical fan’ was described similarly. This provided a perfect example of how the racial disproportionality between black player and white fan has been normalized to where athletes only envision one kind of fan.

Another theme that resurfaced throughout the interviews was threat management, also known as fear mitigation. In the literature review, we learn about race and sport from a historical context. Early on, black athletes were highly sought after and revered by white authority figures and fans because their athletic capabilities were perceived as superhuman and elite compared to other races. The black male, who was ordinarily considered aggressive and dangerous, became

respected and supported once in uniform. One participant spoke explicitly about how athletes must intentionally alter the way they speak and carry themselves in order to make their white fans more comfortable; he referred to the practice of mitigating white fear as ‘submission’. Another athlete spoke about how his blackness made him more threatening for the white fans. He believes fear is what motivates so many white fans to turn to social media; social media provides a space where they can hide behind their screens and engage with black athletes in an unfiltered manner without fear of consequence or repercussion. The mere existence of the black male athlete ‘poses a threat’ to the same people they’re expected to perform for, win for, and entertain. These fans are willing to spend thousands of dollars on private access to players and events, but only if the players are submissive, diluted, and more manageable.

This research successfully served its purpose, it has filled the hole. We can no longer use lack of knowledge or understanding as justification for why we aren’t doing everything in our power to cater to the black, male athlete. Participants shared their frustrations with the current system; they had no choice but to be reminded of their race throughout the entirety of their time competing on the collegiate level. There is no doubt that there is work to be done, the question is where do we begin? I don’t expect the racial makeup of fanbases to immediately change into something more representative of the teams they support. However, I do expect a variety of options to be considered by both individual universities and the NCAA to determine how they can provide their black athletes with more support, comfortability, and community. Whether its reevaluating the number of tickets athletes are allotted each game in effort to get more of their family and friends in the stands. Whether it’s offering an annual conference or symposium that focuses on bettering the experiences of black athletes while also preparing them for greater opportunities upon leaving the university. Something has to be done and the time is now.

LIMITATIONS

The biggest limitation I encountered throughout my research was difficulty in finding participants for my study, and more specifically getting them to follow through with our scheduled calls. I relied heavily on previous relationships and connections made through networking to find my sample, but I underestimated the busyness of top tier collegiate athletes, especially during an international outbreak. Having to omit personal information was another limitation of my work. I tried to establish rapport with the athletes so they would feel comfortable opening and being transparent with me. The athletes shared so many great stories about their personal experiences with racism on their specific campuses, but much of that information had to be omitted from the paper in fear of including any minor details that would make the participants or their universities identifiable.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

To expand on this work, it would be interesting to hear the perspectives of the white fan. The theoretical lens chosen, White Habitus, explains the socialization of the white, dominant group, but this work only gave a voice to the black athlete. I explored many different methodological options before making the final decision to focus on black men's basketball players only.

I considered a comparative analysis between black athletes at predominantly white institutions (PWI) v. black athletes at historically black colleges or universities (HBCU). This study would allow the researcher to more accurately assess the effects of a fan base whose racial diversity is in alignment with the athletes, the difficulty with this study is that there are no Power 5 HBCUs, meaning the visibility, resources, arena size, and access level is drastically different in these environments which would affect the comparison. To control for all the factors above, the

experiences of black athletes at HBCUs would need to be compared that of black athletes at PWIs in comparable conferences.

I considered comparing the experiences of the black athletes at PWIs v. white athletes at PWIs. Again, this study would juxtapose the experiences of black athletes and white athletes but now in the same environments, meaning the effects of their racial identity would be made clear. It would be interesting to compare the experience of athletes belonging to the same teams, even controlling for their position, age, and productivity level to ensure the results were all rooted in racial implications.

I also considered comparing the black experiences of basketball players to that of football players. Basketball players are more accessible to fans due to the size and intimacy of their playing environment. However, the racial representation on most Power 5 football teams is out of unalignment with their fanbase as well. Future research should also include the experiences of female athletes, with a focus on the dually marginalized black, female athlete. Understanding the intersectionality of the black, female athlete and how her race, sexuality, and gender work in tandem to influence the experience will further enrich the discourse. Although, I have no regrets regarding the participants or criteria I chose, I think the narrative can only be enhanced by expanding and giving others a voice; variance of perspective will present a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between race and fandom.

TABLE 1	
Research Question	Theme
How do interactions with fans impact the overall student-athlete experience?	Support Belonging Access Identity Interaction
In what ways does race affect or influence fan/athlete interactions?	Threat management Representation Patriarchal benevolence White Savior Complex
What actions can the university take to lessen the likelihood of negative racial interactions between player and fan?	Resources Programs Responsibility of Athletic Department v. University
n = 5	

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