

BLACK WOMEN IN CANADIAN SPORT: THE IMPLICATIONS OF EQUITY,
DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION POLICIES IN USPORT

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Dedication

To the Black women athletes who let me use their stories. I hope they feel seen and heard.

Abstract

There have been various academic works dedicated to the inclusionary practice in the world of elite sporting programming, some of which have touched upon the subject of racism, specifically the treatment of Black athletes. Recently, the debate surrounding the representation of the Black body in athletics has gained immense popularity in academic spaces. However, there continues to be a research gap regarding the treatment of Black women. This research explores this relationship and establishes a discursive space for this aspect of sporting scholarship. It examines the experiences of Black women athletes across two USport institutions, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge, utilizing the oral histories of Black women athletes and one-on-one interviews with USport administrators. This research investigates the correlation between the treatment of Black women athletes and institutional policies. This research concludes that there remain inconsistencies regarding the intent of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policies and the experience of Black women athletes in USport, as well as the presence of racist and gendered behaviours towards these bodies in USport.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Work described in this thesis received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Black Women in Canadian Collegiate Sport,” No. Pro00138996, October 30, 2024.

USE OF GENERATIVE AI

This project used AI to transcribe the oral histories of Black women athletes.

PREFACE

My Athletic Journey: Finding My Voice

This project is not one of objectivity, solely based on academic jargon. It is a composition of stories told by Black women for Black women with arching themes of blatant and subtle instances of discrimination. Although this thesis is written in what most would consider a structurally Western discourse, the reader needs to understand that the stories told by these Black women extend beyond the words on the page. The themes discussed in this thesis address an ongoing fight against the political and social disenfranchisement of the Black woman's body. This experience is one that I, the author, remain very familiar with.

Throughout my experiences as a university athlete playing basketball, I encountered various instances in which I felt like an outsider, whether physically or in terms of my position. Fitting in became an everyday consideration. In my first year, my coach told me that I was a “natural.” I was often matched up with other Black players. This was because I matched well athletically. I was usually yelled at when I would mess up. I remember a specific incident when I failed to call a screen for my teammate. This was accompanied by a vivid scream from my coach at the time. I had never heard the gym so quiet as echoes of “it was your fault” ran in my head far past the end of the game.

In my second year of playing university basketball, my confidence as a player grew. This confidence oozed into other aspects of my life. Although I had a new coach, I was excited. He believed I would be an “important part of the team.” Later that year, I remembered him breaking his clipboard on the sideline following a missed layup. That same coach would constantly compliment me on my hair every time I got it done. He would say, “Nice new dreads,” following a public shaming about my stats that season. I built up resentment for this coach. A couple of

weeks later, he called my hair dreads again. I responded angrily, letting him know that it was “a very white man comment to make” and that they were not in fact dreadlocks but braids. I recall speaking with my captain at the time about the incident and her saying that I shouldn't feel bad because now we were even. She believed that my coach and I were now even. His microaggression about my Black hair was equivalent to my outburst.

In my second year playing university basketball, I became more vocal. I would question Black men about their disdain for Black women. I became more confident in my voice and began questioning specific perspectives. Some of my chosen topics made the group uncomfortable at times. This did not deter me.

In my third year of playing basketball, I was excited to start with my new team. After taking two years off during COVID, I believed I had found my voice and agency and could better navigate serious conversations. This school was far from home; however, I was confident that playing at a higher level would ensure more growth. During one of our first team events, one of my new teammates mentioned that the team was visiting her grandparents in Medicine Hat. She made sure to note, however, to the group that they were a bit racist, following this, she said “sorry.” This was met with an uncomfortable silence. I remembered feeling very embarrassed, hoping that I hadn't ruined the mood. Later that day, the same teammate sent me a text, apologizing for her inappropriate comment. In my third year, I was accused of being “too aggressive,” following an on-court session that left my teammate with a concussion. This rumour circulated between both the men's and women's teams following me into my fourth year.

In my fourth year, I began to feel more comfortable in my new school. I had achieved leadership status on my team and thought that I had started making connections with my

university community. My game also improved. I was celebrated as being one of the best players on my team, winning the MVP award and gaining recognition from my peers and coaches. In my fourth year, for the first time in USports, I was on a team with another Black athlete. As previous friends, we would often joke around, call out questionable behavior, and use humor as a way of addressing uncomfortable moments with our teammates. In my fourth year, I had a better relationship with my coach. In my fourth year, I was also voted one of the top 5 most confrontational players on the team by other teammates.

In my fifth and final year. As I find myself in a very politically charged space, the questions have become bolder and the voices much louder. I have found myself at the center of racial debates, simultaneously regarded as “the Black voice” by my institution while heavily policed on what I can and cannot say. I find myself re-challenging the same issues I faced in my first year, witnessing the same microaggressions, and educating the same individuals.

As I reflect on my entire athletic journey, I find similarities between my story and that of the athletes interviewed. I understand that my research has its limitations and cannot be the sole platform for Black women to share their voices. However, as a Black woman student athlete, having experienced racism within sport, this continues to fuel my desire to explore such injustices. My passion and lived experience remain the foundation of my research and the likely purpose of my ongoing inquiries as a researcher.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Accessibility Belonging and Community
ACB	Access Community and Belonging
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CIAU	Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union
CIS	Canadian Interuniversity Sport
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DEI	Diversity Equity and Inclusion
EDI	Diversity Equity Inclusion
EDIA	Equity Diversity Inclusion Accessibility
EE	Employment Equity
ESL	English as a Second Language
IAT	Implicit Association Tests
IRCC	Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada
JEDI	Justice Equity Diversity Inclusion
LGBTQ+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (+ others)
LGBTQ2S+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Two-Spirited (+ others)
LSU	Louisiana State University
MA	Master of Arts
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
OPV	Organization for the Prevention of Violence
OUA	Ontario University Athletics
SIC	Sports Integrity Commissioner
SWAN	Scientific Women's Academic Network
TCT	Triple Consciousness Theory
UCCMS	Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment
UCP	United Conservation Party

CHAPTER 1: BLACK WOMEN IN CANADIAN SPORT: THE IMPLICATIONS OF EQUITY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION POLICIES IN USPORT

In the last five years, one in five people have reported experiencing or witnessing “unfair treatment, racism or discrimination in sport,” according to Statistics Canada (Government of Canada, 2024). The motivation reported by witnesses, victims, athletes, and spectators has been attributed mostly to race discrimination at 64%, followed by physical appearance at 42%, and ethnicity and culture at 38% (Government of Canada, 2024). There have been various academic works dedicated to inclusionary practices in elite sporting programming, some of which have considered racism, specifically the treatment of Black athletes (Joseph et al., 2022; Withycombe, 2011; Nzindukiyimana, 2020). Janelle Joseph, Jenny Lind Withycombe, and Omella Nzindukiyimana are some who have begun exploring the intersectional experiences of racism. Recently, the debate of inclusion concerning the Black body in sport has gained immense popularity in academic spaces. However, there continues to be a gap regarding the treatment of Black women and the direct correlation to institutional policies.

In this MA thesis I seek to understand these relationships and to create a discursive space for this aspect of sporting scholarship. I explore the experiences of Black women athletes in USport, the national governing body for university sports in Canada, drawing on oral histories of Black women-identified athletes. Through this project I also consider the implications and assumptions associated with gender and race, central to the positionality of Black women's unique and complicated experiences. Therefore, this project explores and explains the physical and mental assumptions placed on Black bodies by coaches, administrations, and other categories of workers in the sports industry, some of which are linked directly and indirectly. These expectations can be attributed to racist, sexist, and classist beliefs regarding labor

historically carried out by Black women's bodies. As Black women have been institutionally and intentionally excluded and forced to negotiate performances of strength and femininity, there remain barriers to accessing higher levels of sporting activities and a continued lack of representation in sports institutes.

In addressing the treatments taken against these bodies I seek to investigate the correlation between the treatment of Black women athletes and institutional policies. Equity, diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies are implemented to empower racialized groups and create a safe environment. Still, very little has happened to make these policies work to the benefit of minority athletes. Often perpetuated through inclusionary practices, universities have continued to preach diversity without making its principles open to all, especially racial minorities. These institutions often fail to provide concrete plans to implement ideas governing EDI. However, as women's sports continue to gain immense popularity, especially in the American and Canadian contexts, their experiences remain very important. In addressing the tension between athletes and institutional policies in these contexts, this research aims to inform the experiences of marginalized and often-ignored populations within the sport world by examining untold and ongoing stories from athletes themselves. Findings from this research will encourage policy changes, creating a safer space for all athletes.

Throughout this research, nine Black women student-athletes from the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary were interviewed about institutional EDI policies and practices. Black women athletes were asked whether they had ever felt the need to access such policies and whether they understood the reporting structures currently available to students. Administrators from the University of Lethbridge athletics department and EDI office were also

questioned about the effectiveness of these policies, their perspectives on changes to EDI, and the relationships between athletes and EDI policies.

Historical Background

Historically, the Black body has been the site of struggle and strife for equal rights in all fields of human endeavor. This has marked the lives of Black athletes even today and remains the legacy of colonial domination. Black women have been institutionally and intentionally excluded on account of their race, gender, and class from several social, economic, and cultural institutions. Since the arrival of the first African Slave in British North America in 1619, Black bodies have continued to be exploited for their physical ability by America's capitalist society (Hunt II, 2020). Characterized as either "subhuman or savages" or "mere primates," theories of their intellectual inferiority in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were constructed and circulated for devious reasons (Yancy, 2017). America has historically portrayed the Black body as being naturally fit for labor (Hawkins, 1995). This legacy of abuse of the Black body is similar to the commodification of this body in the more recent regime of the drafting and recruiting system in collegial and professional sporting arenas.

During slavery, the Black body, like her male counterpart, was sold on the auction block based primarily on her physical capability to do manual and domestic work. Described as "the first era of Black commodification," the injustice of this act has been well documented (Hunt II, 2019). Tropes such as "mammy," "jezebel," and "sapphire" were used to describe Black women. The Black woman slave was "seen, and temporally related, that is, renamed and recognized only as an instrument of utility and coerced into performing" roles relevant to assigned identity

(Edwards, 1999, p. 280). National and collegiate leagues operate similarly. The NBA, WNBA, MLB, NFL, and NHL have players undergo testing and evaluation of their physical qualities to facilitate potential trades. For College athletes, this remains true, as coaches recruit players based on their statistical success on their high school teams. These sporting institutions only validate Black athletic bodies to the degree that they are valuable for other white bodies and white businesses (Thrasher, 2016). Behaving like slave owners, these facilitators select athletes whom they believe will contribute to their winning team in the given sports season. Black women then undergo trade deals between teams based on their physical and marketable value at the moment of recruitment or draft. Studies measuring the differences between Black and white athletes' fast-twitch muscle fibers, biochemical levels, and enzymes have also been at the forefront of geneticists', anthropologists', and physiologists' interests (Hawkins, 1995). This has continued to inform the differences between races, contributing to negative biases associated with the Black body.

What's even more damaging for this disenfranchised group is the narrative surrounding pain tolerance, which was used in the past to justify slavery and the African slave trade. The belief that there was a biological difference between Blacks and other races was and is especially advocated by scientists, physicians, and slave owners (Hoffman et al., 2016). During slavery, it was accepted that Black slaves were immune to pain (Washington, 2008). The application of this assumption remains true in contemporary sports-racialized patients within the medical field and becomes very important when discussing the physical and mental capacities assigned to these bodies.

Literature Review

Sports is a complex arena for Black bodies. It is one of the few places where Black people have been perceived to be superior to their white counterparts (Sailes, 1993). As is the case with many such institutions, racism has been part of the social and cultural foundations of Western societies, and the admission of Black superiority is part of the expression of racism in the sports world (Singer, 2005). Racism has also been demonstrated as being a well-established reality (McKenzie & Joseph, 2023). The United States may be the closest example of the Canadian sports system, as it shares the same cultural foundations (Joseph & Kuo, 2009). Given that much of the research on this subject has focused on Black men in sports, this research draws on both Canadian and American sports literature to unpack the exceptional Black experience in sports.

Compared to other white athletes, the acceptance of minority athletes in sports is vastly different (Bopp et al., 2017). Racialized athletes are also often over- and underrepresented in categories of sports throughout the professional and collegiate levels, as well as within specific types of sports (Martin & Ebrary, 2015). For example, research has shown that Black athletes were over-represented in strength at the 2000 Olympic Games (Hardin et al., 2004). Media images of these athletes in strength sports, such as boxing, were inconsistent with the actual medal results of Black athletes (Hardin et al., 2004). On the other hand, this is not the case with white athletes in the sport. There was an obvious overrepresentation of white athletes in “aesthetic or non-contact sports” such as diving and gymnastics, which require immense mental focus and toughness (Hardin et al., 2004, p. 214-215). Historically, Black athletes have been excluded from these categories of skilled sports while their white counterparts have constantly

been overrepresented (Primm et al., 2007). White athletes have also mostly played quarterback in football, point guard in basketball, and catcher in baseball, positions that have been attributed to great intelligence, decision-making skills, and leadership. Black athletes have filled positions of running back and receiver in football, forward in basketball, and outfielder in baseball, positions requiring “brute strength” (Coakley, 2007; Jibou, 1988; Knee, 2004; Lomax, 1999; Spence, 1999). This separation of body capacity by race indicates a clear divide in the capabilities of athletes in this sphere (Hardin, 2004). It has also been hypothesized that members of minority groups may have been discouraged from attaining specific sporting heights due to their race (McPherson, 1975). Hardin (2004) argues, while exploring the 2000 Olympics games for gendered and racialized athletes, that the reason for this has been the desire to uphold the power of whiteness over other races, which is part of upholding power relations in the larger US society. This is achieved through “non-threatening” means, which fail to challenge or disrupt the already established notions of white superiority. This was also true in Canadian settings. Canadian sports historian Ornella Nzindukiyimana (2020) explores such anxieties in her academic work, concluding that the racial anxiety trope, where “a few Blacks were tolerable, but to many were menace,” remained relevant in Canadian sporting settings as well (p.1378).

Black student-athletes must also consider both academic and athletic pressures during their time at school. Although there are strict guidelines regarding the academic performance of eligible athletes, Black athletes are almost always addressed as athletes first, not the other way around (Nartey & James, 2022). The “dumb jock” stereotype, although often understood as a cinematic trope, has been applied to Black athletes as they have been described by their white peers as being less astute and studious during their academic journey (Sailes, 1993). This understanding has been attributed to various social structures and assumptions based on notions

of superior physical talent, naturally occurring genes, and perceived capability to run faster and jump higher than their white counterparts (Nartey & James, 2022). Sailes (1993) suggests that the most prominent stereotypes of African Americans concerned their superior physical abilities, temperament, and intelligence, qualities often attributed to athletic success.

Based on these racist narratives of the Black body and its capabilities, coaches would suggest “student-athlete friendly course(s)” suited to prioritize their athletic pursuits rather than their academic goals (Comeaux, 2010, p.391). Black American athletes have been reported to feel frustrated by useless and unnecessary academic pursuits, as both coaches and academic advisors within their institutions (Singer, 2005). They have additionally reported such realities as racially motivated (Bimper, 2015). As a result, the only means of achieving opportunities for management or decision-making offices had to be secured through dominance on the field (Singer, 2005).

Smikle and Trusell (2024) assert that Black -identified athletes have undergone microaggressions in sporting arenas over the decades, reporting feelings of anger, fear, and hopelessness because of anti-black stereotyping and intense surveillance. Covert and overt expressions of racist actions provided evidence as to how Black athletes were depicted as less intelligent and capable than other white athletes, making them more likely to be excluded from leadership positions (Smikle & Trussell, 2024). They felt treated differently from their white peers and held to a much higher standard regarding success in their positions. These athletes were categorized as “Black athlete” and rarely given opportunities to showcase their work ethic (Nzindukiyimana, 2020). Black athletes, especially in football, reported not having the same allowance to make mistakes. They often experience higher mistrust from coaches and staff when performing (Singer, 2005).

Additionally, Black athletes felt they were punished more consistently and harshly for misdeeds in their personal lives compared to other white athletes (Singer, 2005). Addressing such inconsistencies remained difficult for these athletes, as they did not feel it could be achieved without jeopardizing their status on the team (Singer, 2005). As there are universities and sports leagues with unclear policies about diversity in managerial positions within sports, Black athletes reported feeling uncomfortable addressing many inequalities (Simiyu, 2012). This also remains true for Canadian athletes in Canadian post-secondary institutions (McKenzie et al., 2024). Research on Ontario University Athletics (OUA), an organization similar to USport, found that ideas of whiteness were centralized within university sports (McKenzie et al., 2024). The lack of diversity among senior leaders has fostered a bias that permeates the processes of hiring, recruitment, and promotion in the sporting administration (McKenzie et al., 2024). Bimper (2015) argues that Black student-athletes have recognized such under-representation and attribute this to racial inequality. In dealing with instances of racism and discrimination, the structure of sports administration in this case lacks experience, often highlighting blindness, ignorance, and naivety to both systemic and individual forms of racism, resulting in inaction (McKenzie et al., 2024).

Research on Black women in sports is much more limited in scope but also echoes similar themes as those of their male counterparts. Like Black men, the most noteworthy narrative about Black women athletes is that, regardless of the differences between individual values, they remain simply “Black athletes.” However, they must also navigate gender discrimination and racial assumptions (Nzindukiyimana, 2020). This study considers both

Canadian and American contexts when exploring the experiences of Black women athletes in previous literature.

Representation in Sport

Racial representation in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the United States, for Black athletes, remains minimal. In 2014, for example, African American women reportedly made up only 4.7% of the college athletes' population in this league, with the highest percentage being concentrated in basketball and track and field (Lapchick et al., 2015). Like Black male athletes, misconceptions about the skills and natural abilities of Black women's bodies are still rampant in sports (Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). Research in both the Canadian and American contexts indicated that Black women athletes felt pressure when they both accepted and rejected stereotypes of their natural ability in the sporting arena (Withycombe, 2011; Nichols, 2019). Black women-identifying athletes are perceived as having natural athletic advantages, such as jumping higher, running faster, and being stronger in body. As a result, these athletes are often “singled out and assigned all sorts of racial descriptors” when referred to during their athletic endeavors (Nzindukiyimana, 2020, p.1377). These assumptions remain associated with this body, significantly impacting their sports experience (Douglas, 2002). These assumptions also complicate their participation in traditionally white spaces, as Black women are viewed as both extraordinary and exemplary (Withycombe, 2011). As a result, many feel immense pressure to excel.

In assessing the categorization of Black women in these sports, there continues to be a gap in the research and data that clearly demonstrates positional differences as a means of

perceived intellectual differences on the part of Black women. However, as women's basketball continues to gain immense popularity in mainstream media, igniting conversations around the importance of these leagues, white bodies continue to be centered as leaders of movement both on and off the court, as Black bodies continue to undergo erasure and misogynoir in sport (Razack & Joseph, 2021). This has been illustrated in various ways as discussed previously but may also be analyzed through the depictions of Black women-identified bodies in sports. In a study examining the descriptors of sportscasting for both men's and women's basketball games in 2001, Eastman and Billings (2011) found that although Black women made up most starters that year, they received proportionally less commentary highlighting their skills than other white women-identified athletes. Stereotypes regarding their innate athletic ability by announcers were additionally congruent with their Black male counterparts (Eastman & Billings, 2001). Withycombe (2011) illustrates such understandings, highlighting how Black athletes felt that university media guides reinforced stereotypes that accepted gendered, racist, and classist ideologies by emphasizing Black women as sexual and dominating vessels of sport.

“Dumb-Jock” Stereotype

The “dumb-jock” trope also remains relevant for Black women athletes within sports settings, as research also indicates feelings of frustration regarding academic interests. Withycombe (2011) concluded that Black American athletes found that they were often portrayed as unintelligent by both their peers and coaches. This resulted in a lack of academic advising and mentorship, and in continuous surveillance by administrators of academic progress. As a result, Black American and Canadian women-identified athletes reported having to work

especially hard to prove themselves, as they were frequently met with mistrust of their educational priorities (Withycombe, 2011; Nichols, 2019). Foster's (2003) study on historically white institutions also reflected such findings, concluding that Black women-athletes experienced racial stereotyping from athletic employees as they predicted their bodies to be underdeveloped academically, immature, and misinformed as to the degree of difficulty they were likely to face in the university setting. As a result, student-athletes felt greater pressure to succeed than their white peers (Foster, 2003). Stone (2012) also conducts a similar analysis, exploring the effects of stereotypes on student-athletes in the classroom. Analyzing the stereotype threat to the label "scholar-athlete," Stone concluded that when primed with that label, African American athletes placed higher importance on scholarship, adding to their stress, performing worse on academic tests than their white counterparts. These findings proved that when labeled, certain stereotypes arose. This led Black to become consumed by that idea, accepting the deficiencies associated with such labels. For Black athletes, this can lead to negative reinforcements that deter them from reaching their full academic potential.

Mistrust and Harsher Punishment

Racism in the form of mistrust is also very apparent in this group. Burening et al. (2005) found that Black women athletes reported on various accounts of experiencing preferential treatment compared to their white peers in American universities. The stereotypes placed on these athletes, whether positive or negative, were demonstrated as having adverse impacts on Black women athletes (Howard & Borgella, 2018). Stereotyping in these circumstances may act

to acknowledge both the athlete's gendered and racialized identity (Howard & Bogella, 2018). Depending on the situational factor, whether this pertains to athletic achievements or intelligence, the Black women athlete will feel different pressures and discrimination based on her gender, her race, or both simultaneously (Howard & Borgella, 2018). In addressing such treatment, acceptance into the team and feeling comfortable with the coach remain very difficult to achieve for these athletes (Bruening et al., 2005). As race is often used as an indicator of both their successes and failures, a sense of dissonance arises when attempting to negotiate their athletic accomplishments and self-worth (Bruening et al., 2005). Withycombe (2011) also shows that Black women athletes report feeling that their coaches do not trust them to make critical decisions on and off the court, as they were often reduced to just their athletic work. As they are expected to excel only in one realm of sport the physical labor it entails the demand from coaches raises anxieties about winning and upholding physical standards for the group/team (Withycombe, 2011; Nichols, 2019). The preconceived notion about the “attitudes” and “behavioral” problems brought on by deviances to this reality due to the inscribed stereotypes placed on these bodies works to further establish these athletes as loud and untamed (Withycombe, 2011; Douglas, (2002). Furthermore, Black women athletes reported frustrations concerning the series of steps put in place for formal complaints, processes that can and have been attributed to aiding in the continual marginalization and social inequalities of Black women in sport (Eke et al, 2024).

Lack of Diversity in Sports Institutions

Most research concludes that coach involvement and support are essential for athletes' success (Horn, 2008). This remains very true for Black women athletes. Although it has been recently reported that 40% of college and university undergraduates in Canada are racialized, only 10% of these groups hold top university positions in sports administration (Heroux and Strashin, 2020). While Black women athletes were reported to hold some leadership roles in addition to their athletic success, research clearly demonstrates inconsistencies with feeling adequately supported in these sporting spaces (Bruening et al. 2005). Participants of the Black women-identified Coach Membership Program in Ontario (BFCMP), a program exploring the impact of Black representation for Black women athletes, concluded that Black mentorship was beneficial in aiding the development of Black leaders in sports, building relationships to resist loneliness as athletes, and nurturing resilience through community (Joseph & McKenzie, 2022). This enhances young Black women athletes' feelings of inclusion in university programming. Studies also suggest that the lack of diversity and equal representation play a crucial role in the silencing of Black American women-identified athletes, reducing their positive experience significantly (Bruening et al. 2005).

Intersection of Race and Sex in Sport

Compared to their Black men-identifying athletes and white women-identifying counterparts, Black women have far fewer resources, exposure, and belief in their capabilities to provide credible forms of athletic accomplishments (Hoerber, 2007). They remain underfunded, highly sexualized, and under immense surveillance by both their peers and the administration of their given institutions (Foster, 2003; Smikle & Trusell, 2024). The goal of this research is to

provide an in-depth analysis of their experiences as gendered and racialized persons in sports; the exploration of this intersectionality remains crucial to achieving this goal. Therefore, biases that arise from stereotypes, whether because of gender, race, and class, have immense implications in sporting and societal contexts (Eastman & Billings, 2001). This research draws on previous scholarship to determine the established understandings of how these impacts Black women athletes in both Canadian and American contexts.

Opportunities

In sports activities where Black athletes make up a reasonable portion of participants, opportunities still tend to be more readily available for Black men and white women compared to Black women athletes. For Canadian women-identified athletes, the igniting force for equality began following the second wave of feminism and women's liberation, which was spurred by the Royal Commission in 1970 that advocated for federal and provincial/territorial governments to act in this direction, motivating greater participation by girls in sport. In the United States, Title IX of the Educational Amendments also empowered women in sports. Put in place in 1972 to protect athletes from discrimination, this federal Civil Rights Law states that “no person in the United States shall, based on sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefit of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Morgan, 2021). The amendment was passed to ensure that both women and men were provided equal opportunities to participate in sports, receive equitable scholarships, and receive equal treatment in collegiate sports (Morgan, 2021). Since its implementation, Black women in college sports in America have increased by 955%, yet Black

women athletes still lag behind every other ethnic group (Lopiano, 2007). Belief in sexism inevitably means that women are naturally inferior to men. It is one of the intersectional hubs that remain relevant in the sports arena, as women have and continue to challenge images of the “ideal athlete.”

It has been reported that thirty-five years following Title IX, Black Women have yet to prosper to the extent of their white women counterparts (Evans, 1998). These findings also demonstrate that women continue to receive fewer scholarships, women's teams are less promoted and receive a lesser share of the operating budget than male athletes and their teams (Danylchuk and MacLean, 2001). When comparing various incentives provided by Canadian Universities, a study exploring gender equity practice in major sports such as hockey, rugby, and basketball in the CIAU concluded that there were far fewer roster spaces for women (Hoeber, 2007). The men's hockey roster ranged from 24 to 30 players, while the women's roster had 15 players. This was also true for rugby,, as the women's roster comprised 17 players, while the men's team was almost double that at 32 players (Hoeber, 2007). Although almost given the same facilities to practice, the same study found that the women’s ice hockey team played less than half the number of season games compared to the men. They traveled less, competing against fewer teams during the season. There continues to be a push to increase the number of women’s teams in Canadian institutions, but the inequalities explored in this study suggest that this would not directly address the funding and resource gaps faced by women. The culture of gendering will remain in Canadian sport (Hoeber, 2007).

Black women continue to suffer from such inconsistencies. Sexism in their case may also be demonstrated through various avenues of inequality, such as media and announcer coverage, funding, and overall treatment within their different institutions. Research conducted by Danielle

Gabay (2019) found that when asked about their employment, Black Canadian women athletes currently enrolled in academic institutions reported having “financial and psychological stress” when attempting to keep the required GPA to maintain a scholarship, balance an external work schedule, and their social life commitments (Gabay, 2019, p.235). When questioned in the same study about how participation in athletics may impact their future employment opportunities and financial stability, several participants contended that although they had dreams of an athletic career beyond University, they soon had to face the reality that there was proportionally less funding in women’s sports as well as less opportunity to attain those positions (Gabay, 2019).

The Villainization of Black Bodies

Henry (1994) argues that the media plays a pivotal role in the racialization of crime. This is true of the media's impact on Black women in sports. The sexualization of this group becomes especially important in understanding their intersecting inequalities. Sexualization and masculinization of Black women athletes have occurred throughout their existence in sports, and it is likely to continue. Over the years, embarrassing stereotypes emphasizing Black women's unwelcomeness in sports have indeed deterred some from participating in athletics (Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). Media coverage reflects the same understanding. Women-identifying athletes have continued to be misrepresented and vilified in the media (Martin & McDonald, 2012). Messages relating to physical beauty and sexual desire infused by the male gaze have often been the prime focus in the depiction of these women (Riebock, 2013). Recently, it was determined that the need to attain greater levels of success through media representation has encouraged women athletes to permit such sexualization (Riebock, 2013). Serena Williams, arguably one of

the most famous Black women athletes of all time, is an important figure to examine regarding the masculinization and sexualization of Black women in the media. She has often been portrayed as the personification of “the ultimate Black woman athlete”. In her debut, Serena Williams challenges expectations of race, excelling in a predominantly white sport, and tearing down hegemonic ideals of athleticism (Martin, 2012). In accomplishing these triumphs, she has been a victim of changes in dress codes, reflecting institutional desires to make Black women athletes adhere to white standards, hyper-surveillance, and racism (Borda, 2021). Serena and her sister Venus Williams have been labeled “arrogant, aloof, and self-absorbed” because of wearing beaded cornrows, tinted hairstyles, and “tacky outfits” (McKay & Johnson, 2008, p. 496). The famous 2003 catsuit centers on racialized and targeted depictions of Serena Williams being described as a “hooker look” by the Washington Post's fashion writer (McKay & Johnson, 2008, p. 496). Additionally, throughout her career, Serena has also been described as a “sledgehammer” on the court, having an “Amazonian physique and piranha mentality”, while her white opponents have often acquired descriptions around gracefulness and artistry when playing tennis (Viner, 2007; Mott, 2000).

More recently, such notions have made their way to collegiate sports. As women's basketball continues to generate popularity, key contributors to the movement, such as Caitlin Clarke and Angel Reese, have found themselves in a controversy that echoes and reiterates the same set of stereotypical schemes for Black women athletes and their media perception. During a much-anticipated final NCAA game in 2023, key players, Clarke from Ohio State and Reese from Louisiana State University (LSU) exchanged moments of competitive banter. Following the game, Reese (the Black player) was instantly targeted by the media, labeled “classless” and accused of unsportsmanlike conduct (Gregory, 2023). Even though the gestures discussed were

displayed by both Reese and Clarke during the season and in the championship games, social media outlets condemned and singled out the Angel. Following her championship, Angel commented on the racist double standards placed on her as a Black women's athlete in university, saying “All year, I was critiqued for who I was...I’m too hood, I’m too ghetto...When other people do it, and y’all don’t say anything. So, this is for the girls that look like me.” (*Independent Digital News*, 2024). Reese and Williams are proof of the double jeopardy faced by Black women athletes in contemporary contexts. Although institutions will have athletes believe that racism does not exist, covert means of disenfranchising remain for racialized athletes (Trussel et al. 2023). Acts of racism are becoming more complex due to the subtlety employed in the acts themselves. For Black women, there are many dimensions to consider in cases like the ones previously outlined. Kristi Tredway (2020) argues that excellent performances of blackness disturb and confuse expert tennis. This understanding can be applied to numerous white dominated sports. As Black women find themselves existing in multiple intersections of discrimination, understanding and addressing their experience may work to benefit the well-being of all athletes.

USport: Governing Body of Canadian University Sport

According to recent postings, USports was officially introduced on October 20th, 2016 (U SPORT). Previously known as the Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union (CIAU) and Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), USport is its most recent title. It is the umbrella governing body for different sporting organizations in the Canadian University system. These sports include basketball, cross-country racing, curling, field hockey (women), soccer, swimming, track

and field, volleyball, and wrestling. There are currently 56 member universities, 12,000 student-athletes, and 77,000 games and events per year among USport Universities (U SPORT). All 56 of these universities are split into four regional associations and/or conferences, which host regional championships with the intent “to give our student-athletes and national championships the visibility, appreciation, and reward they deserve”. The USport brand is committed to “revitalizing [their] place in the national sports conversation” through various entertainment strategies (U SPORT). Financially funded by the federal government, the ultimate goal of this league is to serve the “national priorities,” the first being the “coordination, promotion and development of high-performance sport” and the second the “provisions of administration and technical leadership, policy direction, consultative services, financial resources to function effectively as the primary agent for excellence in sport policy” (U SPORT).

USport is registered as a Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) member. The UCCMS is the National multi-sport agreement produced by the Sports Integrity Commissioner. Its purpose is to “prevent and address maltreatment across all levels of the Canadian sports system,” providing guidelines as to how student-athletes and sports leaders are to behave to create the desired safe environment for all participants (Sports Integrity Commissioner [SIC], 2019). Within this document, many of the objectives for Canadian sports can be directly correlated to ensuring diversity and inclusion in these settings. According to the UCCMS, participating in sports should ensure respect despite varying “race, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, and other characteristics” (SIC, 2019). The UCCMS also acknowledges that discrimination may take many forms among sports participants (SIC, 2019). This may be overt or subtle forms of harm that may be demonstrated through the inaccessibility of services,

benefits, and opportunities, unfair treatment, verbal insults/messaging, and the support for misogynistic, racist, ableist, homophobic, or transphobic attitudes and stereotypes in sport (SIC,2019). The UCCMS also recognizes that these outcomes may not always be accompanied by the intent to harm (SIC,2019).

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Most research recognizes equity as a process of acknowledging privilege and systemic power structures within higher education institutions (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). The origin of the equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) movement in the Canadian university system dates to 2005, following the Athena Swan (Scientific Women’s Academic Network) charter in the UK, which was intended to promote gender equality in UK universities (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021). Although the Athena Swan policies were initially concerned with gender equality, they were broadened to include other minority groups, such as Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, racial minorities, and the LGBTQ+ communities (Dimensions: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Canada, 2023). EDI policies conventionally focused on two goals: the first on prevention, and the second on responding to acts of discrimination (Campbell, 2021). An important part of these programs is the EDI educational strategies. These programs remain crucial to implementing the policies' first goal, as they aim to inform participants about attitudes and behaviors that have discriminatory impacts, whether intended or not (Campbell, 2021). Prevention remains an important consideration, as these programs were designed to foster understanding of conscious and unconscious biases that may occur during decision-making (Campbell, 2021).

Regardless of these principles, the United States has continued to deviate from EDI principles and practices. Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the institution's biggest division, recently announced its shift away from diversity statements (Blinder & Schuessler, 2024). According to an article by Alan Blinder and Jennifer Scuessler (2024), "after months of turmoil over its values and the role of equity initiatives in higher education," Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences has opted to remove the requirement for job applicants to submit diversity statements. Rather, only final candidates for teaching positions will have to describe and or discuss how they will work to strengthen learning communities and encourage students to ask valuable questions and share ideas. These changes came following a controversy following Claudine Gay's, the first Black president of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, resignation after being accused of plagiarism and complaints of complacency regarding anti-Semitism. However, the change was attributed to faculty feedback, fearing that the diversity statements were too limited in information, whilst depending on vocabulary that was not accessible to all students, specifically international students. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology echoed such claims following Harvard's decision to "no longer require diversity statements," labeling the statements ineffective and an infringement on freedom of expression. Various states have banned or prohibited public universities from requiring such statements, such as Florida, North Dakota, and Texas. Following Harvard's removal of its EDI or DEI statement, some professors, such as Dr. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, have expressed shock, noting that professors who taught race and racism at Harvard "faced attacks from conservative critics in recent months and the university has yet to defend them" (Alonso et al. 2024). Dr. Muhammad states that rather than being concerned with racial equality, Harvard's decision to exclude diversity statements aims to appease conservative and political agendas. However, others argue that it is unfair to center

identifiers such as race, gender, and/or sexual orientation when trying to choose the most qualified (Alonso et al. 2024).

Following the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, twenty-three U.S states have “either banned CRT or have bills currently moving through the legislature” (Hodes, 2023). It is important to note that there have been, and remain, critiques of the performative aspects of diversity in these institutions. This backlash, however, is sometimes confused with institutional gaslighting and the erasing of critical discussions within academia (MacKenzie et al., 2023). Similar to structures in sports, Canada often emulates the United States in some institutional policies (Sarkonak, 2023). However, there have been multiple examples of educational practices to combat barriers faced by disenfranchised groups in Canada. For example, the Dalhousie nursing program and the University of Calgary Law School maintain spots for Indigenous and/or Black students (Sarkonak, 2023). Alberta specifically, however, has begun movements away from EDI/DEI practices. Adopting the policy framework originating at the University of Chicago, Ontario, and Alberta government principles on free speech closely emulate those currently utilized in the United States (D’orazio, 2021). The Alberta United Conservative Party (UCP) has contemplated removing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and halting conversations surrounding racism, diversity, and privilege (Hodes, 2023). This proposal was ultimately rejected by the province; however, the rejection was based solely on the proposal’s wording rather than its intended objectives (Hodes, 2023). Following their election in 2019, the UCP, the party “promptly changed the anime, content, scope and amount of anti-racism grants available under the Human Rights Education” programme in Alberta (Hodes, 2023). This decision closely followed documentation indicating an increase in racial diversity in Alberta and a rise in racially motivated hate crimes reported from 2014 to 2017 (OPV, 2019). Understanding surrounding the

inclusion of topics such as CRT and diversity statements has generated a “colonial divide-and-rule intergroup conflict” instead of a “call for systemic and structural change” (Hodes, 2023).

Regarding EDI policies and their implementation, educational plans are poorly worded. The language of diversity “can be used normatively as an expression of the priorities, values, or commitments of an organization” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 52). Tamtik and Guenter (2020, p. 46) examined the use of terminology and language across 15 Canadian universities and concluded that Institutional Strategic plans were generally “characterized by the use of broad and vague language regarding equity, diversity, and inclusion.” Such phrases reflected unclear understandings of the celebration of all forms of diversity (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). The University of Alberta, one of the most prestigious and well-known institutions, was quoted as stating obscure phrases such as “we value diversity, inclusivity, and equity” in their strategic plans (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020, p. 46). Across all 15 universities in this study, there was a pattern of addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion issues as homogeneous, fusing all “objectives and activities” (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020, p. 46). The language of diversity in these EDI initiatives, then, has “commercial value”, in most cases, “used as a way of not only marketing the university” but also to “conceal the continuation of systemic inequalities” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 52).

It is additionally important to note the distinction between Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation initiatives and EDI/DEI. Indigenous people, although often considered part of the marginalized community in Canada, have separate policies to consider. Section 35(1) of the Constitution Act states that “the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of aboriginal people of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed” (The Constitution Acts, 1867-1982). Section 25 of the Charter “protects three categories of rights and freedoms against Charter claims: (1)

aboriginal rights, (2) treaty rights, and (3) other rights or freedoms that pertain to the aboriginal peoples of Canada” (The Constitution Acts, 1867-1982). The indigenization movement in higher education came after attention brought by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which announced calls to action in 2015, addressing Indigenous access to language rights and learning, curriculum, autonomy, and community engagement for Metis and First Nation students and academics in higher education (Heath & Johnstone, 2024). Indigenization encompasses policies and practices that are meant to “propose more modest goals of increasing Indigenous student enrollment and hiring more Indigenous faculty and staff” (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p. 218).

Ultimately, indigenization aims to situate and establish change, with the intent to better universities by providing support to Indigenous students and communities (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). These themes also recur in EDI principles; however, indigenization and containing components remain unique to Indigenous peoples. Additionally, EDI principles and policies, although intended to assist marginalized individuals, can sometimes remain inaccessible for certain groups of students. This is especially true for international students. Canadian universities often celebrate diversity by highlighting the welcome of international students; however, as most of this demographic are Asian students, the arrival of these students has been met with “racist critiques in the media and society,” questioning the very effectiveness of EDI and the experiences of international students (Buckner et al., 2022, p. 40). The federal government has also recently moved to adopt an intake cap on post-secondary student permit applications (IRCC, 2024a; 2024b). These new policies were introduced supposedly to address the “housing shortages and labour market needs,” projecting responsibility to “unscrupulous actors” (Harden-Wolfson et al. 2025, p. 114). However, critics of these policies point to the fact that while IRCC

aimed to meet these marketing demands, they failed to provide ethical practices, including the code of conduct, which vowed to “support, rather than punish students” (Harden-Wolfson et al. 2025, p. 124). This, of course, calls into question the intent behind enforcing the cap rather than focusing on creating affordable housing for students. International students’ tuition additionally adds significantly to university revenue as their tuition remains significantly higher than that of domestic students (Youjin Choi & Feng Hou, 2023). These tuition fees were a major funding source for operational activities to maintain or expand instructional programs” (Youjin Choi & Feng Hou, 2023, p. 2). As a result of this cap, universities have had to adapt to the decrease in revenue, forced to lay off faculty and staff, as well as cancel programming (Noha Haidar, 2024). Additionally, the programs that are often cut first often coincide with liberal arts degrees (Mason, 2025). A degree that teaches students to think critically and question the systems that continuously work against marginalized groups like international students (Mason 2025). This was the case at York University, as the institution recently announced that 18 undergraduate programs, including Indigenous studies, gender and women’s studies, and sexuality studies, were to be cut following the decrease in revenue (Mason,2025). EDI policies often exclude international students, categorizing these students into a single label, even though a majority of this group is non-white (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). There continues to be a gap in this regard with EDI and the inclusion of international students.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusionary Practices

A study conducted by Arora and Wolbring (2022) revealed a major gap in academic investigations into sports, physical education, and physical activity. Thabani (2022) further

revealed that universities use EDI policies to control and manage bodies that confront racial and hegemonic systems of power. Training under this system has been demonstrated to be “another duty to be borne by individual internal stakeholders under institutional authority” rather than “an initiative that the organization owns, leads, models, and champions” (Campbell, 2021, p. 52-53). Literature on these failures continues to reveal “neglect of discussions” about marginalized groups and the cultural settings in which they exist (Campbell, 2021, p. 54). In the Canadian context, much of the research on this topic has focused on the barriers and challenges faced by Indigenous students and faculty in these institutions (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). The performative aspect of EDI remains a powerful testament to its often ineffectiveness. Instead of enacting actual change, obscure language, ineffective training, and limited resources have led to the continual disenfranchisement of the very group that its existence is intended to help. This has resulted in the marginalization of faculty and staff perpetuated by the false assumption of the EDI program's effectiveness (Henry et al. 2017). Ultimately, current EDI goals and implementation in Canadian institutions may act as “institutional gaslighting” (MacKenzie et al., 2023, p. 3). These policies can then be determined to embrace inclusion, “while simultaneously deploying strategies that prevent dismantling inequalities” (MacKenzie et al., 2023, 1). Intent is crucial in shaping EDI practices and policies. Sara Ahmed (2012, p. 58) states that “when diversity becomes a routine description, what is reproduced can be the routine of this description”. These Vague commitments might be deployed simply as a “lip service”, a “ritualized or polite speech” to avoid controversy and/or institutional responsibility in creating an inclusive space for all students to succeed (Ahmed 2012, p.58).

Methods and Methodology

This research focused on the experiences of Black women athletes and how these experiences differ from those of their peers. The study aimed to determine how the positionality of these athletes influences their access to resources and the institutional perception of what their bodies can accomplish. The following research questions were utilized to gather this information.

1. What are the experiences of Black women-identified athletes within Southern Alberta and how has this shaped the athlete's journey?
2. How has race played a role in enforcing negative treatment in USport towards Black women-identified athletes?
3. How does the intersection of gender and race impact the treatment of Black women-identified athletes in elite sport (USport)?
4. How do Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies influence the experience of Black women identifying athletes in USport and their university?
5. What recommendations can be made to make EDI policies at USport universities more effective?

Drawing on oral histories, this research explores firsthand accounts of Black women athletes' experiences in USport across various institutions in Southern Alberta. Oral history, as a methodology and theoretical framework, aims to uncover knowledge of the past through subjective means. This approach places narrators at the center of the pursuit of complex truth, viewing them as essential collaborators alongside the researcher.

Following Western epistemological paradigms, oral histories are recorded to reveal previously untold stories from the past (Janovicek, 2006). By prioritizing the narrator, oral histories provide a platform for marginalized communities that have historically lacked accessibility to such spaces. Ultimately, oral history as a methodology aims to unearth deeper meanings of human experiences, particularly those that have been historically disregarded due to unjust actions taken against certain groups (Flynn, 2008). Therefore, “oral history is evidence about past life events and traditions taken from the spoken word of people who know these facts,” and an oral historian accurately tells these stories for the accessibility of broader society (Freund et al., 2015).

Black culture exists along historically rooted untruths and injustices. For Black women, this is even more complicated as they negotiate not only racist rhetoric about their capabilities in various settings but also their gender identities. To understand the complexities of their lived experience, storytelling becomes deeply intertwined not just with Black culture but also with the transfer of skills when negotiating such harsh realities.

Storytelling through oral histories is an educational tool for future generations to access and redress historical wrongs. As the popularity of women's sports rises, oral history is one way for Black women athletes to be at the center of telling important stories. Ultimately, the goal for this project is to enact change for Black women in sport. Oral histories have been described as closely linked to activism and social movements. Loose et al. (2018) contend that oral histories provide a more in-depth account of storytelling, thereby enabling this methodology to elicit impactful emotional reactions in broader social settings. These feelings, often extreme in their expression, may ignite action. Oral histories can then build relationships by leveraging emotional connections that facilitate collective action (Loose & Starecheski, 2018). Readers, after hearing the stories of Black women athletes, I hope you will be able to channel your emotions into

action. Addressing contemporary and complex issues, such as the questions proposed in this research, allows for this exchange.

This research also determined how these experiences correlate with the given institutions' EDI policies and their goals for the treatment of minority groups in sports. In establishing these relationships, this research explores how the administration perceives these policies. This was achieved through one-on-one qualitative interviews with selected administrators from participants' universities. Due to the breadth of the intended topic, a semi-structured interview style allowed flexibility for participants and their experiences. This style of interviewing also empowers the women in this study to go beyond surface-level conversation, allowing for collaboration in this portion of the project. The purpose of qualitative interviewing “is not to get the informant to answer the interview questions,” but rather to actively listen to stories with the hope of attaining understanding (Roberts, 2020, p. 3189). Approaching this project through qualitative methods has enabled an in-depth analysis of Black women athletes. Participants for this study were recruited using the snowball method. As a researcher and a current USport athlete, I began recruiting within my institution. Recruits then invited other interested Black women identifying athletes through word of mouth. Interviews were held both online and in person, depending on each athlete's availability. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour, depending on each athlete's schedule. Each interview was recorded on a recording device, which was later translated by an AI program. Once this data was collected, several themes emerged concerning athletes' backgrounds, their integration into sport, their experience in USport, and their understanding of current EDI policies. Administrators were additionally interviewed, also recruited through word of mouth. These interviews differed from those of athletes, as they primarily focused on current EDI initiatives. Administrators were questioned

about institutional efforts to create an inclusive and safe space for Black women athletes. In addition to these interviews, I obtained and analyzed the current EDI policies and practices at both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary, as well as their corresponding athletic programs.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (hereinafter, CRT) will be used to analyze data from the one-on-one interviews. CRT is an academic field that focuses primarily on the relationships between socially constructed understandings of race and ethnicity and the social and political laws that inform these categories. This framework works to resist the “passive reproduction of established practices, knowledge, and resources, that make up the social conditions that marginalize race...” (Hylton, 2005, p. 81). As the research aims to discover the intersections of Black women athletes through their experiences in sports, CRT remains the most appropriate means to achieve an in-depth analysis. It has been contended that CRT and the concept of intersectionality have been very useful in establishing the complexities surrounding marginalized identities. For this research paper, the theoretical arguments stem from the understanding that race and gender in sports cannot be separated for Black women athletes. The colonial systems that continue to legitimize dominant ideologies, especially for educational institutions, may only be challenged through this acknowledgment. CRT is rooted in the idea that for social justice to occur, there needs to be an acknowledgment of the “multidimensionality” of different forms of oppression (Harris, 1999). Collins (1986), Crenshaw (1991), and the Combahee River Collective (2015) explore such conclusions, theorizing the simultaneity of race and gender in important academic work.

CRT, as an epistemological framework, holds the assumption that race remains an “important social construct to consider in studying the problems of people of colour in society” (Singer 2005, p. 369). Framed within the theory of intersectionality, CRT showcases the complexities of Black women athletes in USport and their ongoing battle for equality. The findings of this thesis establish racism, sexism, and classism as active in sport. CRT, in the case of this thesis, “challenges the dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colour blindness, and meritocracy” of institutional practice to stop racism and sexism and establishes these claims as the camouflaged “self-interest of the power entities in society” (Singer 2005, p. 370). The following findings, presented in the oral histories of Black women athletes, support such claims.

The Theoretical Foundation for Intersectionality

Intersectionality contends that Black women’s lives are made up of intersecting systems of oppression and may not be reduced to “a singular process” but are rather “better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems...” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 304). Both the Combahee River Collective and Patricia Hill Collins (1986) accept the understanding that an individual experiences oppression in a unique manner in any given society (Combahee River Collective Statement, 2015). In multiracial societies where some racial groups are marginalized, this experience becomes even more complex. This project assumes these truths. The Black man who belongs to this marginal group does not struggle in the same way that the Black woman does and faces a different reality. Dill and Zambrana (2009) also hold these assumptions. They articulate that intersectionality is an emerging field that “challenges traditional modes of

knowledge production”, and in doing so “combines advocacy analysis, theorizing and pedagogy” in the “pursuit of social justice” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 108). As a concept, intersectionality operates at two levels: the individual and the structural. At the individual level, interlocking systems construct a broad range of “expression of the performance of individual identity” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 110). However, at the societal or structural level, intersectionality reveals how “systems of power are implicated in the development of the organization, and maintenance of inequalities and social injustice” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 110). Focusing on both the constraints and privileges that work to marginalize different groups, Dill and Zambrana (2009, p.114) understand the intersectional approach as a complex and multidimensional means to “examine how different identity makers overlay or intersect with one another at all levels of social relation in different historical and geographical contexts.” Intersectionality thereby centers the experiences of People of Colour and, as such, provides a way to understand how interlocking systems of oppression work at both the individual and structural levels in ways that impact people’s everyday lives. It provides knowledge based on the “outsiders-within” perspective in the sense that there is a difference in experience between being a Canadian and being a racialized Canadian (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 111). There is a difference in experience in being a university student and being a Black university student, and there is a difference in experience of being a student athlete and being a Black woman student athlete. While whiteness is rendered as invisible and “normal”, Black bodies alongside other marginalized groups are denied the same rights and protection; however, they continue to find themselves othered by various institutions.

To separate sexism from racism and classism is an impossible task, as all systems of oppression work in tandem simultaneously and uphold one another, especially when considering the realm of sports. (Collins, 1986). The masculinization of Black bodies then becomes an

important factor to consider when addressing the experience of Black women in USport. Raewyn Connell's (2005) *The Social Imagination of Masculinity* highlights the complexity of masculinity and how it shapes social spaces. She asserts that masculinity is “simultaneously a place of gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage in that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture” (Connell, 2005, p. 193). Gender, according to Connell, serves as the foundation for how social practices are ordered. These processes, Connell contends, are directly organized in relationship to the reproductive arena. The organization of this arena has been a historical process. Defined through bodily structures about sexual arousal, intercourse, human reproduction, childbirth, infant care, etc., gender serves to inform “internal divisions of labor and systems of control” (Connell, 2005, p. 194).

Connell's framework (2005) can be broken down into three concepts: power, relations of production, and cathexis. Power pertains to the “dominant position of men and the subordination of women” across various social settings (Connell, 2005, p. 195). Connell acknowledges that there continues to be an ongoing battle refuting the legitimacy of such an understanding; however, the patriarchy remains persistent through subtle and overt performances in social institutions. Relations of Production refers to the gendered division of labor. The social construction of masculinity encourages and depends on the divisions of tasks separating masculinity and femininity. Masculinity aims to control “major corporations and private fortunes” (Connell, 2005, p. 194). Wealth and power are then accumulated through the ownership of these spheres. Cathexis, the final fold, discusses the practices that attempt to dictate and realize desires. Often described as a natural phenomenon, sexual desire becomes a condition for the gender order. Questions about relational pleasure and how it is distributed between

genders become political as they shape understandings surrounding what is morally acceptable regarding these acts. Connell additionally explores differences in masculinities, stating that hegemonic masculinity is “culturally exalted” and works in a complex and often inconsistent manner (Connell, 2005, p. 195). This has never been truer, within sports. Although a “small” number of men do not meet the standards of normative masculinity consistently, most of them still benefit from hegemony due to the general properties of the patriarchy (Connell, 2005, p.196). The interplay of gender with class and race also informs masculinity, as this differs for different marginalized groups. An example of this would be how “Black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender construction” through its interaction with institutional racism (Connell, 2005, p. 197).

The impacts of such social constructions of identity leave Black women in a constant state of dissonance as they often internalize and accept negative and problematic images of themselves (Cooky et al., 2010). Therefore, this acknowledgment becomes critical when addressing and questioning the hegemonic ideals of any given society and establishing a relationship between theory and practice, a necessity for enacting actual change as addressed by Boggs and Davis (Boggs & Davis, 2012). In addressing simultaneity and interlocking oppression, it is also important to emphasize that simply theorizing is not enough. This must be matched with collective behaviors that address such injustices on a daily and ongoing basis and may only occur with the recognition and appreciation of the politics of location of these very marginalized groups (Boggs & Davis, 2012).

Implications and Significance

Crenshaw (1991) asserts that women of colour are dismissed from various socio-political arenas and, therefore, as Withycombe (2011) articulates, are also denied the resources needed to secure personal agency. Often, the successful athletic Black body is associated with the accumulation of wealth. Unfortunately for Black women athletes, this is not the reality. Their silence in various institutions, whether educational or athletic, then becomes an important academic subject to explore as it provides insights into not just their experiences, but the experiences of all marginalized groups, as well as exploring possibilities for alternative pathways of success. Within the Canadian context, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding Black women's experiences in sports.

Despite the current political climate where EDI is often under threat in institutional contexts, EDI policies remain essential to addressing false notions of national oneness that accompany the tropes around sport and the Black body discussed earlier. By exploring the relationship between these policies and the adverse treatment of Black women athletes, Canadian universities can begin to address their failures and allow for a more inclusive space for all their students. To disrupt the politics of both “dissemblance” and “silence”, for this marginalized group, there needs to be active and intentional work being constantly facilitated to understand the systems to which they remain disenfranchised (Edwards, 1991). Black women possess a very complex and unique position within society, placing them at the forefront of untapped and undiscovered truths in sport. By exploring their lived experiences within the athletic realm, more institutional strategies may be implemented to aid in addressing inequalities.

Due to the political nature of this study's subject matter, all participants in this study were kept anonymous. Efforts concerning anonymity included aliases such as “athlete 1”. Any information regarding athletes’ identities was also protected. This included but was not limited to athletes’ birthplaces. The same precaution was taken to protect the identification of administrators.

Conclusion

My purpose in this study is to give a voice to Black women. It aims to identify failures in USport, university athletics, and existing EDI policies. I aim to expose assumptions placed on Black women's bodies regarding their physical and mental capacities instilled by their coaches, the University, and USport. These assumptions can be attributed to racist, sexist, and classist rhetoric concerning the labor historically carried out by these bodies. There are consequences to these preconceived notions. The participants have described the impact of them and how they have led to adverse experiences in sports that are particular and unique to their demographic location as Black women. This includes, but is not limited to, barriers to higher levels of play, a lack of representation in sports, and overall unhappiness with their sports experience. In addition to acknowledging the experiences of athletes, this study examines how their experiences relate to the roles of prejudicial behaviours and institutional policies, or the lack thereof, in enabling and facilitating the challenges faced by Black women athletes. Policy change has historically demonstrated an immense impact. As most educational institutions have a version of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (hereinafter EDI), there needs to be a continual analysis of how its construction directly influences marginalized populations. Often, optics and the projection of an image of unity are the only purposes for having these policies. This research, therefore, draws

concrete connections between how and whether EDI policies are implemented and the negative experiences of Black women athletes, urging for institutional change.

CHAPTER 2: STREOTYPES IN USPORT: EXPECTATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN ATHLETES

Introduction

W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, as presented in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), explains the dissonance experienced by Black people as they navigate “two polarising identities residing in one body” (Welang 2018, p. 297). According to this theory, Black folks, because of physical and psychological pain in America, are forced to reconcile their Black identity with their American identity. However, Du Bois's double consciousness fails to consider how this may differ for Black women. Welang (2018) expands on this concept, coining the “triple consciousness theory” (TCT) to describe the experience of Black women. Triple consciousness theory argues that Black women perceive themselves through three lenses rather than two. They must consider the nation to which they belong, Blackness, and womanhood. TCT addresses and confronts the “messy contradictions of conflicting identities to produce new liberated identities” (Welang 2018, p. 298). According to this theory, Black women have had to consider nationhood, represented by the “hegemony of white patriarchy”, Blackness, “a racial space that prioritizes the interests of Black men,” and womanhood, “a hierarchical gendered identity with white women at the top and Black women at the bottom” (Welang, 2018, p. 298-299).

The stereotyping of Black women athletes continues to impact their participation and experience in sport. Black women must consider both gendered and racial stereotypes. Intersectionality is an essential concept to consider for this group, given their complex experiences in sport. Crenshaw's (1991; 2011) intersectionality refers to the intersections of forms of oppression, such as race, gender, and social class, which are “masked and exacerbated

by structural and institutional power” (Rankin-Wright and Hylton 2021, p. 173). The simultaneous impact of sexism and racism on Black women athletes continues to recur in various institutions (Bruening, Armstrong, & Patore, 2005; Corbett & Johnson, 2002). Black women in sports must actively consider how they perceive the social world and whether this perception aligns with their self-image as they decide how best to fit into systems and structures that continue to perceive them as outsiders.

Various stereotypes concerning Black women's bodies exist within university settings. This research seeks to explore three recurring assumptions regarding Black athletes: lack of intelligence, harsher punishment associated with attitude problems, and perceived natural physical advantages by coaches and peers in USport. Intelligence, in this context, encompasses both academic pursuits and intellectual abilities. The astute Black student challenges the athlete's initial identity, as Black bodies have often been stereotyped as capable of running faster and jumping higher (Nartey & James, 2022). Black women's bodies specifically contradict both the stereotypical sports prototype and social constructions of femininity, as “racialized discourse intertwined with discourses of gender and class serve to construct and represent Black women in particular ways” (Scraton, p. 178). The positionality offered by Black women in this space provides greater insights into different forms of discrimination prevalent for all minority groups.

The nine Black women athletes interviewed for this study were asked about instances of racism and discrimination concerning their participation in USport. All nine acknowledged the importance of maintaining exceptional academic results, driven by individual and family expectations. The athletes also reported being perceived as naturally athletic, rather than hardworking. As a result, some Black women athletes felt that they were more harshly

reprimanded by coaches based on their presumed ability to handle mental and physical challenges. Black women athletes in this study also mentioned, in some cases, being punished and ostracized for having Black hair in athletic spaces. Lastly, the athletes in this study described having to embody a loud persona for their peers, continuously performing for the collective. Ultimately, the evidence provided by each oral history regarding ongoing stereotypes in USport indicated a need for structural shifts within university institutions.

“Dumb-Jock” Stereotype

Recently, a scoping review of racialized Canadian women in sport identified a gap in research on Black women in sport (Joseph et al., 2022). Although Black women have been present in Canada since the seventeenth century, and access to sports has increased significantly for this group, they have remained largely absent from public archives and written records (Joseph et al., 2022, p. 873). However, academic research dating back to the nineteenth century explores stereotypes concerning the athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority of Black people in general (Harrison, 2001; Harrison & Moore, 2002; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Wiggins, 1989). For Black athletes, the “dumb jock” stereotype often presents itself in subtle ways. Black students, as previously mentioned in Chapter One, are provided with “student-friendly course(s)” that emphasize their identity as athletes first (Comeaux, 2010, p. 391).

Additionally, Saile (1993) determined that Division I white male athletes in the US believed that Black student-athletes were academically unprepared for college/university and were not as intelligent as their white counterparts. Davis (1990) also revealed that the reasoning behind the “dumb Black” athlete stereotype was a racist condition engrossed from the fear

ignited by the white status quo. Davis (1990) concluded that the white ruling class feared losing economic, educational, and political superiority, which in turn encouraged investigations concerning athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority for the Black athlete. In the case of Black women athletes, Comeaux (2010) argues that faculty lacked crucial insights into the structural academic disadvantages these student athletes faced. Instead, faculty assumed meritocracy regarding the success of Black students and their intellectual abilities. Bonilla-Silva (2002) echoes similar findings, demonstrating faculty concerns about the college admission qualifications of Black women athletes. This merit principle, as previously explored by Comeaux (2010), assumed the absence of systemic oppression in educational institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). The idea of meritocracy assumes equal opportunity despite discrimination by gender and race for Black women athletes, therefore situating them as less hardworking in all instances that they fail academically (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Despite advertised Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policies (EDI), sports organizations frequently ignore the barriers related to racial disparities and the barriers that hinder racialized Canadians from participating in sports (Peers et al., 2023). Many of these themes remain true for Black women athletes when discussing the “dumb-jock” stereotype; however, their oral stories also indicate an additional pressure to excel academically due to cultural backgrounds. For some athletes from immigrant backgrounds, their parents strongly encouraged them to focus on academics and achieve good grades. For these Black women and their family members, success in a new and disproportionately white country had to be achieved through exceptionalism. More specifically, exceptionalism concerning academic achievements. As a result, Black women athletes maintained high individual expectations concerning their academic success. All nine athletes were asked about their balance between school and sport and

if they felt any pressure from their coaches and/or peers to prioritize either realm. The athletes were also asked what they believed was more important to their identity as Black women athletes.

Balancing School and Sport

All nine athletes reported having to exert extra effort to balance being an athlete and a student. For the Black women in this study, this often meant maintaining a strict academic and training schedule. Although there were varying degrees of educational experience, every athlete recalled having limited time for school, sports, work, and a social life due to their multiple commitments. Athletes 2, 3, 5, and 8 mentioned scheduling tasks to maintain this balance. Athlete 3 specifically used “time blocking” as a strategy to balance academic and athletic responsibilities. For Athlete 8, her schedule had to be kept quite rigid to accomplish her goals. However, throughout her time as a student athlete, she discovered that rigidity could be beneficial. She found that she liked maintaining a busy schedule, as it allowed her to keep focus while staying entertained. She stated:

My schedule is a lot more rigid and a lot more packed, which... a part of me likes it that way to an extent. Like, yes, I like, I do think I like being busy. And I do think I, like, generally, filling my time with commitments and such. But of course, it can also get exhausting, and very tiring.

The appreciation for busyness was consistent with the experiences of other Black women athletes as well; however, for those who had to consider part-time and full-time work, sacrifices concerning academic and athletic excellence had to be made. Athlete 1 found it incredibly difficult to attain and maintain success in all avenues of her life, especially as a student, while working two part-time jobs, being on the track team, and having a busy social life. Expressing that she often did not “have time for schoolwork,” Athlete 1 found that balancing the responsibility of a working student athlete was very difficult at times.

Black women athletes in this study also described having to learn to allocate their time more effectively as they progressed deeper into their USport careers. This was demonstrated when athletes spoke about their first year. For some, this year proved to be the most difficult academically, due to what they perceived as “first-year shell shock.” The transition from high school to university was at times overwhelming. This was the case for Athletes 3, 4, 6, and 9. Athlete 3 described struggling academically in her rookie season due to the dynamics of her team. She found it challenging to balance her academic responsibilities without the support of her athletic community, stating:

I didn't do very well again, it felt like I didn't have much support. So like I felt like I was struggling, like last year was definitely hard for me mentally with, like, having a team that I didn't like, like I didn't like being here, and then living alone, like it was hard to leave my , my house, my room, to get to practice and practice with a bunch of girls that I didn't like, didn't like me, and then go back to my room that looked like a jail cell. Like it was hard all around. That was hard, and then it was harder to then balance that with

school. This year, my situation's changed, and the team isn't, isn't as toxic. So, like, I'm definitely doing better in school.

Athlete 4 also remembered struggling in her first year, specifically in her first semester. Similar to Athlete 3, she believed her academic shortcomings were due to a toxic team environment and an unsupportive coaching staff. As a result, both athletes found it particularly challenging to establish healthy academic routines. Athlete 4 also felt that her academic shortcomings benefited her coaches, as they gave her more time for sport.

Pressures to Excel in Sport

As USport athletes, students face pressures to excel in all aspects of their lives that can become overwhelming and difficult to handle. This is especially true when considering external factors, such as expectations from coaches. When asked about pressures from coaches and peers to prioritize athletics over academics, most women in this study acknowledged some concern from coaches about their academic pursuits. In contrast, others noticed a preference for athletics. Athletes 1, 5, 6, and 9 were encouraged by their coaches. Athlete 1, although acknowledging that oftentimes “something else [had] to give,” felt supported by her coaches in her academic pursuits. She remembered her coach consistently checking her grades and inquiring whether she or her teammates needed help. Athlete 5 would also seek her coach for advice, acquiring “tips and tricks” and resources to aid her studies. Athlete 6 shared a similar experience during her time in USport. She explained that her coach always encouraged her to do her best. However, Athlete 6 also mentioned rising tensions when sacrificing athletic training for academics. She stated:

:

[USport Coaches] see my transcripts, and then it's always like, holy like you have really good grades, and then I feel like that's kind of an expectation, or even when we win, like the academic all Canadians, and it's like that feels like a pressure of like you need to keep that standard...if you went to [USport coaches] office and you sat down and was like, and you started having a meltdown, and you're like, I'm so stressed about school, like [they] would do what [they] can to help. And I feel like I always felt like there was something there...[they] also gave us a ton of autonomy to, like, entrust us to do our schoolwork on our own. I think when it comes to basketball, [they] are pretty good at, like, encouraging us to get extra shots, get in, making sure we're doing our lifts. And it's not necessarily like encouraging extra lifts to exert ourselves too much, but I think [they] are really good at just being that encouragement piece and letting us be independent and making those decisions...[USport coach] here has been really good at just like...if you need to miss a practice to take a test or catch up on school, they would definitely say to your face, like, that is okay. Like, if you need to do what you need to do, like, do it. Like, I'll support you in any way I can but when you come back to practice. Sometimes it's like, a little bit like, kind of tense, but then [they] get over it.

Athlete 9 shared a similar experience; however, her coach was even more hands-on regarding academic help. During her first year, while struggling, she would often visit his office to discuss specific academic struggles. According to this athlete, her coach would do their best to

help by reviewing assignments, editing, and discussing academic strategies. While discussing the encouragement she received from her coach, she stated:

What better person to really help me? And like, [USport Coach] be using these crazy ass words. So [USport Coach] was like, if you ever need help writing an essay, you can come to me and I'll help you make the outline, or you'll make the outline. You write it and I can help proofread it. So I remember, like, when I was taking the spring course my first year, [USport Coach] literally would proofread my essays and, like, would give me feedback and stuff and help me out and like that just shows how much [USport Coach] cares. Because I feel like not many coaches would be going through those lengths that would, like, really help you succeed in school... Now [USport Coach] is not worried about me, because I'm further along, like, I got things done and, like, yeah, he doesn't, like stress or like, you know, sometimes he'll be like, oh, like, how school is going? Just to make sure, like, everything's good if I need help from [USport Coach]...And I was just, I think this class, I was telling you that I knew to study earlier. I was like, okay, like, I'm scared. Like, if I fail this class, what might happen? And [USport Coach] was like, you're not gonna fail. Like, just go back and study really hard and you're gonna be fine. And now I'm fine. I passed the class, so I'm okay...And [USport Coach] just, like, is really encouraging.

Athletes 2, 7, and 8 discussed administrators' efforts to support athletes academically; however, they described these efforts as minimal, primarily aimed at preserving athletes' eligibility. Athlete 2 describes her coach, as do Athletes 1, 6, and 9, as encouraging in both

athletics and academics. However, when describing athletics in general, Athlete 2 had different perspectives. She believed that administrators in general were concerned about academics to a degree that kept athletes eligible. Athlete 2 stated, “They want you to do well at school, but they're okay if you do decent as long as you're selling their sports.” Athletes 7 and 8 echoed the same claims. They also believed that their athletic department accepted and sometimes encouraged the bare minimum from athletes academically. When reflecting on this athlete, 7 specifically stated:

So we had like, a whole meeting about this, like, some, I think it's one of the athletic directors. I think he came to us and we, I think our whole team was there. And he was just like, yeah, so it's important that you guys keep up the 2.0 and you get out. I think it was like 16 credits in the year or something like that...then he was like, it's really important that you play next year. That's the most important thing. Like get the 2.0 and then you'll be able to play. So yeah, sometimes I feel like we'd have a meeting to just discuss that you just need this minimum requirement to play next year...that's when they show that they don't really care about the student part as much. So yeah, that's what I've seen...they care about our future as students as much as if we're playing the year for them.

Athlete 7 felt that school was important, however, she questioned the intensity of training compared to the intensity of academic pursuits. She felt that “if you missed training,” you would often get “reprimanded”, risking starting positions and dressing for games. Because of this, she found her institution's commitment to academics for student-athletes to be “wishy-washy.”

Athletes 3 and 8 reported feeling no additional pressure from their coaches to succeed in either athletics or academics. However, for Athlete 3, this was because of low expectations from her coach. Having had a challenging first year academically, she recalled her coach assuming she was “not very good at school.” This was especially apparent when being compared to another Black woman athlete. During the first year of her Black teammate's career, she had failed, making it impossible for her to play the following season. She remembered not wanting to follow in her footsteps. Despite making it through to her second year, Athlete 3 was continuously labeled “good at rugby” and “not very good at school.” Following her poor marks in her rookie season, she admitted that her coach was more attentive academically. Athlete 3 stated that her coach “[needed] her to play rugby and that is why he was “on her” about school. During her most recent season, Athlete 3 transferred to open studies. According to Athlete 3, this program was often recommended for students to “take random easy classes”, ultimately making it easier to remain eligible for sport.

Athlete 3's experience at her institution may demonstrate the self-fulfilling prophecy that is often associated with the “dumb-jock” stereotype for Black athletes. The self-fulfilling prophecy theory, as described by Merton (1948), refers to “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true” (p.175). According to this concept, "the prophet", in this case, the coaches and administration, “cite the actual course of events” through repeated suggestions of academic inadequacy (p.175). Athlete 3 was often told that she was an excellent athlete. She was pushed to build on those skills, becoming even faster and stronger on the field. For Athlete 3, regardless of bad days or practices, her coaches believe in her overall athletic ability and continuously encourage her to reach new heights. In contrast, after struggling academically in her first year, coaches and administrators

allowed this same athlete to choose an easier and more reliable educational pathway, validating her preconceived notion that she was “not good at school”. Earl Smith (1995) argues that this understanding of what the African American athlete's body could and could not accomplish grossly undervalued the “intelligence needed to be an elite athlete” (p. 154).

The experiences shared by the Black women athletes in this study also revealed themes of family pressure. For most athletes, there were high expectations regarding their academic pursuits. More specifically, academic excellence was commonly associated with immigrant parents. These pressures often stemmed from athletes' parents. For these families, academic excellence was a means of achieving a better life. Black women athletes were usually told that, to excel career-wise, they had to supersede the average. To be perceived as equivalent to their peers, they had to excel academically. Athletes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 discussed the need to consider their family expectations during their university careers. Athlete 1 described her aunt, uncles, and father's careers as having required high levels of education. As a result, she felt "the pressure" to match or supersede her family's standards. Athlete 2 discusses her stepmom. She stated that for her stepmom, “it was mostly school first and then everything else afterwards”. As a result, they both established a routine, prioritizing academic success to achieve Athlete 2's goal of attending medical school. Athlete 3 shared similar experiences with her family. She stated that after enrolling in open studies, she felt that her parents were unhappy with her. Coming from a highly educated family, she said that her “[immigrant] parents would not like to hear that she ever failed”. She understood academic success to be particularly important for Black students. When speaking about these expectations, she stated:

Again, like, I'm an immigrant, so it's like, it's, it's like, academics and education...got them this far. So they believe that that's the only thing that's gonna get you that far. If you talk to my mom about rugby, she'll be like, that's not gonna get you anywhere, even though I still believe strongly that it could, no one has faith actually, like, that's something I was talking to somebody else's parent about that the other day. They don't have faith that rugby could take me anywhere, so I really have to land back on school. And I believe that. But I know other athletes who've made it out and or, like, dropped out of school to go pro, but I'm like, do you want to do that.

Athlete 4 also shared similar understandings. She felt immense pressure from both her mother and other family members, stating:

like, again, being Black, like, it just comes with it. I know that's a whole stereotype of, like, oh, we're dumb, but no, like, if I came back home with any C's or anything under B plus, like, I would hear it. Academics was really important for my mother. And like, she's, she's a graduated university student, you know.

Athlete 4 also notes that being an immigrant affected these expectations. She contended that as a Black woman, there are different rules and expectations regarding the perception of success. Athlete 4 stated:

Depending on where your parents came from, most of the time, like their immigrants right...And with that comes you have to work what, twice as hard as your counterpart

that doesn't look like you. That's what I've been told literally my entire life. Like for us, like we can't just do the bare minimum. We have to do amazingly well all the time to be recognized or to even get, like, the bare minimum of recognition. So yeah, I think that's part of it. And also, like, why my parent immigrated here for a better life. So obviously she doesn't want me to just be a high school graduated student. And, they... like, going to university, you are more likely to get higher pay...

Athlete 6, who did not have parents or family members who completed higher levels of education, also discussed family pressures regarding school grades. She focused primarily on her father, stating:

My dad, like, my biological dad, was always really hard on us...he wouldn't help us study, he wouldn't really ask about our homework or anything like that. But when he saw us every few weeks, it'd be like, well, how's school are you passing? Are you doing good? And then he just, like, would harp on, like, how important education was. So I feel like that had to be, like, his own thing, like he didn't finished high school, and he just wanted, like, in a way, he wanted us, he wanted us to do well, because he didn't have that opportunity.

In her case, she believed that education and excelling in university were a way her immigrant father thought she would achieve greater success. Finnie and Muller (2009, 2010) found that children of Canadian immigrants were more likely to attend post-secondary education, specifically university, than their non-immigrant counterparts. University participation rates in

Canada were 57% for first-generation immigrants and 54% for second-generation immigrants, compared to 38% for the non-immigrant population. The result of this study highlights various themes. The first is the impact of Canadian immigration policy, which has continued to attract and encourage highly educated immigrants (Childs et al., 2017). The second theme concerns the cultural understandings behind the importance of education for Canadian immigrants. Parental aspiration was assumed to be correlated with immigrant children's university attendance. Although this alone was not the driving force for university participation, cultural factors impacted the obligation felt by immigrant students to continue and succeed in their post-educational pursuits (Childs et al., 2017). The Black women athletes in this study supported these themes. As previously indicated, athletes with immigrant backgrounds often felt parental pressure to excel academically. This was especially true for the athletes whose parents possessed higher educational degrees.

Regardless of external pressures to succeed, Black women athletes in this study also felt a personal conviction to excel academically. Athlete 2 recalled being “obsessed with grades”, while Athlete 8 prioritized her academic path, situating her educational success as a means of “doing well” in the future. Athlete 1 admitted that she would “100% rather miss a meet than fail a class,” as she grew up prioritizing school over all aspects of her life. Athlete 6 shared that she would often experience emotional breakdowns associated with “not doing well”. She describes her identity as closely related to her experience as a student rather than an athlete. Athlete 6 remembered being hard on herself, stating:

I'd be bawling my eyes out. So, like, in those ways, I've always been, like, very, like, self-driven, self, wanting to be good. And I think that comes from school. Like, I've always

been good at school. And I feel like I haven't always been good at sports, like, I've always been okay, but school is like, the one thing that it was, like, kind of connected to my identity...Like anytime I do a little bit poor on an assignment, like, and I'm reading through comments, and it's just like, I overwhelm myself, like, oh my god, I'm not going to get an A, I'm not going to pass the class. So like, I overwhelm myself that way academically.

It was apparent that the Black women athletes in this study defied stereotypes about the lack of care for academic pursuits. All nine athletes acknowledge the importance of education as student-athletes involved in USport. Although the stories shared did not provide direct evidence of athletes' actual academic performance, it is evident that all nine athletes perceived themselves as students first.

The Black women athletes were also questioned about how prevalent they perceived the “dumb jock” or “jock first” stereotype to be for Black women athletes. They were questioned on what they believed was more important for their identity as Black women. Some of the athletes believed that the “dumb-jock” stereotype still existed within their institutions. Athlete 1 admitted that “nobody [expected] Black women to get an education,” therefore, this group had to “try harder in school to prove a point,” and this was the reason that oftentimes “Black people had their noses to the books.” Athlete 2 additionally stated that as a Black person, “people assume that you are good at sports” exclusively, therefore would disregard everything else about Black women's identity. Most of the time, when they found out she was intelligent, it was often a “shock to them.” Athlete 7 followed a similar pattern of thought, stating

It always might be the same for Black men and Black women at the same time, because I feel like we're not seen as smart people in general. Like I feel like we're looked down upon with like, academically. So I feel like if someone saw me on the street, I feel like they would be like, maybe she's good at sports...or she's tall enough to play a sport, or something like that..

Athlete 8 additionally concluded that she believed that Black women were often perceived as “athletes first”.

Naturalized Athletic Ability

The assumption of inferior intelligence is often linked to superior athletic ability among Black athletes. This theme was additionally realized when discussing relevant stereotypes within USport. Athletes’ stories revealed that they were perceived as naturally more athletic compared to their peers. Athletes 3, 4, 5, and 6 recall personally experiencing these assumptions. Athlete 3 attributed her inability to bond with her team to these assumptions. She believed that her team perceived her as naturally talented in her sport, therefore lazy and undeserving of her playing time, coaches' favor, and her ongoing accolades within USport. When discussing the impacts of this stereotype, she stated:

Another reason I think they didn't like me. Like, again, natural athlete... I'd go to the gym and just freaking squat heavy and just leave, and it'd be like, you skip sometimes, but you're really good at what you do, and so it's like, how are we supposed to like you?

Because it feels like you don't deserve the things you get, kind of thing, you don't deserve to start.

Additionally, athlete 4 mentioned that USport coaches made assumptions that Black athletes were “probably really fast players because they're Black.” Despite changes to USport, she believes that this stereotype was “always going to be a thing.” Athlete 6 resonated with this experience. She thought that oftentimes Black women athletes in USport were reduced to their natural talents, discrediting the hard work necessary to make them elite athletes. Athlete 6 discussed how, as a Black woman athlete, how good you were was dependent on your Blackness. She stated that “she's so good” was often followed by, “well, she's also Black.” She would always have to “preach to people” that when comments such as those were made, they were, in fact, racist. Although categorized as a positive stereotype, the impacts of such assumptions could be detrimental for Black women athletes. To “chalk athleticism to her race” was to make Black women athletes' bodies vessels simply for physical purposes. It was to strip the body simultaneously of vulnerability and agency. The implications of this stereotype have placed Black women's bodies as undeserving and lazy. Evidence of these ongoing stereotypes was also present during the scouting process. Athlete 6 stated:

I feel a lot of the times it's like, if we're talking about the scout, we're talking about the teams, it's like, oh, they have a big Black girl. And that comes up a lot. And then we, like, we just focus on the big Black girl, but it gets brought up a lot, instead of it just being like, Oh, they're big. Like, yeah, it's always they have a big black girl.

The effects of the “naturally gifted” stereotype are much more complex than administrators or athletes assume. Athlete 5 demonstrates such complexities when discussing the natural Black athlete trope. Unlike Athletes 3, 4, and 6, she does not explicitly mention experiencing this stereotype in USport; however, she explains that Black athletes themselves hold this belief about other Black athletes. She notes that, among Black athletes, it's understood that we are physically superior. It's understood that “we should be good at sport”.

The impacts of the natural gifted trope led athletes to feel pressured to excel and to be perceived as deviant within team culture and values. Athlete 4 reported feeling mentally and physically exhausted chasing such expectations, making her USport experience “worse”. Athlete 6 shared a similar experience; however, in her experience, there was added pressure being one of two Black women on her team. She wanted to live up to athletic expectations and be a “good” representation for the community. While discussing these pressures, she stated:

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That aspect has always kind of lingered in the back of my head, of like, I need to perform well, and I'm not very good at putting that pressure on myself, because when I do, I play really bad... You can tell like I don't hide it well. So I think that subconsciously, like that has a lot of pressure on me, especially being like, we're the only two Black people on the team. Like, kids that come and watch Black kids in [athletes city], and they're like, oh, my God, that could be me. And it's like, wow, I can't suck.

Assumption concerning the athletic superiority of Black bodies remains an ongoing trend in both the lived experiences of Black athletes and ongoing research. Wiggins (1989) explores the history of this stereotype, discussing theories that have contributed to the ongoing debate over Black athletic superiority. The one certainty discovered through this exploration is that “there is no scientific evidence of genetic association or linkage between genes for individual and group athletic achievement” among Black people (Wiggins, 1989, p.184). Athletic ability remains a “function of many genes in interaction with several other variables such as economic background, motivation, facilities, and coaching” (Wiggins, 1989, p.184). Regardless of the source of athletic talents, Wiggins (1989) contends that the individual should not be ignored when assessing their athletic achievement.

Harsher Punishment

Some Black women athletes in this study also reported receiving harsher punishment and differential treatment by coaches and administrators. Although it was not determined to be the result of athletic and intellectual capability, for some Black women athletes, it was apparent that their coaches had different expectations regarding their mental and physical capabilities. Athletes 1, 2, and 5 all agreed that during their USport experience, they did not believe they received differential treatment from coaches based on their race. Athlete 1 correlated the individual's performance and willingness to adhere to team culture with the treatment they received from coaches. In her experience, she had never received harsh punishment from the coach because she “pulled her weight” on the team. According to this athlete, being harshly reprimanded meant that athletes were not meeting the academic and athletic standards set by the

collective before the season began. In this case, her coach's decision to call out or punish players was justified by previously agreed-upon agreements. Athlete 2 agreed with this notion. If an athlete were to be late to practice, reminders would be sent to that athlete and the coaches about team standards. If an athlete skipped practice and then underperformed at the next competition, the coach would impose consequences. Both Athletes 1 and 2 concluded that punishment by coaches was a direct indication of the athletes' commitment to the sport, rather than their race or sex. Spots on the team were never “guaranteed,” therefore, for these athletes, there was not a “big difference if you were Black or White.” Punishment was based on the individual action. Athlete 5, another track-and-field participant, agreed with this assessment.

Athletes 3, 6, 7, and 8 had different experiences concerning coach treatment. All four athletes recalled one or more instances in which they felt they were treated more harshly because of their race. These athletes attested that they were often perceived as more capable of handling harsher treatment by their USport coaches, athletic trainers, and team leaders. Athlete 3 specifically discussed how a miscommunication led to a public lashing by her strength and conditioning coach, leaving her confused and embarrassed. In this instance, Athlete 3 had texted her strength and conditioning coach to inform her that she needed to miss two workouts before the training sessions. After returning to the workout space, she was told, “to get the fuck out” and continue her workout in the public gym. At first, Athlete 3 was unsure about why she was met with such hostility, especially from a professional figure who was meant to represent the university. However, after reflecting on the situation, she concluded that their reaction was likely race-based. According to Athlete 3, another Black teammate had developed a consistent pattern of missing workouts without communicating. As a result, she believed that the athletic trainer, like other instances of racism on her team, conflated the two athletes together. Athlete 3 felt that

she and her Black teammate would often be punished harsher, as the Black collective in this case was perceived as deviant. Athlete 3 also reported being reprimanded more consistently and more harshly by the leadership group on her team. She reported feeling that her teammates often watched her, waiting for her to do “something wrong.” She frequently questioned whether these treatments were due to “being Black or just her.”

Athlete 6 also felt that she and other Black women athletes on her team were targeted for punishment. Following the coach and athletes' meetings, she made it clear to her coach that she did not do well with yelling. She was more than willing to receive and implement criticism; however, having previously experienced a hostile coaching environment, she wanted to ensure her new USport coach was aware of how she best received feedback. Despite taking this precaution, Athlete 6 found herself often harshly and publicly blamed for mistakes made during competition. She explained that when instances involving various players arose, it was usually assumed that she had made a mistake. These mistakes would sometimes be met with “screaming” and “arguments” as this player had to often be on the defensive against her coach. She felt that sometimes, for the coach, it was easy to direct his frustration on the Black athletes. Athlete 6 also stated that other players, white players specifically, were more often given the space to talk back and justify their actions, while Black women athletes would get “shut down”. When questioned about how race directly impacted this reality, Athlete 6 believed that coaches would sometimes assume that Black bodies could handle more. Their capacity for mental and physical criticism seemed to have a higher threshold. She stated:

It might be because...in the sense of the stereotype... we can take more so we're perceived as we can handle it when I explicitly told him, like, don't yell at me...like, have

a conversation with me about it... and it's just like, she'll get over it, and then we act buddy buddy the next day. It's just like, it has to be chalked up to something, because otherwise I don't see it with anybody else. Like in practice, when he's like, he's yelling at [other Black woman player], yelling at [other Black woman player], yelling at [other Black woman player], yelling at [other Black woman player], like, consistently, and [other Black woman player] just eventually you're gonna break down, But he thinks you can take it, and then he acts like nothing's wrong.

When asked if she would be surprised at harsher punishment being a recurring pattern for Black women athletes in USport Athlete 6, additionally stated:

No, like, I would like to think it's kind of a common experience...I would think it is like just even based on how [other Black woman athletes] can relate on that level. And I'm like, it can't be that different. Like, you know what I mean, if it's so similar between me and [other Black woman athlete], then it has to be...

Athlete 7 shared similar experiences, expressing how she was often penalized more harshly than her other white teammates. She specifically recalled a time when she and her teammates both received yellow cards in a game, but she was the only one who had to sit out of the next game upon her coach's request. The difference in treatment was never explained or clarified to her or her teammates. Athlete 8, like Athlete 6, explicitly remembered approaching her coach to discuss how she best received criticism. She and her teammates took personality tests during their season to inform their coaches on how best to approach them. Despite sharing

her results with her coach, Athlete 8 felt that she and other Black teammates received harsher, more consistent criticism from coaches. Athlete 8 acknowledged that criticism was an essential part of being an athlete. Continuous feedback was necessary for sustained progress. However, she found that her white peers were often treated as more fragile. She first noticed this in high school sports. However, she felt preferential treatment was also prevalent in USport, stating:

I've also like, seen this a little bit in my like varsity experience as well. But I've noticed that, like, there's this like inclination I've seen in coaches to let like, protect the like feelings, or, I don't know, whatever, of like, some of these other players. I feel..like, I'm dispensable, or they have this sense of it's ok if your feelings are hurt you will recover. I've always wondered, like, if like, what it was about me specifically, that like makes it easy for him to do that? Because I don't really see him doing that with other players. And, like, I even noticed it with, like, one of my [Black] friends who used to be on the team, she stopped playing...she also ran into, like, a very similar, like, dynamic and relationship with our coach, where it was almost like he felt as though, like, in order for her to play well, and like, you know, you know, bring some energy to the game. Like she needed to be mad or angry, so then, like, he would kind of be the instigator of that... she would always be like, but I don't like that. Like, I don't like that he's doing that. Like, it feels almost a little manipulative... he's also said that to me, where he's like, I feel like, maybe you play a little bit better when you're like, a little bit annoyed with me or a little bit angry with me, and he's like, I don't want to do that. Like, I don't want to make you feel that way. But if he's like, if that's what's making you play better, like, we can find ways to, like, channel that energy in a different way.

Athlete 8 felt that, unlike other players, she was punished for not being angry. This type of discrimination was facilitated covertly. Coaches would tell this athlete that she was “missing hunger,” while the other women on her team were not expected to display such behaviours or attitudes. As a result, “any ounce of confidence” that was built up by this athlete was “completely torn down.” This experience was validated by other teammates who also reported being confused by her treatment.

The “Angry Black woman” trope is very familiar to most Black women. Often discussed in the workplace, this stereotype suggests that Black women are perceived as being either “*only* angry or strong/stoic” (Doharty, 2020, p. 553). For Black women, they remain “aware that despite how they might perceive themselves to be managing their emotions,” whether that means being “softly spoken, articulate, educated, light-footed or introvert,” to some, they may still “possess features that are a little too angry” (Doharty, 2020, p. 554). This stereotype becomes especially complex in athletic settings. Often, anger and aggression are perceived as being advantageous during competition. Anger within athletic spaces is associated with grit, tenacity, and determination on the court and field. For Athlete 8, the lack of such an emotion disrupted her coach's archetype of the productive Black woman athlete. She, along with other Black women athletes on her team, was punished for not possessing this “fire”. This demonstrates the double-edged sword of stereotypes for this group of women. By adhering to the natural athlete trope, Black women are expected to meet unrealistic standards of athletic success, pressuring them to push themselves beyond their capabilities. However, when Black women athletes diverge from what is expected of these stereotypes, such as the angry Black woman stereotype, they are also punished. According to these oral stories, grace is permitted in areas where Black bodies are

meant to fail, such as academics. However, white players at USport have the freedom to excel and or fail in all aspects of their university careers.

Punishment for Black Hair in USport

Mbilishaka (2018) attests how systems of oppression have continued to dictate the treatment of Black people based on their hair in present-day America. Similarly, Brown (2018) situates the politics of Black Canadian women's hair as “simultaneously implicated in the various oppressions experienced by Black Canadian women” (p.67). The politics of Black women's hair places them at the bottom of the gender and race hierarchy below both men and white women. The villainization of Black women's athletes encompasses all parts of their bodies. The villainization of Black hair remains a recurring theme for Black women athletes in USport. Based on the experiences shared by the women interviewed, most Black women athletes in this study described feeling othered and punished for having Black hairstyles. Hair discrimination for this group of women served as a reminder of the racial and gendered hierarchy within their institution, as well as an indicator of ongoing microaggressions towards Black women athletes. Athletes 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 all mentioned Black hair when discussing instances of racism during their time in USport.

Athlete 8 experienced the most overt form of racism regarding Black hair. According to her, before joining the team, she heard tales of inappropriate behaviours mocking Black hair. She described how one of the women on her team with braids had her extension fall out. Following this event, her other teammates collected the extensions and placed them underneath their coach's hat, mocking and documenting the coach's new look. Athlete 8, along with another teammate,

remembered hearing about this story and being deeply uncomfortable. For the rest of her teammates, it was just a “joke,” but for her and her other Black peer, this was an indication of the social hierarchy based on physical appearance. She said she didn't like what this meant for team culture.

Athletes 2, 3, and 7 shared similar experiences. Each athlete explained being punished in competition for having Black hair. At one of her USport events, Athlete 2 had a referee approach her coach to complain about the length of her braids. This referee claimed that the athlete's hair had been over the line before her track race, describing it as an extension of her body. Following this discussion was the threat of disqualification if the issue was not resolved by the next competition. While reflecting on this incident, Athlete 2 stated:

As a Black woman, we like to have our hair up. And, like, when you lean over, you're, um, you're not supposed to necessarily be way over the line. And my hair, I think, crossed the line. They were like, that is technically a foul...well, okay, other people have their hair out long, and things like that, like this, has never really been a big problem. But in that scenario... It wasn't only me. It happened to another [Black] person on the team another time...in a way, I get it, I understand, like... but like, there wasn't really any rules or anything, kind of in place...that was a little bit of a questionable time.

Both Athletes 3 and 7, like Athlete 2, also remembered being punished for having long braids; however, in their cases, their hair was used to justify rougher play against them. Athlete 3 reminisced about her personal experience with hair discrimination during a competition when an opposing player pulled her braids. After complaining to the referee that this was not allowed,

Athlete 3 received personal criticism rather than empathy. The referee informed Athlete 3 that it was her fault for having longer hair and that she should try tying it up differently. However, other players on the field also had long hair, just not long braided hair. While reflecting on this incident, Athlete 3 stated:

I look at girls, I know girls who have really long hair, who don't get their hair pulled or, like, who aren't being told to tie their hair in a certain way. Because I feel they just want to tell you, like, when they say, tie it up or wear it up, they're kind of, they kind of mean, get a shorter hairstyle. But they're only telling you that, they're not going to tell another white girl to go cut her hair because of her sport. They're kind of just telling you that because they know you have the ability to wear your hair a different way. So, like, since you can do that.

Athlete 7 shared a very similar experience, also getting her hair pulled during competition. However, when describing this incident, she related her Black hair to her Black identity, stating:

I had this one experience where I had my hair and it was really long... braids down to my butt, and a ref, like, literally, was like, yeah, your hair is too long. because some girl, was like, pulling on it as I was trying to run. So I was like, it was like, a problem. And I told my coach, like, she keeps pulling my hair, and I don't know if she's doing it on purpose or not. She could have not been but, yeah, she kept pulling my hair. And the ref was like, yeah, you know, your hair's too long, that's your problem. And I was like, she's pulling

my hair. So I feel like, since a lot of Black girls don't play rugby, our hair is, like, our identity. And I don't know, I just feel like things, little things like that really affect it, and that's what made me insecure about wearing my hair in, like, long braids, or sometimes even natural, because I feel like someone's gonna pull it or something...it's a big issue. And they said it's on you, like, that's your issue. That's what I had a problem with. They said it's your fault that basically, they're basically saying it's your fault that's your background or your identity, because that's what I think my hair is part of, my identity. Like, that's how I express myself as a Black woman. So to think that someone could just say that's your fault? Yeah, that's what really hurt me.

Athlete 7 followed up, believing that this experience was different for “some girls”. For non-Black women athletes, having their hair pulled in competition was met with swift action by officials. She found that it was pretty “weird” to reflect on the difference in treatment and remembered these instances as “jarring” events in her USports career.

Athletes 4, 5, and 6 explained the deviance of Black hair through its changes during the athletic season. Athlete 4 described using her reactions to her new hairstyles throughout the year to gauge administrators' and teammates' understanding of Black women's identity and of what was deemed appropriate responses to changing Black hair. In her experience, she had never encountered anything “crazy” being said about her hair; however, she admitted that her acceptance of this microaggression was relatively high. Athlete 5 expanded on the “fascination” with Black hair. She concluded that, for the most part, she perceived comments about her hair as innocent, though they could also be exhibitionistic. Athlete 6 echoed this understanding, reflecting on how she felt othered because of her changing Black hair. Athlete 6 stated:

I feel like every time, I guess it happens to me too, but anytime I take my hair out, like from the braids, when we take our hair out, people always have something to say... but it's like, fine, and you're gonna see me at the game with braids the next day, and it's gonna be fine. And then it's just like, oh my god, I love your curls. Okay? Thank you. Or it's like, [other Black player] your hair. Wow, it looks so nice. What colour are you getting next? It's like, I know what they're trying to get at, but it's just like those types of things. I feel like that could sometimes feel like you're getting watched. Or, like, even when the [other USport athlete] was like, Oh, I actually don't like your natural hair. And I'm like, why would you ever say that to someone? Like, that's like, going up to someone being like, wow, you look terrible today. Like you just look awful. Like, bad choice of makeup, hair.

All three athletes, although not ever experiencing overt racist behaviours concerning their Black hair, expressed the importance of this feature to the Black women athlete experience. For these athletes, reactions to Black hair served as indicators of their institutions' overall attitudes towards Black identities. For most of the athletes interviewed, their USport institutions and administrators failed to acknowledge microaggressions concerning Black hair, but also to address such injustices for Black women athletes. Although some may perceive hair politics as trivial in the ultimate pursuit for equality, the stories shared by these Black athletes demonstrate an ongoing theme of covert racism experienced by Black women athletes.

Additional Forms of Discrimination

Following the description of discriminatory acts, athletes were asked about what other stereotypes they believed still existed within their institutions. A recurring theme for these women was the expectation to be loud and vibrant. Oftentimes, athletes' shyness or quietness was misunderstood by their peers and superiors. Athlete 9 specifically questions such expectations, asking “why she had to be loud all the time”. She explained feeling that she never had the space to be calm without teammates or coaches assuming that she had an attitude problem or that something was wrong. This was also met with contradiction, as Athlete 9 was simultaneously told that “she had too much personality” and that she “needed to water [herself] down”. Athlete 7 also recalled that Black teammates were often overlooked and not taken seriously by their peers. According to this athlete, it sometimes felt like they were merely a spectacle to be laughed at and to entertain the group. These stereotypes, although not explicitly discussed in Chapter One, inform the personality stereotypes associated with these women, which can be directly correlated with the other stereotypes.

Representation

Carrington (2002, p.5) determines the process of representation as a “primary site for the construction and constitution of identities, collective and individual.” For Black bodies, Blackness has and continues to be “pathologized as a deviant identity,” by various institutions (Carrington, 2002, p.6). The contradictory relationship between the “deviant” Black body and its white counterpart has simultaneously acted to maintain the social and political hierarchy of these bodies and reinforce ongoing stereotypes (Carrington, 2002). This remains especially true within

sports. The “colonial myths” regarding Black bodies represent Black athletes as primarily succeeding in athletic arenas (Carrington, 2002, p.15). Representation that exceeds the toughness or natural ability of Black athletes, in this case, may provide Black women athletes with alternative narratives regarding how and where their bodies are welcomed.

Black women athletes in this study were asked about the importance of representation in USport. They were questioned about the impacts of having Black women players, coaches, and administrators, and how this could and would impact their time in USport. All the athletes interviewed agreed that representation, whether in terms of more Black athletes, coaches, or administrators, provided substantial benefits. Athlete 1 believed that representation would have made her experience “more fun,” while Athlete 2 emphasized that there needed to be an acknowledgement by USport that Black women's experiences are not the same as those of their peers. She stated that what worked for the other women athletes did not work for Black women. A significant difference remained in culture, treatment, and the overall reality for these athletes. Rather than fighting for equality, where all athletes are presumed to start from the same point, USport should strive for equity and understanding of each athlete. To achieve this, representation was necessary at all levels of the USport institution.

Other Black women athletes in this study also felt much more comfortable reporting instances of racism with administrators who shared similar backgrounds. Athletes 5 and 7 believed “it would help with more personal conversations” and with navigating “certain types of discrimination,” giving more validity to the athletes' experience. Athletes also felt much more comfortable discussing discrimination with other Black women players. They reported closer relationships with their Black community as a result of similar shared grievances. Athlete 8 specifically stated:

Developing or like creating, a stronger community of like, the Black people.. Black women in my sport, or whatever...before I didn't really think anything of it, and like, I was like, Oh well, everyone's cool, everyone's chill, everyone's homies or whatever. But I feel like now, like, throughout like, these experiences, and just throughout my like, you know, whatever, years in university and being an athlete in the USport..I see like, even more value in like, leaning into, the community and finding people who like, I can identify with and they can identify with me. I feel like before I didn't, I didn't like, necessarily fully realize the value of having like, that kind of community and having people that like, you know, you can, like, candidly talk about these things.. let's say I suspect that something weird is going on with a situation, but I don't really know... because you never really truly know for a lot of the cases, but it's usually just like, a little microaggression that you're like, sounds a little suspect. It's like, I didn't realize how valuable it was to have other Black like women playing the same sport I'm playing and whatever. Didn't realize how valuable it was to have them, like, in my close circle, to be able to talk to them about these things freely...And they'll try their best to, you know, help navigate that...there's only so much they can do like in like, in terms of empathizing and like understanding truly...

Athlete 4 also concluded that having representation during her first few years in USport would have boosted her self-confidence. She believed that it would have encouraged her to try even harder in her sport. For this athlete, “seeing other Black women play rugby” meant that “we [could] play”. This was also true regarding representation with Black coaches. Athlete 4 felt that

she would have been more likely to pursue coaching if she had been Black. For this athlete, seeing Black representation meant that a career in this field was within reach.

Athletes 3, 4, 5, and 6 felt that representation in sport was a complicated concept they had to navigate. Athlete 3 admitted that she wanted the most qualified individual for the job; however, she also acknowledged the benefits of having Black Women in positions of power. Athlete 4 believed that administrators didn't need to share a similar background with athletes to have a positive impact on them. She stated that “as long as they are actively doing research...doing the work [and] unlearning some of their biases,” they could make USport enjoyable for all athletes. Athlete 5 felt there was insufficient information about how administrators handled instances of discrimination, and Athlete 6 thought the information provided was all “performative.” Athlete 6 did not believe that administrators were genuinely aware of the injustices that occurred within sports spaces. She stated:

There's so many things where it's like, we do these things for Black History Month, but we forget about it until February every year, or like, with the EDI policy changes. And I'm like, do you understand how important those things are to people? It's like, not even just for a race thing, like sexual identity, like any type of gender identity, like anything like that, and like, it's so important to have those things in place and having, I don't know, like, I feel like a lot of the support is there if you want to go find it. But I also sometimes feel like a little bit that it's like, we're here, but don't come to us.

Regardless of their differing perspectives, all participants believed there was an inappropriate level of representation of administrators in USport. Black women athletes in this

study believed that there needed to be more Black women in administrative. Such positions included head and assistant coaches, as well as other administrative role.

Conclusion

These athletes, as illustrated by their oral histories, often had to simultaneously consider how their institution perceived them, as athletes first, how they perceived themselves, and how Canadian culture, a culture steeped in hegemonic ideals, shaped those perceptions. For most Black women athletes in this study, a good education was critical to them and their families. Therefore, they prioritized their education over their athletic careers. However, based on historically rooted stereotypes, Black women athletes in this study were aware that, oftentimes, they were perceived as intellectually inferior and as having athletic superiority over their peers. As a result, these athletes recalled emphasizing the importance of excelling in their studies to challenge this stereotype. Ultimately, the internalization of the dumb jock trope continues to impact the experience of Black women athletes in USport, remaining prevalent within these institutions. The Black women athletes in this study also had to contend with the vilification of their bodies. This was facilitated through the projected indestructibility of their athletic body, resulting in harsher punishment by superiors, the exclusion of Black hair in athletic spaces, and the expectation of certain personality traits from Black women. Black Women athletes in this study additionally hoped to have a space where they could address these issues to their peers and superiors. Although most of the participants involved in this study indicated good relationships with teammates and coaches as well as evolving leadership roles on their team, it cannot just be the athletes themselves who address racist and sexist structures. Representation, as presented in

the oral histories, remains necessary in providing safe avenues for Black women athletes to excel.

CHAPTER 3: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND INTERGRATION INTO SPORT: WHERE ARE BLACK WOMEN WELCOME IN CANADA'S USPORT

Introduction

Each athlete in this study has a unique and complicated journey. For the Black women athletes who participated in the study, their sports backgrounds informed their university experience. Although each athlete's path led them to USport, it is essential to consider how individual experiences shaped each athlete's story, while considering the historical context in which these bodies exist.

An athlete's first year of university sports sets the precedent for their experience in this space. It is during this formative year that athletes are introduced and incorporated into the team and institutional culture. Based on this experience, they decide how best to integrate into a new system and whether to continue this journey. The first year for a university athlete is also foundational for relationship-building with peers. These relationships are crucial for the athlete's integration into university sports, success as a student, and overall enjoyment

Belonging to an athletic collective and representing an educational institution within USport may generate a sense of pride for athletes who are otherwise marginalized in most settings. Some of the Black women athletes who shared their stories expressed that there was no correlation between their Canadian identity and being a university athlete. In contrast, others described their participation as a means of acclimating to Canadian culture. However, all nine athletes agreed that certain sports were more typically associated with Black bodies. Black bodies rarely existed, for example, in winter sports such as ice hockey and ice skating, quintessentially Canadian.

The Black women athletes in this study demonstrate that acceptance and community within their athletic groups led to success. This sense of community was often found with other Black women. Based on these conclusions, several themes emerged regarding the integration of Black women into their institution. These included access to higher levels of sport; falling behind their peers and having to rely on external support to access elite teams; and tending to gravitate towards certain sports during childhood. These themes were also present during the athlete's recruitment process. Their stories also revealed a lack of understanding during the recruitment process and a need for community approval to commit to a team. Black women athletes also shared an appreciation for representation within these spaces, forming close relationships with teammates of similar backgrounds. However, these athletes at times also felt that there were limited spaces and resources and therefore felt pressure to compete with other Black women athletes. This competition was held both within teams and against other USport athletes.

Sport and Nationalism

Theeboom and colleagues (2022) argue that sports play a crucial role in promoting integration by fostering social inclusion. Participation in sports, as suggested by these findings, may be utilized as an inclusive space for individuals to find their identity within a collective (Theeboom et al., 2022). The fellowships of certain sports aim to create a shared identity through processes of “imagining, constructing, reproducing and inventing” (Watson, 2017, p. 291). Sport, as a national tool, can work to define the “common essence” that is unique to each community (Watson, 2017, p. 304). Dowling (2024) described sports as “an excellent arena for the integration of ethnic minorities into host communities” (p. 240). In this arena, participation in

sports has also been described as a “contested terrain” in which “social inequalities such as class, gender, sexuality, and race” determine where most individuals finish in the game (Wong & Dennie, 2021, p. 2). In this terrain, Wong and Dennie (2021, p. 2) suggest that “racial images, ideologies, and inequalities” are manufactured, challenged, and transformed in response to shifting social agreements.

Canadian national identity is most often tied to hockey and romanticized notions of playing the game on outdoor ponds in harsh, rugged winter landscapes. Yet, the homogenization of Canadian ideals and values through hockey nationalism has been described as an instrument that masks social inequalities that continue to permeate various Canadian institutions (Dennie, 2021; Adams, 2006). For many Canadians, the nation's collective spirit remains “articulated through the denigration of others, both internal and external to the national community” (Watson, 2017, p. 304). As Robidoux (2002) contends, hockey has become a symbolic representation of the Canadian identity.

Winter sports, in general, have been reported as having a direct relationship with newcomers' participation, integration, and national identity (Simon, 2023). Canada's climatic conditions and geographic location have often been associated with this reality. However, Canada's historical and ongoing identity as a white settler-colonial nation has also been linked to the cultural significance of winter sports in shaping Canadian identity (Gruneau & Whiston, 1993). Jedwab and Holley (2021) suggest that newcomers are interested in winter sports due to their strong association with Canadian identity. Although this research aimed to explore the experiences of Black women across various sports, it had limitations regarding their participation in winter sports. Out of the nine athletes interviewed, four played rugby, three were on the track and field team, and two played basketball. While seeking participation in this study, there was a

noticeable gap regarding the inclusion of Black women in “aesthetic”, typically feminine presenting sports and winter sports for both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary. Currently, the University of Calgary offers women's and men's basketball, cross country, women's and men's curling, field hockey, football, golf, women's and men's hockey, women's rugby, women's and men's soccer, swimming, track and field, women's and men's volleyball, and wrestling. The University of Lethbridge offers women's and men's basketball, women's and men's soccer, track and field, women's rugby, and swimming. No Black women athletes on ice hockey, swimming, curling, or soccer teams participated in this study.

In this study, nine Black women athletes were asked about their relationship to Canada and how their participation in USport has impacted their national identity. More specifically, they were asked if participating in university sports had made them feel more Canadian. Responses to this answer varied among athletes. Athletes 3, 7, and 8 all agreed that being part of the sport had allowed them to “meet more people,” broadening their understanding of different cultures. They described playing their sport as an opportunity to access Canada's multiculturalism. Athlete 8 describes feeling more connected to national sport opportunities and hopes to one day participate at that level. She stated:

One thing I will say, though, it has been really nice to see the like, like the sevens team, like the Canadian sevens team, like they won silver in the Olympics this year and like, that was insane. Like, honestly, such an insane performance by them. And I feel like it's done a lot for or it's going to do a lot for the sport in Canada. Because, yeah, rugby is not like a super, super popular sport in Canada. However, I think it is on the up, and I think that it is gaining more recognition. So I feel like having, like a woman's sevens team, like

compete in the Olympics and win silver. A silver medal is like, insane, and I think that's gonna do like, wonders for the sport itself. So I feel like, in that sense, like it has made me like, like, obviously, like, seeing them accomplish that has made me, like, a little bit more proud to be like, yeah, I'm Canadian. And like, yeah, I play rugby. And like, this is, like, Canada's doing great things with rugby, and I'm like, proud to be a part of it in like, any way, shape or form. So yeah, I feel like positive things in that sense.

Athlete 2 believed that track and field was not inherently Canadian, unlike in her home country; therefore, she lacked a sense of national pride when playing. She expressed her participation in track and field as a connection to her home, stating:

I feel like track, like, track is a big thing, but I don't think it's that crazy big for in Canada, yeah, like, so like, in a way, like, I feel like track is like a comfort for me, because I'm like, I did it in [home country], it feels like something I did in high school and in middle school. It's just a comfort for me, but like, overall, it doesn't feel like it's like as crazy, integrated into the Canadian culture, because it's track. If I was in basketball I'd feel integrated because it is basketball, but track is more, is not like one of the Canadian sports. So, like you if you go to a Canadian, they'd be like, those are the sports that we like, we like, you know, it's like hockey or basketball but it's never track. I wouldn't say to its track.

Athlete 2 also expressed that she did not see many Black women in hockey and other winter sports. When asked what spaces it would feel unnatural to see Black women, Athlete 2 stated:

I mean, any winter related, any winter sport like ice, or anything like that, it's just like, whoa. Or even swimming, because it's like, swimming is like, I mean, some of us do fall into stereotype. But like, you know, Black people can't swim, things like that... and like any like, skating or winterish sports.

Athletes 6 and 9 also indicated no connection between their Canadian identity and their participation in USport. However, like Athlete 2, they contended that this disconnection was due to their lack of participation in winter sports.

Exclusion from sports that have historically been associated with Canadian culture and its geography is just another example of how Black bodies are perceived within Canadian contexts. As discussed in the previous section, these bodies are often regarded as unsuitable. This very idea has permeated Canadian legislation and policy. Meister et al. (2025) explain that in the twentieth century, Canadian immigration campaigned to block Black settlement. The “discriminatory practice was driven by pervasive domestic racism” which aimed to create “numerous obstacles from Black immigrants” (Meister et al., 2025, para.1). A passage from the Order-in-Council banning stated “any immigrant belonging to the Negro race, which is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirement of Canada” see <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/order-in-council-pc-1911-1324>: This idea remains the same for Black women athletes in sport. These bodies are continuously excluded from environments where their image threatens the Canadian ideals, such as winter sports.

Welcomeness in Sport for Black Women Athletes

For Black women, feeling welcome in sports, especially at the collegiate level, is very complicated to negotiate. These women often find themselves as outsiders both during recruitment and in their first years of playing. Gender inequality in sports limits women's "access to a binary gender system and, within that system, restricts or obstructs participation for women" (Joseph et al., 2022, p. 868). Black women athletes then face "structural and systemic barriers to participation," which have often gone "unnamed and unchallenged" by various institutions (Joseph et al., 2022, p. 867). Past research studies have established two central themes for Black women in sport: limited participation in sports due to racism and sexism, and that participation in sports is heavily influenced by community (Joseph et al., 2022). These themes were reflected throughout the athletes' oral histories conducted for this study.

The nine athletes interviewed from the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge, although with various athletic backgrounds, participated in sports to join and belong to a community. These athletes explained that they wanted a safe place to belong, seeking peers with similar backgrounds to find comfort in an otherwise intimidating and unfamiliar setting. Participation in sport is provided in this community. While in their first year, Black women athletes in USport also faced various forms of discrimination and racism, initially deterring them from feeling welcome in their sport. There were also several accounts and stories of feeling pressured to be the best or most successful athlete on the team during their first year, not just against their white peers but also against other Black women athletes in these spaces. These women felt there was limited space for Black women. Ornella Nzindukiyimana (2020) explores such anxieties, concluding the existence of a racial anxiety trope, where "a few Blacks were

tolerable, but too many were a menace” (p. 1378). In this study, additional pressure was due to intra-specific competition. However, the nine athletes in this study also reported feeling more welcome when they met teammates with similar cultural backgrounds. Representation, in this sense, became very important to their integration process.

Introduction to Sport

The nine athletes interviewed shared similar stories regarding their initial experience in sports. Athletes 1, 6, and 7 grew up with older siblings who had previously participated in sports, encouraging them to follow a similar pathway. In contrast, athletes 2, 4, 5, 8, and 9 participated in free school sports programs offered by their elementary schools and soon discovered a passion for playing. Athlete 2 stated that growing up in her home country, “when you started school, like kindergarten, it was kind of like you had to do it”. During her first year of school, she participated in what she called a “sports day.” She and her peers were put into teams by colour and tried different sports throughout the day. This was the same for athlete 1. Most athletes grew up playing various sports in school, usually specializing in high school.

When asked about their first memory of playing sports, all the athletes remembered moments of enjoyment and community. Athlete 6 remembered skating at her local rink for the first time, envious of her brother playing hockey. Athlete 9 remembered her mother signing her up for judo to help teach her respect and discipline. Athlete 2 remembered her first time playing sports in Canada as the first time she felt at home in a new setting. She stated:

I first came here to Canada, and I was in grade eight, and I didn't, I was, like, kind of lost. That was a weird. I like, I'm like, I wasn't used to wearing random clothes to school, like everything was new. And then we did, like, tryouts for like, track and field, and then my coach was like, you have long legs, you're gonna do hurdles. And I was like, I didn't wanna do it because everybody was like, no, it's a bad thing, but I did it. And then I went to the first competition, and I was like, you know, I won the race. And I was like, huh, actually? Like, this is pretty good. I can keep doing this. And then ever since then, it's just been like, every year, track and field, I've done it every year. Never stopped.

Athlete 2's participation in these activities began a lifelong inquiry into how hard she could push themselves physically and mentally.

Barriers to Sports Participation

A common theme among Black women athletes in this study was financial inaccessibility to high-level club teams, such as Team Alberta, and a lack of knowledge about these teams. Connections, or lack thereof, became currency exchanged for opportunities. Due to the interconnectedness of the sports community, these athletes had to rely heavily on their coaches and peers for support to advance in their careers. This was especially true during the recruitment process. Another barrier for these athletes was a lack of transportation to and from sporting events, as well as parental support. Lack of parental support in this case was caused by inflexible employment and unclear expectations concerning participation in community, club, and provincial teams.

For some athletes, financial barriers hindered participation on elite teams, while others were supported by family members. Athletes 1, 2, 5, 6, and 9 received financial compensation from family members throughout their careers, allowing them to participate in both school and club sports. However, Athletes 3, 4, 7, and 8 mentioned struggling to obtain the financial support for specific clubs and provincial teams, such as Team Alberta. Athlete 3 remembered not being allowed to play in her first club game because of late fees. She stated that, “because it was a contact sport,” her coaches at the time would not let her participate in her first games because her fees were not fully covered. Athlete 4 also recalled struggling to pay fees but later achieved financial stability in high school. Athlete 7 also struggled to make team payments; however, she received support from both her junior high and high school coaches. Athlete 8 additionally struggled to keep up with payments after discovering a passion for multiple sports. Financial support for these athletes often came from their parents and other family members. However, for those who struggled to pay their sports fees, there were patterns of disconnect from family members concerning the importance of sports in the athlete's life. Athlete 2 described family expectations as a barrier when first starting in sport. Although she found financial stability throughout her career, she had to pay her own way through school rather than rely on family members. She stated:

It was more like family, kind of, what you call it, barriers, because, like, my parents were just more, like, you go to school, come home kind of thing. They didn't really want the extra things like, it was a bit hard like trying to get into because most of the times when you compete, it's always far away. Yeah, and we're new to Canada, so they don't really trust people as much. And so it's just like, trying to, like, explain to them, I gotta go travel

to Calgary. Like, trying to explain to them, like, I need to do this. And like, you know, try to, like, give them all information and everything. And like, you know, sometimes they don't get as much information. So that was one of the barriers.

Athlete 3 also described having to explain her passion for sport to family members. She explained that her parents “never really understood” why she played the sport she did. They remained apprehensive about the “aggressiveness” involved while playing. She remembered that she often had to rely on other teammates and coaches to subsidize costs and provide transportation to and from practices and games. She stated that “if there was nobody to drive” her, it was her responsibility to find her way to sporting events, as asking her parents was not an option. Athlete 7 shared a similar experience; however, she credited her parents' absence from sporting events to their busy work schedules. She would also carpool with teammates. She believed her parents' main priority was her getting a good education. Because of this, her family began to appreciate her involvement in sports once it led to a university scholarship. Athlete 8 also counted on her teammates for transportation and found immense support from the community. When asked how she would get to and from practice, she shared her appreciation of her sports community, stating:

I was, like, fortunate enough to, like, have really good, like, friend groups and, like, great friends that, like, we all played basketball, me and, like, it was probably like, I don't know, six or seven of us girls, like, we all went to like, the same junior high, played basketball together there, and then we all went to the same high school to play basketball there, because they had, like, a pretty good program. So yeah, we always, like, we try and

help each other out when it came to, like, practices, games, that kind of thing, and we try and figure out carpool schedules. I feel like that was, like, the whole, like, sports world, I guess...But, yeah, I definitely remember, like, there were several games, or, like, whatever where, like, my mom would have to, like, if she worked a night shift, like the Friday night I had a game at what, like two, 2pm on the Saturday, she'd like, come home, she'd like, get some sleep, whatever she could do, and then she'd like try and hustle to get me to my games.

Access to higher levels of sport, such as university club teams and provincial teams, was only available to some athletes. Participation in these teams required previously established connections. For the Black women athletes in this study, there was limited knowledge concerning the requirements for being on such teams. Information for those who had access often came from school coaches or external sources. Athlete 2 started playing on the club team in grade 9. Her partner's mother was involved with a sports council and suggested she join the team, providing the necessary information and guidance to help her succeed. Athlete 4 described having to search for these same resources on her own. She boasted that her love of sports drove her determination to make a club team. The communal aspect of the sport fueled this love. She described wanting to “shine individually” but also loving “the camaraderie of it all,” appreciating the friendships made on and off the field. It was for this reason that athlete 4, despite a lack of connections, continued playing her sport and found opportunities beyond her high school team. Athlete 6, unlike most of the participants, grew up playing sports in a small town where opportunities were limited. She described having “no idea” about provincial teams, where or when their tryouts take place, or who to contact to get this information. She often learned about

these opportunities after they had passed. Athlete 8 shared a similar experience. However, she opted to play community rather than club sports because of the fees. As a result, she felt “left behind” further in her career, especially during the recruitment process. Athlete 9 was always well-connected within the basketball community; however, she found it challenging to navigate the club sports world as an eager Black woman athlete dedicated to winning. Always aspiring to play at the highest levels, she shared that some club coaches described her as “indecisive” and “unpredictable.” As a result, she was excluded from these spaces in her final years before college recruitment.

The recruitment process for these athletes echoed similar patterns. When deciding whether to continue with varsity sports, Black women athletes often relied on their community for advice. This included coaches, family members, and friends. However, all the athletes in the study took the initial initiative during the recruitment process. The recruitment process was also beneficial for those with previous connections to the university. Athlete 1 was the only outlier in seeking a community during her decision-making process. She stated that her main goal was to go to a “place where nobody goes” where she would be allowed to “just be herself” and do what “she needed to do.” Although she never directly planned to play University sports, she remembered seeing her peers going further and believed that she could as well. To achieve this goal, she reached out to various university coaches and participated in tryouts. Athlete 2 was also self-motivated in her pursuits, both in higher education and collegiate sports. She explained that there was never a single moment when she thought she would play University sports. However, for her, quitting was always difficult. Her dreams, along with every victory and challenge, fueled her motivation to be the best. This determination led her to reach out to coaches and try out for various teams, hoping to advance to the next level in the sport. This was also true for athletes 3,

4, 5, and 8 their passion for the sport served as a driving force to continue to higher levels. For Athletes 6, 7, and 9, their recruitment process, although still self-driven, was also facilitated by community members. These athletes, lacking prior experience or knowledge of the recruitment process, relied heavily on their coaches and peers. Athlete 6 admitted that, looking back, sports, especially the recruitment process, remained highly political. From her perspective, it was less about the athlete's talent and more about the connections the athlete had. She concluded that if you knew the right people, "you could go or play for certain teams." Athlete 7 reiterated the importance of connection, attributing the difficulties she faced during her recruitment to the lack of connection in the sports world. Her lack of knowledge concerning the requirements, financial expectations, and responsibilities of USport made her recruitment process much more difficult. She stated:

I didn't even know anything. I didn't know you had to, like, I don't even know, like, I knew nothing about it, or I didn't know, like, there was a whole recruitment process, and you have to get into school, of course, before and all that stuff. And they wouldn't, and they also don't pay for anything for rugby. So, yeah, that was another thing I didn't know.

For this athlete, her USport career was made possible because of her high school coach. Her coach reached out to the university she wanted to attend, making the first contact. Athlete 9 was the only athlete in the study formally contacted by a university team. Despite attaining various awards throughout her career, she received only one USport offer. Similar to Athlete 6, she reported having to navigate the complex political landscape of higher-level sports. This meant competing against legacy players, those whose parents grew up playing on the same teams

and were almost always guaranteed the same opportunities. Having been labeled “unpredictable” and “indecisive” by previous coaches, athlete 9 had limited options for playing at the collegiate level. Despite this, she wanted to ensure that she was making the right decision to continue playing. Athlete 9 then sought advice from both her high school coach and former teammate. She explained that “she needed to talk to him [high school coach] because he knew her.” He knew how she wanted to be coached; he knew the “type of player she was” and which environment would suit her best. Athlete 9 also received advice from an older peer who had already experienced playing in USport. After considering both opinions, she felt comfortable moving forward.

The relationships made during an athlete's career may dictate future opportunities. For university athletes, this is especially true during their last few years of high school. Black women athletes in this study expressed relying on community support as they navigated the recruitment process. For the athletes who had previous relationships with coaches and university teams, this process became far less complicated. Despite this advantage, each athlete in this study was self-motivated to participate in university sports.

Black Women Athletes and Community: First Year Blues

Motivation to continue in sport differs for each individual. However, there have been trends associated with women's engagement in athletics and physical education. While men's participation in sport has remained “one of the most important bases for the reproduction of masculine hegemony,” both women's and men's sports are in “pursuit of common” goals and the

“opportunity to experience the camaraderie and togetherness” (Theberge, 1995, p. 390). Coakley and White (1992) and Craike et al (2009) found that many young women discontinued playing sports even after having had positive experiences during their time at school, withdrawing after their friends stopped playing. Women who continued in their athletic careers were often motivated and supported by family members and friends (Johnston & Weatherington, 2018). Women are also encouraged to continue building and maintaining communities, with a greater focus on goal-oriented approaches in sport (Deaner et al., 2016).

Community and socialization-building remain at the core of the Black women athlete experience. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) assert that peer-to-peer relationships were crucial to students' development during their undergraduate years. In athletics, good relationships with teammates remain an essential part of social support for student-athletes (Cooper & Jackson, 2019). Without such support, Black women athletes must navigate instances of racism and discrimination individually, affecting their sense of belonging and thereby impacting athletic and academic successes (Francique, 2018; Ofoegbu, 2022; Schwabe, 2022).

Athletes 1 through 9 were asked about their first year on their respective USport team. More specifically, they were asked about how welcome they felt with their peers, coaches, and administrators. They were additionally asked how they believed their identity as a Black woman impacted this experience. All nine athletes reported facing challenges of fitting in. For the athletes who succeeded, community was often found among other Black women. These relationships provided spaces where athletes could voice their grievances about racist and/or sexist behavior and establish alliances against coaches and administrators. The establishment of such communities became the deciding factor in whether an athlete continued after their first.

Integration into their new environment was heavily influenced by team dynamics, feelings of isolation, and the presence of culturally similar teammates.

Athletes 2, 3, 7, and 9 did not initially feel welcome in their first year in USport. All four athletes described anxieties about fitting into an already established group and about feeling left out by their teammates. Athlete 3 felt that her teammates had preconceived notions about the type of person and athlete she was. Coming from high school and having already played on the national team, athlete 3 felt the women on her new team were envious of her previous experience and skills. She felt they did not believe she worked hard enough to earn her accomplishment, implying that she was naturally talented. Athlete 3 stated:

They didn't like me. I feel like, like, it took me, like, a bit to, like, come to terms with this, because, like, it was such a struggle last year, and I was like, if I say it like that, it feels like in my head, I'm being like, a cocky bitch. Like, no way I'm saying oh, they don't like me because I'm actually good at what I do, but that's the only thing I could come to conclusion with.

Athlete 3 felt that in her first year, a year filled with a lot of confusion, she lacked guidance and support from her teammates, which ultimately left her at a disadvantage athletically and academically. Athlete 3 suggested that she was often lost navigating systems, stating:

I had a hard year last year, like, again, I just didn't know what I was doing. I felt like I had to do a lot of things alone, without the help of my parents. And so when I was applying to housing, nobody told me that I had to only pick Uhall, because I thought that

was only what first years got. And so I picked Uhall when I was selecting housing, instead of, like, the good options. And so that's what I got. So I had to live alone in my first year, which was already sad enough as it is, that I had to, like, get used to, like school and just like the whole independence thing, like right off the bat, and it felt like my team did not help. If it was like, being a team, it should be like, oh, like, you're in your first year, we've been through this. Let me help you out. That was not the case.

Athlete 9 echoed the same themes; however, she felt there was a significant cultural disconnect between herself and the rest of her teammates. For this athlete, it was difficult to maintain her Black identity while also trying to fit in with her new team. She found herself thinking about what behaviours would be appropriate for her new setting as a Black woman rather than enjoying her experience. Athlete 9 recounts her first year being “tough,” stating:

Like I said, like, came into like, for like, first practice. Obviously, you know, we start early July 1. Everybody's there, and it's just like, I'm the only coloured player. Obviously, there's [another player] who's like, you know, [players ethnicity] and stuff. But, like... you know, like, culturally, like, no Black people, not, like, even on the coaching staff, like, just white people, maybe, like an Arab dude, and that was it, you know. And I'm like, okay, like, what have I gotten myself into... Just culturally like, like, even, like food, like I'm craving something, like I'm craving gumbo. No one's gonna have gumbo soup...sometimes you feel like you got a tip toe around, like white people and like, I was like, hey, like, I'm so gonna be myself, obviously, but it's gonna take a bit of time to kind of, you know, to adjust.

Athletes 2 and 7 initially found their first year difficult; however, they soon adapted following encouragement from their peers and coaches. Athlete 2 labeled herself as initially shy and soft-spoken. As a result, she often found herself in the background of many team discussions. She felt that she “did not stand up” for herself. According to Athlete 2, her coach was the person who helped her get outside of her comfort zone. She remembered an instance when she had broken down during a competition, and her coach was constantly the voice of reason and reassurance. Athlete 7 found community through her relationship with her previous teammates. She made sure to “stay with the people that [she] knew,” hoping to eventually change the culture of exclusion on her team in her later years.

Athletes 1, 4, 5, and 8 felt integrated in their first year. However, these athletes' comfort level within their institutions was also directly linked to community support. Athlete 1 found camaraderie with other Black women sprinters who often stuck together. Athlete 4, being a transfer, felt a greater sense of integration at her second USport school due to the increased presence of Black women on her team. She believed that a team's demographic composition was a direct indicator of her comfort level. Athlete 4 echoed the same feeling, expressing that oftentimes, her white peers were unaware of the impacts of the things they would say within the team setting, therefore making it uncomfortable for Black athletes. After she transferred to another school with a higher representation of Black women athletes, she felt more comfortable speaking about microaggressions. The size of her second USport team also helped establish a more tight-knit community. This helped build stronger relationships with other athletes and her coaches. Athletes 5 and 8 additionally boasted about their sports community. Athlete 5 described “sticking around” other Black teammates in workouts and team events. According to this athlete,

these teammates made it possible for her to express herself in a judgment-free space while sharing cultural understandings. Athlete 5 stated:

... it felt nice to have another black person on team. Like, there's certain ways again, that I would laugh at their jokes, but there's certain ways me and like [other Black athlete] would joke about things that only both of us would be able to laugh at, like hair and other stuff that just like, wouldn't be able to talk to the team about, but, yeah, it's never really affected me too much. I feel like we're kind of just, you kind of just learn to get used to it. Being the only black girl, I learned to get used to it.

There were various instances of community among other Black women athletes; however, competition also existed. For some athletes, there were feelings of scarcity regarding the resources and social acceptance available to Black women in these spaces. Athletes 1 and 5 both discussed feeling an extra motivation to be the best Black athlete competing. Athlete 1 describes explicitly having to “fight for [her] spot” in a setting where there was a limited representation of Black women. According to Athlete 1, “It was all fun and games until [they] got to the line.” After that point, it became a competition to determine who the “best Black athlete” was at USport events. However, outside of competition, athlete 1 admitted that, ultimately, they were all good friends. Once the competition portion was over, “they would laugh” and “have a good time” together. Athlete 3 also discusses what it means to be the “acceptable” Black woman athlete in sport. Having another older Black teammate on her team, she felt that in her first year there was only room for one “acceptable” Black athlete. Although her team would usually conflate both her and her Black teammates' identities, athlete 3, despite

having received immense support from her Black teammate, believed that there was always a sense of competition between the two of them, stating:

It felt like a competition between me and [other Black athlete] as we played the same positions. We're both fast, and every time felt like competition. I don't know if like [other Black athlete], like, thought of it much..I'm like, no, like, I have to be the best...And so it would be like, who's gonna beat who today...there aren't that many of us, so only, like a couple of us can be the best. That's how it feels...

Athlete 3 also described an ongoing comparison of the two Black athletes on her team. She stated:

And there were little times where they would just be like, someone would say something like, oh well, [other Black athlete]. Oh well, [other Black athlete] knows how to oh, well, [other Black athlete] does. They were always comparing. And I'm like, oh my god, bro. Like, like, it was just like, there are times, now that I think about it, where that would happen, they would be like, Oh well, look at the way [other Black athlete] does it like...They'd be like, Oh well, [other Black athlete] scores... why are you trying to pit me against my sister?.. it would be like there wasn't enough space for both of us to succeed at the same time.

Nzindukiyimana (2020) examines the competition and comparison fueled by other athletes, driven by the racial anxiety trope. The racial anxiety trope addresses the “limits of

acceptance which hinged on non-threatening clauses on the part of Black people” (Nzindukiyimana, 2020, p. 1378). Black women athletes may feel pressure to be the best Black woman athlete compared to their peers due to fear of exceeding the capacity of Black bodies in their given institution. During their first years, Black women athletes felt a sense of dissonance in this regard. They found community among themselves, but they also felt pressure to be the best and most accepted Black bodies in athletic spaces. The competition and comparison between Black women within their collectives further demonstrate the unique experience specific to their positionality. Black women athletes’ existence remains a threat to the institutional structures that uphold white elites. In one instance, these bodies are exploited for their supposed athletic superiority, celebrated by sports teams, and labeled as a phenomenon. In the same instance, they are pitted against one another in attempts to isolate and divide the Black collective. Access to the community for these women, as explored in previous chapters, remains an essential component of their success. The intentional efforts to disrupt such relationships among Black women athletes remain both recurring and problematic for this group.

Administrator's Perspective on the Importance of the First Year

When asked about athletes' integration into the sport, administrators reiterated the importance of getting to know the athletes. They thought it “absolutely vital” to make athletes feel like they were a “key piece of their varsity programs.’ Being part of a smaller institution, such as the University of Lethbridge, was beneficial for establishing strong relationships, which in turn led to higher retention rates among student-athletes. From their experience, administrators

found that people perceived Lethbridge as a place that most people would not want to go. However, “once kids get here and once athletes get here, they do not want to leave.” According to administrators, student-athletes need to feel like they are a crucial part of the university community, not just a part of the department. As this remains an integral part of creating a safe environment for student-athletes, structures such as roster caps were utilized—a roster cap limited varsity teams to having a certain number of participants. According to administrators, this would ensure a comprehensive student-athlete experience, allowing coaches and other administrators more opportunities to interact with their teams and allocate resources effectively. The roster cap essentially protected student-athletes from having a diluted experience, attempting to avoid what other big universities struggled with. Having already established strategies to combat negative athlete experiences, administrators were then asked how this differed for athletes of colour. Specifically, the issue of retention for Black women athletes. Administrators remained unsure as to how these experiences differed specifically. However, they noted that this issue had previously been discussed as part of athlete leadership development for Canadian University sports. They responded:

We haven't had to or felt the need to, and so I honestly don't know. And again, just being completely honest, like I don't hear that ton to be a consideration. I am mindful that we're in southern Alberta, and southern Alberta is a different place than Vancouver or downtown Toronto, and so I know it's definitely the experience in southern Alberta from our visible minorities, is definitely different, different than our, than our, than our non-visible minorities. I just haven't heard lots of the need to do that, and it could be from a lack of pursuit on my end, but I just haven't really felt that that's been a thing.

Although administrators acknowledged the possibility of differences in experiences for young Black women athletes, their approach remained essentially unchanged.

This response by administrators demonstrated a surface-level understanding of the problems that plague Black women athletes. There was no mention of potential initiatives to address equity programming or policy changes regarding the athletes' recruitment process. The consensus and overall tone of this response suggest that exclusion as a means of current recruitment processes was not a significant issue. The suggestion that Southern Alberta lacked diversity insinuates that the barriers faced by Black women athletes were essentially a fault of their own, primarily dictated by their decision to live in Southern Alberta. This perspective additionally disputes institutional responsibility. Kimberly Crenshaw's intersectional perspective views administrators' perspectives as a symptom of colourblindness. At a simple level, colourblindness "mobilized a metaphor of visual impairment to embrace a simplistic and misleading affirmation of racial egalitarianism" (Crenshaw, 2019, p.4). In this case, administrators failed to acknowledge the existing power structures that contribute to the disenfranchisement of minority groups within these institutions, labelling such issues as unimportant or natural (Crenshaw, 2019).

To mitigate the intimidating nature of their position, administrators also sought humor to relate to student-athletes. Oftentimes, administrators worry about "coming off as condescending" in their leadership position. Humor among athletes and, at times, other staff members broke down barriers to hierarchies within athletics. Speaking to athletes as competent, capable, and mature individuals enabled administrators not only to establish trusting relationships but also to maintain ongoing, healthy communication with their student-athletes. They hoped this approach

would aid athletes' transition into USport, showing them that they were a figure they could openly communicate with. Administrators specifically stated:

I'm the individual in the office that that gets picked on and berated the most, yeah, and I wear it as I wear it as a badge of honor, because I am a leader within the department, and so I act like an idiot to make people feel more comfortable with me, to break down the perception and the barrier of a person in a position of leadership. And so that's not who I am to begin with. I'm really good at being the jackass in the room, the funny guy, the the class clown, and so I purposely do that to eliminate I'm rambling now, but to get rid of this perception and barrier that there's that [person] who sits in a position of leadership, so that people feel more comfortable in approaching me and in confiding in me. I haven't I haven't done that specifically because of race or anything like that. I've done that because of more so of positional power. Yeah, and so maybe that's helped create, maybe that's helped create a more trusting environment between the athletes and myself that not me. Just do it to everybody to try and feel, make them feel like they can come and talk to me about whatever they need to talk to.

Administrators also acknowledged that access to and participation in sports differed for men and women. They stated that oftentimes, “women need a cause to fight for, and men need to fight for the cause.” This meant that most often, women athletes needed a strong community before feeling comfortable participating in sport, while men often competed to be accepted into this same community. While men had to perform what Connell (2026) described as hegemonic

masculinity through their participation in sport, women athletes did not have the privilege of exhibiting such competitive behaviour. Women athletes instead leaned into the communal aspect of sport. Agreeing with the interviewer, administrators also indicated that there was a cultural difference between women's and men's sports. According to their personal experience, women's sports often comprised a shared sense of identity and cohesiveness. It was a space that thrived on connectedness and allyship to be successful. For the men's side, the team's success was often determined by the competitive nature of its individuals. Administrators drew parallels to the University of Lethbridge's women's and men's basketball teams as well as the soccer teams, stating the following:

The difference is, and I'll even use men's women's basketball, the difference between the two men's women's basketball programs is astonishing. Yeah, it is astonishing. And I go into a practice and on the men's side, it feels like they're ready to fight each other at any point, and I go the women's side, and the women are working hard. They're locked in, but it's a completely different vibe, where the body language is different, the face seeing a lot more smiling and a lot more enthusiasm and joy and and not, and that's not, can't be mistaken for intensity. It's just different...yeah, so, and in soccer, it's the same thing, like, it's a completely different dynamic. And so. So I do think that, I do think that women transitioning into university sport as a first year, the first step needs to be feeling like they are accepted into the group and it's become a member of the team, whereas on the men's side, some first years can come in and say, screw these guys. I'm gonna, I'm gonna fight my way into this thing.

When asked about the parallels between the experiences of Black women athletes and Black students and how welcome they would be at the university, administrators were unsure. Curious about how this could be addressed for both demographics, they believed that hosting more Black-specific events by the university would be an easy first step to help with student integration. They noted that upon their arrival, they wanted to get involved with Black-hosted events. Although they considered Black History Month to be “24 hours a day and 12 months of the year”, they were particularly interested in the institutional events available for Black students during February. When participating in an event hosted for Black History Month, they saw firsthand the impact the community had on Black students. This was further demonstrated by increased staff interest, as shown by their inclusion of Black culture in their academic teaching. They stated:

Okay, I had just come to the university, and I was like, you know, I want to do this event. Because then I was told we had never done a Black History Month event on your campus. And so I was like, Oh, okay. And so for me, Black History Month is 24 hours a day, and 12 months out of the year. Yeah, it should be every day, yes. But I had to, like, start slowly to get people to understand the importance of the event. And so now professors are like, oh, did you know in my class that I teach on Asian history, they were Black soldiers in Japan...so they they're starting to think about it more comprehensively, but I think for me, I would love to see a more broader integration of orientation and onboarding for Black students.

Administrators also noted that Black-only events were often perceived as “singling out.” However, this was not the case. Black people are “different in their experiences.” Black women, they contended, are a composition of historical events. Their bodies, whether within or outside the institution, are heavily policed. Therefore, a community where these experiences are shared, where Black bodies can come together in their grievances and accomplishments, is necessary. Administrators conclude that they “need a different kind of support to bring them in and to orient them,” and this remains especially true for Black women. They hoped to establish a Black mentorship program during their time at the university. This would lead to both student- and faculty-led initiatives tailored to the needs at the time. The intent behind a program such as this is to provide Black students with access to experienced individuals in their chosen field. For example, if a student were interested in HR, they would be matched with an HR representative at the university or in the community. However, they noted that this would not be the best year for such a program, as it may be labelled too “polarizing” in their current political climate. Building on the mentorship program, Administrators were asked about the importance of representation. More specifically, it was crucial for Black students to see themselves in positions of power at the university. Administrators stated:

I don't care what anybody tells you. Seeing a person who looks like you creates in you the possibility to dream. I don't care what anybody says if all your life you've gone through school, and you've never seen a Black Professor or a Black doctor or an administrator that looks like you with their kinky hair or whatever. You will always think that this is not a possibility for you, but the moment that you see someone who looks

right back at you, looking like you, you have the possibility to dream that this could be me one day. And so for me as an administrator, my goal has always been, how do I open up the door behind me so others can walk in as well. I could take the blows. I can deal with all the hard, heavy lifting, but in a year or so, someone else can walk through that door and it'd be easier for them.

They believed that representation for young Black athletes is crucial for creating a safe space where all can succeed. Diversity for them often accompanied lived experience, which sometimes replaced direct experience. However, they believed that, when considering lived experience, the hiring process becomes a balancing act. Ultimately, their goal was to hire qualified coaches from diverse backgrounds who could effectively integrate and contribute to the existing culture. A culture that they hoped would help facilitate open and critical conversations led by both athletes and administrators. Although these sentiments were focused on inclusivity, administrators failed to directly acknowledge the implementation of employment equity programs specific to the university. Employment equity, EE, is the creation of a “comprehensive planning process by an employer to identify and remove discrimination in employment and employment practices” (Jain & Hackett, 1989, p.189). EE programs become especially important when considering the intersection of oppressive structures, specifically for Black women employees. According to Crenshaw, Black women workers were systematically excluded from working conditions as Black jobs were often available only to Black men (Southbank Centre, 2016). In contrast, women's jobs were exclusively available to white women (Southbank Centre, 2016). While white women represented all women and Black men represented all Black people,

policy often worked to address either race or gender rather than how both systems of oppression impacted one another (Southbank Centre, 2016).

According to the University of Lethbridge (2004, “policy Statement” section) the university is committed to “achieving and maintain a fair and representative workplace through the development and implementation of an employment equity plan” to ensure that “all individuals are provided full opportunity to develop their potential by removing barriers in selection, hiring, development, and advancement” (University of Lethbridge, 2004, para.6). The objective of this policy is to “attract and retain the best people from an increasingly diverse workforce” as well as “reflect the diversity of [the University of Lethbridge] students and global intellectual communities” (University of Lethbridge, 2004, para. 5). The effective date of this policy was on December 16th, 2004. However, neither administrators nor Black women student-athletes have yet achieved this. Therefore, “best people,” as proclaimed by the policy, continue to exclude Black women coaches and administrators. Considering the intent of this study, administrators, who claim to acknowledge the importance of representation for Black women, demonstrated a simplistic understanding of discrimination issues. This was evident in their lack of initiative and overall lack of knowledge.

Athletes and administrators both concluded that representation for Black women and/or minority students improved the experience of Black women and/or minority students in sport. Black women athletes found community and understanding among themselves, while administrators highlighted the positive impact of having coaches with similar lived experiences to the athletes. The administrators did not believe that there was an appropriate amount of representation currently within USport and corresponding USport institutions.

Conclusion

For Black women athletes, integration into educational institutions is especially complicated. These bodies are not considered to be the traditional prototype for “Canadian sports” for a variety of gendered and racist reasons. Black women's integration into university sports, as well as their connection to Canada as athletes, then becomes an important consideration when assessing their experience in USports.

The integration process into university sport was unique for all nine athletes involved in this study. With varying backgrounds and access to resources, these women offered a broad range of insights into their institution's ability to make Black gendered athletes feel welcome, from the recruitment process onward. For some athletes, participation in sports at the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary brought a sense of national pride, while for others, no such correlation was found. However, all nine athletes agreed that some sports were more accepting of Black women than others. Winter sports and “aesthetic” sports, such as ice hockey, were described by the athletes as more Canadian but less inviting for Black women.

Black women athletes also demonstrated a lack of resources concerning information about higher-level teams. Those who had the opportunity to participate in elite sports often had previously established connections and financial support from either their parents or community members. Community, whether during the recruitment process or in the search for the right USport program, became essential for these athletes.

For Black women athletes, their first year playing USport was integral for their integration into their institutions. For these students, feeling included was dependent on the

support systems available. Black women athletes found comfort and community with one another, relying on shared cultural backgrounds to understand one another. For those who lacked these connections, achieving integration became much more challenging. Black women athletes also reported feeling extra pressure to be the best and most successful Black bodies. Some athletes found themselves competing against other Black women athletes within these communities, fearing limited space.

Administrators agreed with the value of representation for these athletes. They acknowledge that Black women athletes have different experiences in sports, but they could not point to concrete, ongoing efforts to address this issue. The intent to protect these bodies is then both acknowledged and ignored by administrators. Diversity and community building remain essential for the success of Black women athletes.

CHAPTER 4: EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN USPORT: HOW EFFECTIVE ARE CURRENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Introduction

Administrators have been making ongoing efforts to portray Canadian universities as multicultural and inclusive. These institutions acknowledge their ethical obligation to ensure that students have the tools to detect and resolve biases that impact marginalized groups (Chen et al., 2023, p. 419). Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies, in this case, are intentionally designed to identify, educate, and protect those who commonly face discrimination within Canadian universities (Campbell, 2021). For Black students, the impacts of EDI policies dictate their experience in educational institutions. EDI policies are an essential source for identifying the university's stance on inclusion, as well as the reporting mechanisms available to students, faculty, and community members for when these principles are not upheld.

After analyzing current policies, several themes emerged regarding the composition of EDI policies. Both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary utilize vague language, lack institutional accountability, and fail to provide the necessary pathways for Black students to access these policies. As a result, a significant gap remains between the experience of Black women athletes and the intent behind inclusion policies.

According to their oral stories, Black women athletes lack general awareness of these policies, how the policies may be applied to athletic settings, and what constitutes discrimination and harassment as determined by EDI policies. Black women athletes have been forced to internalize their otherness and accept discriminatory behaviors as "normal" occurrences. This has and continues to negatively impact their experience at Southern Alberta institutions. In these

cases, a gap remains between the intent of EDI policies and the lived experiences of the groups they aim to support.

History of EDI in Canadian Institutions

EDI initiatives first gained prominence in Canadian higher education in the 1980s, following the resurgence of stories highlighting discrimination (Ahmed, 2012). As a result, EDI statements became essential within Canadian universities' mission statements, performance reports, and action plans (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). EDI statements, in this case, have served as a performative checklist intended to portray universities as inclusive and welcoming institutions. EDI initiatives most commonly focus on two areas: prevention and institutional response to discrimination (Campbell, 2021). Law professor Angela Campbell (2021) suggests that, in theory, EDI is intended to center conversations around unconscious bias. As a practice, it helps mitigate the impacts of discrimination, especially when one group has an advantage in accessing power and influence. The groups included within the EDI initiatives range in scope and may attend to “persons who are Indigenous, racialized, disabled, gendered, sexual minorities, members of minority religious groups, and women” (Campbell, 2021, p.52).

Additionally, EDI policies seek to address historical practices such as colonization, “whose legacies help explain the contemporary realities of ongoing underrepresentation” within educational institutions (Campbell, 2021, p. 52). *Critical University Studies* addresses this issue by positioning universities as sites of ongoing settler colonialism. Stein (2022) contends that to “avoid reproducing colonial notions of universality and placelessness,” there needs to be an acknowledgment of “enduring colonial relations in higher education” (p. 12). Therefore, these structures cannot be understood as stagnant but rather as recurring and adaptive. Indigenous

scholars in Canada have also explored this very phenomenon. Pedri-Spade and Pitawanakwat (2022) conclude that there needs to be active efforts made by these educational institutions to “situate “decolonizing alongside broader institutional commitments related to anti-racism” (p.13).

In 1981, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada surveyed 37 Canadian universities. The survey examined race relations and the policies related to the treatment of racialized groups (Henry et al., 2009). Results from the survey indicated that only a few research universities had inclusive policy statements addressing institutional racism (Henry & Tator, 1994). Although this was identified as an ongoing issue, anti-racist mechanisms began to emerge not solely from these findings but also from the pressure of feminist activists in the late 1970s and early 1980s who sought to address sex-based discrimination on campus (Henry et al., 2009). Another driving force for equality in higher education institutions at the time came from human rights tribunals, which aimed to hold employers accountable for addressing discrimination (Henry et al., 2009). As a result of these two factors, from the 1970s to the 1990s, most Canadian universities began developing sexual harassment policies. In 1986, the federal government also introduced the Employment Equity Program (Drakich & Stewart, 1995). This program required publicly funded universities to increase representation for women, Indigenous peoples, visible minorities, and persons with disabilities (Drakich & Stewart, 1995). Few institutions had equity policies that included people of colour when this framework was initially introduced (Dua & Lawrence, 2000). It was not until the 1990s that other forms of discrimination were incorporated into Canadian university frameworks (Henry et al., 2009). Over the last two decades, research has demonstrated the continued occurrence of racism and whiteness within Canadian institutions (Henry & Tator, 2009). The Henry report on *Systemic*

Racism Against Faculty of Colour and Aboriginal Faculty at Queen's University (2006) reveals that the “culture of whiteness” continues to shape the very foundations of Canadian universities. Following this report was a push to create and implement anti-racist policies to guide educational institutions (Henry & Tator, 2009). As a result, Canadian universities and colleges began adopting a range of anti-racist strategies. These strategies included anti-racism statements, audits addressing systemic discrimination and employment equity policies, and initiatives to address underrepresentation among faculty.

The Canadian government has also implemented EDI plans, explicitly referencing anti-racism and Indigenization as key areas of focus in higher education (Campbell, 2021). Henry and Tator (2009) suggest that following these efforts, changes have occurred in the DNA of Canadian universities and colleges. In 2025, Canadian universities are expected to implement an anti-harassment policy that addresses and condemns racism toward students and faculty of colour (Henry & Tator, 2009). These statements are often associated with and influenced by EDI efforts. Over the last five years, universities have also begun to hire senior-level EDI personnel to provide guidance and advice on implementing discrimination policies (Al Shaibah, 2024). The title of EDI has also changed from institution to institution. For example, the University of Calgary categorizes these initiatives under the title Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA). Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) is also a term utilized to encompass inclusionary initiatives.

EDI and its correlating titles remain heavily influenced by both political and social contexts. Alberta has long leaned towards the political right. The socio-political context in which both the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge remain very conservative. In this case, it is essential to note that shifts away from or towards EDI are not happening in the same

way across Canada but remain the result of provincial politics. Despite EDI's ongoing adaptability to the social world, "few scholars have ventured to examine how individuals at the ground level enact EDI policies" (Pizarro & Wijesingha, 2023, p. 450). This is an important topic to investigate when considering the experiences of marginalized student-athletes.

Criticisms of EDI

Despite documented efforts to enhance the effectiveness of EDI strategies in Canadian universities, a persistent debate continues over their efficacy. Thobani (2022) argues that EDI policies in universities serve to shape and regulate discourses and bodies that aim to challenge colonial and racial structures. Mackenzie et al. (2023, p. 1) follow this pattern of thought, expressing that existing policies in educational institutions are facilitated through the means of "institutional gaslighting". Institutional gaslighting in this case refers explicitly to the role that social institutions possess by employing strategies promoting "patriarchal and white supremacist systems" (MacKenzie et al., 2023, p. 10)

Berenstain (2020), a Black feminist scholar, employs the term "structural gaslighting" to understand how institutional structures deny and ignore the production of hierarchical positions of privilege, utilizing the same strategy. For Black students, the impacts of EDI determine their comfort level within these institutions. Protection from already established systems of discrimination can be a determinant of whether Black students and Black student-athletes continue in higher education. While these policies aim to ensure a safe place for students from all backgrounds in Canada, from a decolonizing perspective, EDI has been described as "diverting energies away from transformative possibilities" (Thobani, 2022, p. 18). The political right has

also described EDI initiatives as jeopardizing academic freedoms while being a consequence of the ongoing “woke culture”, a culture that has become too sensitive to all aspects of societal traditions (Thobani, 2022, p. 18). The effectiveness of such policies remains at the center of opposing discourses, as some critics additionally argue that the nature of EDI discourages critical discussions, fearing being “canceled.” Previous scholarship additionally has reduced EDI to “happy talk” and “hollow diversity” (Hartman & Bell, 2011; Thomas, 2020). At the same time, other research suggests that EDI is a tool used to prevent and dismantle systemic inequalities. Therefore, the composition of EDI policies remains particularly important when considering the experiences of minority groups.

Gaslighting is a means of manipulation, contradiction, and the misleading evocation of mistrust in an individual's narrative and perception of a situation (Petric, 2018). To avoid inclusionary efforts being labeled as “surface-level, superficial, flighty, non-systemic, and non-committal” yet “extremely visible,” there needs to be ongoing evaluation of the experiences of minority students (Gibbs et al., 2023, p. 42). The performative nature of its language remains a point of contention for critics of EDI programs. Regardless of the varying opinions on equity work, this research provides evidence of gaps in policies for marginalized students, more specifically Black women athletes in USport at southern Alberta universities. The findings from the oral histories of nine Black women athletes discussed in this study suggest that both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary employ vague, broad language, rendering their policies inaccessible to students and athletes. This results in a significant knowledge gap regarding how to access these policies. There was also a troubling absence of institutional accountability in addressing the persistent racist and discriminatory structures that still exist. EDI becomes an event and a checklist rather than an intentional practice, similar to land

acknowledgments. The question of how to improve existing programs for this population remains the purpose of this study. For the impacts of inclusion work to be felt not just by Black women athletes but by all students of colour, the issues surrounding EDI initiatives need to be understood as more than an individual issue; they are a problem deeply embedded in the fabric of educational institutions.

Examples of EDI Actions

EDI policies initially focused on preventing unconscious biases and implicit biases. Unconscious and implicit bias is understood as behaviors or stereotypes that emerge from preconceived notions about an individual or a group, impacting actions and behaviors towards that group (Hall et al., 2015). The consequences of these behaviors have been attributed to the adverse experiences of marginalized groups (DiBrito et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2015; Motzkus et al., 2019). Research on reducing implicit biases has also shown that these attitudes can be altered and detected through focused training (DiBrito, 2019; Capers, 2017).

Hawkins et al. (2022) contend that decades of research have revealed the positive impacts of implicit bias education on the understanding of bias in organizations and college classrooms. This was illustrated when first-year seminar students were asked to participate in a bias education intervention before and after completing a survey. Results from this experiment indicated that the biased education training aided in developing both objective and subjective understanding of biases, as well as in acknowledging personal biases and implementing behavioral interventions to detect and reduce them (Hawkins et al., 2022). In this experiment, the results indicated that online bias education could be used to establish a more inclusive

environment on college campuses (Hawkins et al., 2022). However, the study of implicit and unconscious bias remains heavily controversial, as in rare cases, attempting to avoid natural biases has been shown to have the opposite effect (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Berukova et al., 2016). Schimmack (2021) argues that Implicit Association Tests (IAT) measure explicit attitudes rather than personal, individual implicit processes. Duguid and Thomas-Hunt (2015) additionally argue that implying that biases are naturally occurring may normalize more discriminatory behaviors, thereby achieving the opposite of its intended purpose.

The overall effectiveness of unconscious bias training remains largely unknown, as implicit biases are very difficult to measure (Hawkins et al., 2025; Paluck & Green, 2009). EDI practices aim to understand unconscious biases in institutional settings, how and why they occur, and what structures may mitigate their impact, thereby rectifying unequal expressions of power (Campbell, 2021).

Anti - racism Workshops

Anti-racism workshops have also been used as a tool to challenge racism within Canadian institutions. Like unconscious and implicit bias training, anti-racism workshops are often offered by the university's human rights and equity offices. These workshops are promoted to create and maintain an inclusive environment for all students. The scope of anti-racism workshops remains dependent on the university. These workshops can be offered by specific departments or faculties, or by EDI offices. For example, at the University of Calgary, the Office of Indigenous Engagement offers anti-racism workshops to facilitate inclusion for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. The Office of Indigenous Engagement aims to address the barriers of

Indigenous folks “while establishing a welcoming, inclusive, and culturally safe campus community...” (University of Calgary, n.d., para. 2). Workshops provided by this office ensure that students explore topics such as historical racism, systemic racism, personal stories of racism and allyship (University of Calgary, n.d). These workshops remain free for students and faculty to attend and take place in person.

University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge EDI Initiatives

The 2025 University of Calgary’s Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA) mission statement is as follows:

We are committed to establishing an equitable, diverse, and inclusive campus that is accessible to all and free from harassment, bullying, and discrimination. We strive to remove barriers that have been, and continue to be, encountered by equity deserving groups, including women, Indigenous peoples, visible/racialized minorities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ2S+.

We are a centralized resource for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. Through resources and education, we will continue to foster a community of change-makers. We will also support the development of future leaders who will work effectively in a safe community where individuals feel valued for their skills, abilities, and contributions”. (University of Calgary, n.d., para. 1-2).

The University of Calgary's EDIA mandates also state the following promises:

- Collaborate with UCalgary's 14 faculties and cross-campus support services to develop and implement frameworks, policies, and initiatives that foster an institutional culture of engagement, excellence, innovation, and accountability in advancing equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA).
- Develop a spectrum of learning opportunities for the campus community on equity, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility (EDIA).
- Develop and collaborate with campus units to cultivate Equitable Pathways at UCalgary for the federally designated groups (FDGs), including women, Indigenous peoples, visible/racialized minorities, persons with disabilities, as well as LGBTQ2S+
- Engage the campus community about EDIA via research, teaching and learning, program development, and partnerships.
- Contribute to the development of equitable and inclusive leadership skill set and a campus culture of respect for diversity within the university and the broader community.
- Support the development of future leaders able to work effectively in an equitable, diverse, inclusive, accessible and pluralistic society by acquiring equity, anti-racism, and intercultural competence.
- Provide a central repository for equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and decolonial resources and link related initiatives/programs across campus.

- Maintain knowledge and awareness of the best, new, and promising EDIA trends, and the potential for UCalgary.
- Develop and disseminate institutional EDIA and diversity data reports for university leaders and the broader campus community.
- Contribute to fostering a community of change makers.

(University of Calgary, n.d)

The composition of such initiatives was also evident in the University of Lethbridge policies; however, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives recently changed their titles to Accessibility, Belonging, and Community (ABC). As both titles include policies related to equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives that address issues of discrimination and exclusion, EDI and ABC, in the case of the University of Lethbridge, should be understood as intended to achieve the same goals.

The University of Lethbridge ABC's addresses five core responsibilities.

1. To provide strategic leadership guidance and direction for ABC matters at the University of Lethbridge
2. To support the development of Senior Leadership capacity
3. To serve as a centralized subject matter expert on ABC and human Rights issues
4. To provide ABC consulting services and supports to the University community

5. To report on ABC aggregated metric

(University of Lethbridge, n.d.)

The term Accessibility, Belonging and Community are also defined. The web page addressing these institutional definitions states the following:

Accessibility refers to the extent to which a product, service or environment is available to be used by all audiences, particularly those with disabilities. At ULethbridge, we strive to ensure that our services, programs, policies, spaces, environments and actions are welcoming and inclusive to a wide range of abilities, lived experiences and backgrounds.

Belonging refers to having an authentic sense of inclusion where an individual feels psychologically safe, seen, valued and respected for one's unique identity, background and contributions. Belonging unlocks the value of diversity within the campus community and is a critical part of engagement and well-being.”

Community refers to all members of the campus community (students, employees, alumni, and the broader community) who come together to achieve a collective goal/outcome. At ULethbridge, we build relationships between people and communities, creating connections and understanding based on respect, collaboration and shared advocacy to enhance mutual understanding, growth and support.” The University of Lethbridge EDI/ABC team is composed of a vice-provost, a project manager and a special project assistant. The University of Calgary’s EDIA team includes an EDIA Data, Strategy and

reporting personal, an event specialist, a Subject Matter Experts personals and senior advisors.

(University of Lethbridge, n.d., University of Calgary, n.d)

Phrases such as “centralized subject matters” and “aggregated metrics” create contradictions within EDI whilst maintaining a broad, unspecific course of action for intended inclusion work for these institutions. The University of Lethbridge attempts to assure students and faculty of its continued efforts to fulfill the promises of ABCs; however, in its definition, it explicitly mentions only “those with disabilities.” The University of Lethbridge avoids the generic listing of minority groups; however, in doing so, it centers one group, disregarding the othering and exclusion of other marginalized groups. The definitions of accessibility, belonging, and community are also broad. What are the metrics of students' “authentic sense of inclusion?” How is the University of Lethbridge working to track such feelings, and how do these feelings differ across groups with diverse backgrounds? EDI statements, such as these, contain overarching goals and promises of inclusion but fail to provide concrete evidence, thereby holding the university accountable (Peer et al., 2023).

Universal and inclusive language is an EDI-related initiative aimed at ensuring access for all people (Story, 2001). However, these policies continue to present “overarching statements” that declare a “commitment to including a wide range of people” (Peers et al., 2023, p. 198). The University of Calgary EDI policy composition follows a similar pattern. The broad scope of their mission statement is “without any accompanying evidence of actioning the commitment” (Peers et al., 2023, p. 198). Diversity statements may be intended to be “appealing at the surface level”

but have not necessarily been “incorporated as a value” institutionally (Ahmed, 2012, p.113). Peers et al. (2023) suggest that vocabulary such as race, minority, and sexual orientation has become the standard “laundry list”. The University of Calgary EDIA's mission statement also fails to address the intersections of minority identities and how this complicates experiences within the institution. As discussed earlier, intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), seeks to understand how systems of oppression may intersect to create distinct and compounded levels of marginalization, particularly for Black women. Addressing intersectionality remains a key component of understanding the complex systems, barriers, and power structures that EDI statements aim to dismantle, especially in the case of Black women athletes, who are often faulted rather than the system (Government of Canada, 2024). Statements such as those showcased at both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary “serve more to declare the status quo inclusive” while, intentionally or unintentionally, focusing on an “assimilation-style inclusion” tactic (Peers et al., 2023, p. 199).

The University of Calgary also makes specific promises through its EDIA mandates; however, it uses complicated, vague language that remains unapproachable to the average student. The University of Calgary aims to achieve its goals by drawing on critical research to cultivate a shared understanding of EDIA (University of Calgary, n.d.) vocabulary and to inform foundational principles in equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility for the campus community (University of Calgary, n.d.). This type of language can become complex and intimidating for students to comprehend. In this context, the concept of performativity, in which equity initiatives are incorporated into institutional goals primarily for appearance's sake, becomes a relevant consideration in the composition of the University of Calgary's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) efforts (Government of Canada, 2024). Institutional

commitments, utilizing documentation such as policies, can then, even in the case of education, “be understood as opaque,” uncertain about how to translate these promises into tangible actions (Ahmed, 2012, p. 116).

EDI Initiatives for Student-athletes

The University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge share similar visions for their athletics programs. The University of Calgary Athletics' mission is to “Educate and develop leaders and achieve athletic success by building a championships culture to enhance the pride of the University of Calgary community” (University of Calgary Dinos, n.d. para.1). Their core values include “professionalism, integrity, and respect” for all student-athletes and staff, as well as a holistic approach to development. The University of Lethbridge Athletics' mission statement states that “student-athletes are challenged and supported to grow by striving for personal and collective excellence” (University of Calgary Dinos, n.d.). Their core values are “integrity, excellence, competitive spirit, individual responsibility for collective goals, pride and community” (University of Calgary Dinos, n.d.). Using the same vague language, there is no sense of urgency or specific details regarding EDI initiatives for both students and student-athletes, particularly about active institutional changes. It is also important to note that the University of Lethbridge Athletics page does not take a direct stance against discrimination or harassment; however, it informs students and athletes of both the Canada West and USports codes of conduct, as well as its alignment with the University of Lethbridge's Harassment and Discrimination policies. This is demonstrated through the following statements in the University of Lethbridge Pronghorn student-athlete handbook:

U SPORTS is committed to the highest ethical behavior in all of its activities. The following principles are intended for all Canadian Interuniversity Sports Members: coaches, athletes, and administrators. They reflect values, attitudes, and behaviors desired and accepted by the Membership of USPORTS. These principles and guidelines do not limit the possibility of other ethical considerations not covered by these guidelines

Pronghorn Athletics and the University of Lethbridge have a zero-tolerance policy on hazing and harassment activity. This is covered in the University of Lethbridge, Harassment and Discrimination Policy. As a coach and leader, not only does this policy apply to you, your staff, and your student-athletes, but it is expected that you provide leadership and education on the type of activity prohibited in the Universities Harassment and Discrimination Policy. As a coach, it is expected that you will do your best to prevent this behavior and report any suspected or confirmed activity.

(University of Lethbridge 2024, p.15)

See University of Lethbridge. (2024). *2024–2025 Pronghorn student-athlete handbook*.

<https://gohorns.ca/documents/2024/8/29/2024->

[2025 Pronghorn Student Athlete Handbook.pdf](https://gohorns.ca/documents/2024/8/29/2024-2025_Pronghorn_Student_Athlete_Handbook.pdf) for more information.

Reporting Instances of Discrimination

At the University of Calgary, students and faculty are provided resources to report incidents of disclosure and research integrity (University of Calgary, n.d.). These reports are facilitated through the Protected Disclosure and Research Integrity Office (PDRI office). The Procedure for Protected Disclosure “outlines the process by which individuals make a Protected Disclosure, how the university will respond, and how individuals will be protected from reprisals for making Protected Disclosure” (University of Calgary, n.d., para 3). A protected Disclosure is an accusation made by a member of the university of “a breach by faculty or staff of a university policy,” excluding the Research Integrity Policy (University of Calgary, n.d., para 3). Information regarding the university's policies and procedures is available to students, faculty, appointees, contractors, and volunteers. Included in the policies and procedures webpage are the university's “Sexual Violence Policy,” “Procedure for Protected Disclosure,” “Harassment Policy,” and the university's "Code of Conduct" (University of Calgary, n.d.). The “Harassment policy” describes instances of discrimination and racism under the “protected grounds” section (University of Calgary, n.d.). This policy includes protection for individuals and groups of all “race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical or mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation or any form of discrimination prohibited under the Alberta Human Rights Act including sexual harassment,” closely mimicking that of the U of C's EDIA statement (University of Calgary, n.d.).

There are various steps following reporting an incident of harassment at the University of Calgary. First, the individual must make a protected disclosure to a manager, supervisor, or

Dean. They can also report the incident to the protected disclosure advisor via email, to the university president, or to the external service provider established for this purpose (University of Calgary, 2015). The Protected Disclosure report must then include the following: the nature of the activity giving rise to the complaint, a description of all parties involved, potential financial interests and rewards, the violation of university policy or law, and any other information relevant to evaluating the protected disclosure (University of Calgary, 2015). A receipt of the protected disclosure is sent to a manager, supervisor, Dean, or the President for further investigation. A response acknowledging receipt of the disclosure would be sent back within 5 days, along with additional information, such as the date and time the disclosure was received (University of Calgary, 2015). After this assessment, the receipt would then be reviewed by an External Service Provider and then by the Protected Disclosure advisor. After 10 business days, this advisor will inform the complainant of the decision and the next steps to address the issue (University of Calgary, 2015). See University of Calgary. (2015). *Protected disclosure, procedure for*. <https://www.ucalgary.ca/legal-services/sites/default/files/teams/1/Policies-Protected-Disclosure-Procedure.pdf> for a more in-depth explanation of ALL the steps of the Protected Disclosure procedure. The last revision of this policy was on December 3rd, 2015.

The University of Calgary Athletics' page additionally provides a reporting platform and support services. Once accessed, the individual is provided with campus resources and statements encouraging student-athletes to "bring forward concerns," allowing for "dialogue between individuals involved where that is possible and appropriate" (University of Calgary Dinos, 2023, p. 1). For discrimination claims, athletes are advised to access the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. They are given the same resources and policies described earlier within the "protected disclosure." For specific athletic concerns, such as team selection, roster, playing

time, and adherence to team rules and standards, a hierarchy of reporting remains in place. Initially, the head coach of the given team is to be informed. If a solution cannot be found, the issue is escalated to the associate director, then to the director of athletics, and if there is still no resolution, the problem is eventually brought to the attention of the Dean of the Faculty of Kinesiology. It is important to note that the provided resource includes a section under “Safe Sport,” specifically addressing “Inclusion (EDI)” (University of Calgary Athletics, 2023). This document also suggests other related policies and documents, such as the USport Policy Against Maltreatment in Sport. See University of Calgary Athletics. (2023, May). *SafeSport: Athlete pathway*. https://godinos.com/documents/2023/4/24/SafeSport_-_Athlete_Pathway_May_2023_.pdf for the whole "student-athlete reporting pathway & supporting services" report.

The University of Lethbridge provides students with the Harassment and Discrimination policy through its ABCs webpage. According to the University of Lethbridge, the purpose of this policy is to provide an “environment in which members of the University Community can work, live, and learn in a climate free from Harassment and Discrimination and share the responsibility for achieving these goals” (University of Lethbridge, 2021, p.1). The University of Lethbridge accepts that there are varying factors to which an individual may have “access to power and privilege” (University of Lethbridge, 2021, p.1). These factors are acknowledged as sex, sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, racialization, age, family status, religion, faith, ability, disability, national or ethnic origin, indigeneity, immigration status, socio-economic status, class, and language. Therefore, the positionality of the individual or group reflects the proximity to harassment and discrimination.

However, it is essential to note that as of 2025, the University of Lethbridge has opted to include what most would consider anti-trans policies, directly contradicting the promises made in the Harassment and Discrimination policy. This policy coined “Fairness in Sport” aims to target women student athletes “in particular those who are transgender or non-binary”, in accordance with legislation established by Bill 29 (University of Lethbridge Faculty Association [ULFA], 2025, para. 2). According to the Government of Alberta (2025) supposed aim of The Fairness and Safety in Sport Act (Bill 29), is to ensure that “women and girls have the opportunity to compete in biological female-only divisions while also ensuring transgender athletes can meaningful participate in the sports of their choice” (para. 1). The Gender, Equity and Diversity Committee of University of Lethbridge have acted against what they perceive to be the unconstitutional nature of this policy. They believe that this policy “betrays” and directly “conflicts with the stated values of the University of Lethbridge” (ULFA, 2025, para. 2-3). The University of Lethbridge's Dr. Craig Coburn, a professor of geography and environment, has now resigned from the University of Lethbridge’s Board of Governors following the implementation of the Fairness and Safety in Sport Act. Coburn concluded that the university’s decision to include this policy was a “direct violation of both the Alberta Human Rights Act and the U of L’s Harassment and Discrimination policy” (Opinko, 2025, para. 3).

The enforcement of the Fairness and Safety Act may have significant implications for Black women athletes. Black women's bodies, as explained in previous chapters, have been positioned as having more durability and strength, excluded from what society has determined as aesthetic and feminine sports. The performance of femininity and masculinity for this group becomes complicated due to their historical relationship to labour. As a result, Black women athletes become especially vulnerable following the implementation of such a policy.

In cases of Discrimination and Harassment, as at the University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge provides students and faculty with various pathways to address such claims. Members of the university community may disclose without filing a complaint, create personal records of the information, discuss the matter with other members of the University community without filing a complaint, file a complaint with the University, and make a report to an external body (University of Lethbridge, 2021). These options are intended to provide the complainant with the agency, placing the onus on them to decide which option is most advantageous for their specific situation. When complaints are reported, they are submitted to the Associate Vice-President (Human Resources), designate, or to the Associate Vice-President (Students), designate. The complaint must include the nature and particulars of the incident, including the respondent's name (if identifiable), the complainant's contact information, the names of witnesses, and supporting evidence and documents.

Within 10 days, an acknowledgment of the complaint from the Associate Vice President, Associate Vice President, or designate(s) will be provided, along with the resources and support available to the complainant. If it is determined that the complaint is actionable under the harassment and discrimination policy, an investigation will be conducted. The Complaint Review Team would review this investigation. The team is comprised of the associate Vice-President (Human Resources, Co-chair or designate), the associate Vice-President (Student, Co-chair or designate), the Executive Director (Student Services or designate), the Chief Safety Officer or designate, and the Senior Administrator or designate. Within 10 days, this team will “determine the investigative process that will be followed based on the nature of the Complaint.” (University of Lethbridge, 2021). Please see the University of Lethbridge. (2021, December 21). *Harassment and discrimination policy*.

https://www.ulethbridge.ca/sites/default/files/2023/07/policy_harassment_and_discrimination_bog_approved_june_13_2019_editorial_revisions_dec_21_2021_0.pdf for a more detailed explanation of the University of Lethbridge’s harassment and discrimination policy.

Individual Responsibility for Reporting and a Lack of Institutional Knowledge

Both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary emphasize individual agencies concerning the reporting process. The University of Calgary requires the complainant to contact the correct institutional member (manager, supervisor, or Dean) based on the specific circumstances. The complainant is then burdened with the bureaucracy of policy. It is up to them to thoroughly review the logistical strategies and practices that will best support their claim to be successfully heard. This becomes especially difficult for students who have limited access to legal knowledge. For example, Kanno and Varghese (2010) contend that what impedes English as a second language (ESL) students' participation in 4-year colleges is not just their English proficiency but their inability to access “structural complaints unique to this population” (p. 311). Kanno and Varghese (2010) called for a more “holistic educational policy” that considered “structural and economic, as well as linguistic, factors” that create barriers for this particular group of students (p. 311). ESL students, like other marginalized groups such as international and racialized students, often face disadvantages when attempting to access institutional policies intended to eliminate existing barriers for these populations.

The University of Lethbridge also emphasizes personal agency reporting; however, it offers different pathways to accommodate individual preferences. In this case, students can disclose harassment, and discrimination claims without the burden of personally filing a

complaint. However, it is essential to note that both universities' policies currently employ complex language and strategies that are not always readily accessible to all student groups. Students, especially those facing institutional and social disadvantages, must then individually navigate these structures to the best of their ability.

Both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary also have hierarchical reporting structures. There are various “point persons” to report to in each process. The understanding remains that these individuals hold the most significant institutional power. This system further establishes a specific power dynamic for the complainant. The complainant must prove to the gatekeeper, a representative of the institution, the validity of their claim, thereby minimizing their need for support within this process. Much of the discussion surrounding a welcoming environment frames some groups as part of the institution, while others are outsiders. Peers et al. (2023) argue that those associated with the institution, that is, administration, are the “rightful owners of the space,” while the groups allowed to be “equal” are conditional, “visitors and guests” only invited to participate if they “make themselves fit into and reproduce the status quo” (p.198). The intimidating nature of this process may deter students from reporting, as it often pits them against the institution. EDI policies, in this case, offload the “labor and responsibility for change onto front-line workers and those being marginalized” (Peer et al, 2023, p. 200).

Black Women Athletes: Reporting Instances of Discrimination

As part of this study, nine Black women athletes from the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge were asked if they ever needed to access EDI policies or report

instances of racism, sexism, or any other forms of prejudice. They were also asked whether the structures in place to combat such claims were currently adequate. Athlete 1 stated that she was unsure whether these resources were available at her institution and, if so, was unaware of how to access them. She further stated that when it came to other information regarding alternative resources, such as mental health resources, it seemed to always be “right there in your face.” Still, when it came to details about inclusion, most athletes “had to look up.” This was an exceptionally astute observation, as the consequences of discrimination through forms of overt and covert behaviours can easily be interpreted as mental health concerns for the individual rather than symptoms of a corrupt system. Williams et al. (2025) explore this idea by assessing the experiences of racism among students of colour at the University of Ottawa. According to the findings, racial microaggressions were often correlated with feelings of depression and anxiety for students of colour. As a result, many students felt they had to “minimize aspects of their racial or ethnic culture to fit in,” unaware of their universities' reporting processes (Williams et al., 2025, p. 8). The adverse feeling associated with this decision can be interpreted as a mental health concern for Black students, rather than systemic failures. As a result, mental health resources are advertised more often and more frequently as a way for universities to avoid institutional blame.

Athlete 1 further concluded that there was more work to be done on her university's stance on EDI and its accompanying initiatives compared to other universities. Such work included more visibility of the available resources. When asked if she ever felt the need to access information concerning EDI, she said that she had not and hoped that she would never have to. Athlete 2 shared the same sentiment, unaware of her institution's EDI policies, also concluding that she did not believe that there were alternative structures to combat racist and sexist

behaviors. She believed that although athletes had to go through various training sessions, they would often “skip through” most of the content. In this case, she questioned the value of adding EDI training in the same format as Safe Sport. Athlete 2 also stated that she had never had to make a discrimination claim; however, if she did, she would feel more comfortable if there were sport-specific resources available. All the athletes interviewed indicated that they were unsure of their institution's stance on EDI. However, all athletes had prior knowledge of the general purposes of inclusionary work. Athlete 3 gave a quick summary of what EDI constituted, stating that these policies felt “more like a formality” than a means to actual inclusivity.

Athlete 6 specifically questioned her university's EDI, stating that she “had not known that it was there.” Athlete 7 also noted that during her time as an athlete, she had never been informed about her university's EDI. She was only aware of some of the policy content due to her prior academic work in criminology. All the athletes interviewed concluded that they never felt the need to report issues of racism and/or sexism. Athlete 3 specifically stated that she “never really complained about things like that.” She additionally emphasized her constant need to “stick things out.” If athletes in this study were to take steps to report discrimination, they all lacked knowledge of what this process entails at their respective institutions. It is also important to note that when discussing their experiences as Black women in athletics, all nine athletes either reported experiencing some type of microaggression in their institution, witnessing racist actions, or hearing of racist behaviors on their team.

Understanding “harassment” and Lack of Institutional Support in Reporting

Student-athletes must undergo a series of training sessions and documentation before they are formally sanctioned as official USport athletes. Safe Sport Training recognizes that a safe and fair sports environment help make sport enjoyable for all (Coaching Association of Canada, n.d.). After completing Safe Sport, athletes are expected to understand their role in maintaining a healthy environment, recognize and identify types of maltreatment, and understand the procedures for reporting such behaviors. Athletes from the University of Lethbridge are additionally asked to participate in athlete orientation. During this session, student-athletes are taught about eligibility guidelines, provided resources on academic expectations, and allowed to meet with other coaches and administrators. Throughout the season, students are reminded of this information and supported through educational programs. Although both Safe Sport and the orientation briefly discuss what harassment and maltreatment could look like in sports, neither mentions the institution's EDI policies. There is also no mention of how the experiences of Black athletes, along with those of other marginalized groups, may differ within these settings.

Trends emerging from the oral histories conducted for this study revealed a general awareness of the foundational principles of EDI work; however, the athletes expressed discomfort and uncertainty about how to access the resources needed to report issues and to educate themselves about their institution's EDI policies and initiatives. Various athletes in this study reported feeling left out on their teams, unsure whether this was correlated with their identity as Black women. For example, Athlete 8 mentions feeling that coaches were especially hard on Black athletes on her team, purposely trying to get them angry before and during games to help them perform better. According to the harassment and discrimination policies of both the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge, the coach's behavior in this instance could be considered harmful to the athlete due to the inappropriate use of power. The University

of Lethbridge defines explicit harassment as "unwelcome" behaviors that, intentionally or unintentionally, create an intimidating or humiliating environment for one or more individuals or groups (Harassment and Discrimination Policy, 2025). Discrimination for this institution is defined as the "differential treatment of individuals, or groups of individuals, based on protected ground under the *Alberta Human Rights Act*" (Harassment and Discrimination policy, 2025). There were various circumstances, like Athlete 8's experience, expressed by the Black women in this study, that contradicted the harassment and discrimination policy for both universities. However, the lack of knowledge concerning EDI, and made it difficult for these women to understand and access reporting structures remained a barrier for these women.

Lack of Institutional Accountability

Another theme found throughout the policy frameworks was the lack of institutional responsibility. Both the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge failed to acknowledge how current and previous structures have continuously worked to uphold patriarchal and racist beliefs. Understanding the systemic barriers in higher education remains essential to improving the institution (Tamtik, 2019). This is evident in the university's promises of inclusion and its reporting structures for harassment. Peers et al. (2023) argue that it is the institution's responsibility to conduct an unbiased inquiry into the student's claims; however, this remains problematic as those in power are "incentivized" to uphold the organization's reputation (p. 201). The phrasing utilized by both the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge conveys the narrative of unity against an external force. However, given the history of educational institutions, a history that has excluded gendered and racialized groups of

students, accountability is necessary to provide students and student-athletes of colour with a more authentic understanding of the systemic barriers that they continue to face. Bailey (2016) reported themes of in-class racism for Indigenous students, particularly. Interviewees in this project indicated having to endure inappropriate comments from university professors. Non-Indigenous students also reported witnessing racist behaviors towards Indigenous educators. Both the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge create policies that position them as separate from the systems that need dismantling. However, educational institutions have historically been at the forefront of maintaining hegemonic systems of oppression. EDI policies at both institutions center on treating the “individual participant rather than the transformation of structural barriers or systemic inequities” (Peers et al., 2023).

Athletic Administrator’s Perspectives on EDI Policies and Practices

As discussed in previous chapters, administrators from the University of Lethbridge were interviewed about the current effectiveness of EDI policies and initiatives. Administrators from the University of Calgary were also invited to participate in the study; however, they failed to respond. Administrators from the University of Lethbridge were asked various questions about the successes, failures, and future steps of inclusion at their institution. These questions were separated into their positional backgrounds, how they believed their position aided in integrating Black women athletes into the university, how they believed the university should address ongoing stereotypes for their athletes of colour, the impacts of representation, and the shifting nature of EDI initiative strategies. Unfortunately, as representatives from the University of

Calgary were unable to participate in this study, this portion of the research remains limited in scope.

Administrators were asked if they had ever dealt with issues of racism or sexism at the University. An administrator recounted a specific instance when racism on a sports team was brought up to them by a Black woman athlete. In this instance, they collaborated with the athlete to mitigate their concerns. The reporting process was as follows. First, the athlete went to the coach, who then approached the administrator seeking additional help with the situation. Meetings were then held with athletes on the team, the leadership group, and the coaching staff. According to the administrator, there were various attempts to “work on the situation.” These attempts included open discussions with the team, addressing what had happened and the impacts of following the event. Unfortunately, as this conflict occurred during the athlete's first year at the University of Lethbridge, following the interventions, this athlete decided to discontinue their athletic experience. When asked whether this was a recurring problem at the University of Lethbridge, the administrator noted that situations like this were relatively rare in their experience. They contended that since 2019, during the COVID period, there had only been two complaints, suggesting that incidents of racism and sexism appeared infrequent in their experience. This directly contradicted the oral histories of all 9 Black women athletes as they explored various tales of discrimination during their time as athletes.

Some key elements of an effective complaint process, as highlighted by the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2025), include communication, formal vs informal resolution, and substantiated and unsubstantiated complaints. Underreporting as a symptom of athletes' lack of knowledge or understanding of institutional policies must be considered in this case. It is also important to note that the basis of all reported racist and sexist claims during this time at the

University of Lethbridge involved Black women athletes expressing feelings of exclusion and being unwanted, feelings they attributed to their race.

Based on the example provided above, Athletics claimed to be at the forefront of addressing the discrimination claim by taking an informal yet collaborative approach. Alongside the coaches and other teammates, they tried their best to diffuse the situation. However, their inability to access a concrete pathway provided by the University's guiding practices could be credited to the athlete's decision to leave the program. The truth of that athlete's experience lies with her. While administrators tell a tale about collaborative efforts, her story remains untold, lost to the very systems that promised to protect marginalized athletes. It is also important to acknowledge that policies surrounding harassment and discrimination are not preventative. They are, in fact, reactive regarding creating a safe environment for young Black women athletes. Black women athletes, in this case, have and will have to experience racist and discriminatory behaviors, often accepting the realities of prejudiced systems as “normal” and unavoidable. For example, Athlete 3, when discussing the dynamics of her team and the challenges of being in a white dominated setting, stated that she had become accustomed to feeling different. At this point in her career, she had “learned to get used” to being the only Black girl on the team. Athlete 6 also stated that she had also become “used to” microaggressions in most athletic settings and that it did not “faze her as much anymore.” Athlete 6 compares her experience as a Black woman athlete and the recurring racist behaviors to a train. She stated, “It is kind of like if you live next to a train and it goes off every night, you like, stop hearing it.” For them, it was not a question of whether their university was discriminatory, but how to inevitably navigate the structures and the people that make this a reality. Failure by USport, administrators, and the

University to acknowledge such conditions undermines the validity of these athletes' experiences, hindering actual change.

Administrators were also asked about the University of Lethbridge's administrative capacity to address these complaints. Overall, they were confident in how the University of Lethbridge supports students of colour during their time as student-athletes but acknowledged that there was still room for growth. They stated:

The last couple of years, there have been more introductions and requirements for different trainings for coaches and university administrators and staff. Thus, there is an EDI initiative on campus. So, we have a new vice president of EDI. There has been EDI training that all the staff have to go through, which has helped. There is also additional sports-related information, so everybody now has to go through Safe Sport...However, there is another version that also mentions this aspect. There are a couple of resources that everyone is required to use. However, there could be more.

The EDI training mentioned by administrators above is a 3-hour online course that presents the test taker with multiple situations. According to administrators, they were given choices about how to respond to the situation and then informed of the correct answer. For example, one situation pertained to a racist microaggression in the workplace. A comment is made, whether intentionally or unintentionally, targeting a group of people. As the trainee, you are then prompted to choose the best approach to resolve the situation. The athletic staff is required to participate in this training annually. Although administrators indicated that the

training “has helped,” there was no mention of any specific or measurable evidence of its effectiveness.

When administrators were asked whether it would be beneficial to provide a structure specifically for student-athletes, they suggested that, spreading awareness of the available structures should be a priority. They believed that this could be incorporated at the athlete’s orientation at the beginning of the athletic season. Following this discussion, when asked whether the university has improved the experiences of athletes of colour, they stated:

We have this as a strategic priority on our strategic plan and so, but it is not as specific. It discusses support for physical minorities, and some of the initiatives we have undertaken include launching a new scholarship, offering more education seminars in close collaboration with the Vice President of EDI, and adding the courses and education I mentioned earlier...And the work that's gone into our new safe sport policy, which is a pretty big document that will further be formalize, it's essentially going to be a contract of behaviors that all coaches and athletic department administrators have to abide by, and if they don't, here's the policy to report it. And so it's a it's a pretty big document. It's taken years to build, and we've presented it a couple times to the coaches and other athletic department staff and and the purpose of that is to protect, protect athletes, and educate people, all athletes, but also visible minorities, to educate them on the behaviors expected, but then also to actually protect coaches and other staff as well, to say, here's the standards that they're held to account, and if they do so that we can support them through different things. So, the safe support document would be the biggest, would probably be the biggest thing that we've done here.

The administrator's response concerning new EDI strategies centers on the institutions. With no specific action plans in place to address the ongoing discriminatory behaviours, the small number of changes to the new safe sport policy serves to “protect coaches and staff” more than anything else. Moreover, the education the administrator so proudly depicts as ongoing has yet to influence their perspective, their involvement in making their institution more inclusive, or their knowledge of current issues faced by Black women athletes. This becomes especially evident when considering the lack of specifics concerning the actual impacts of the “new safe sport policy”.

Recent EDI Changes: University of Lethbridge

EDI at the University of Lethbridge has undergone changes over the last decade. In 2019, the President's Advisory Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, along with the President's executive, reviewed the University of Lethbridge's current policies, plans, and initiatives. The purpose of this project was to “identify gaps between stated institutional commitments and the Universities Canada and initiatives through the institution” (University of Lethbridge, 2019, para. 6). By addressing these gaps, the committee also aimed to provide new recommendations for action based on its findings. The committee had 19 recommendations for the university, encompassing both immediate and long-term actions. These recommendations were grouped into the following five categories: people, plans and policies, resources, consultations, and inventory. The People section of the plan addressed the actual implementation of the recommendations. The committee sought to establish a “point person” to “oversee the

immediate creation of a standing committee comprising elected members of all employee and student groups, both campuses, and with a commitment to diverse representation” (University of Lethbridge, 2019, p.4). This EDI committee, composed of various campus groups, in collaboration with the designated point person, would vet and hire a full-time equity officer. The equity officer would work to “facilitate targeted cluster hiring and provide enhanced support to students, and faculty and staff,” which has yet to take place as of 2025 (University of Lethbridge, 2019, p.4). The point person would also ensure ongoing development and assessment of relevant plans and policies. These groups would establish a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion strategic plan that would “inform the work of an Equity Office” at the University of Lethbridge (University of Lethbridge, 2019, p.4).

Additionally, implicit bias training was to be implemented for hiring committees and other evaluation processes. The recommendation also noted that several updates were necessary concerning current modules and training protocols. Furthermore, the point person, in collaboration with the EDI Committee, was also tasked with creating an accessible web page with current resources “for creating, enhancing, and supporting diversity on campus.” These resources included “incorporating Indigenous and international knowledge practices into courses...,” “support minority-status students and faculty,” and “improve hiring and promotion practices” (University of Lethbridge, 2019, p. 4). See the University of Lethbridge. (2019, March). *President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion public report*. https://www.ulethbridge.ca/sites/default/files/2019/03/presidents_advisory_committee_on_diversity_equity_and_inclusion_public_report.pdf.

Controversy of EDI

Diversity work has been and continues to be at the center of Canadian and American politics. Following the 2024 American election, Donald Trump, the new president-elect, began making major changes regarding equity and diversity work. These changes included dismantling initiatives addressing systemic racism (Agathocleous et al., 2024). The Trump administration promised to “eradicate both public and private diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI policies, cut federal funding to educational institutions that discuss “disfavored” subjects, and “abandon civil right enforcements on behalf of historically marginalized groups” (Agathocleous et al., 2024, p.7). These promises have recently come to fruition for the American people. Trump has begun censoring academic discussions of race and sex discrimination, coining certain phrases as “divisive” for the American people (Agathocleous et al., 2024), excluding words such as gender, equal opportunity, barriers, fostering inclusivity, and feminism from academic works. Albertan politics has been heavily impacted by these changes, and the recent federal election has also shown the influence of US politics on the Canadian stage. The Conservative Party, led by Pierre Poilievre, has been depicted as having a positive, mutually beneficial relationship with the Trump administration. In an interview with an American media outlet, Danielle Smith, Premier of Alberta, acknowledged that although there are some inconsistencies with party goals, she believed that Pierre Poilievre and the conservative party would be in sync with America's new political direction if elected (Wherry, 2025). The Liberal party, following public outrage at Trump's latest political tactics, has also exploited the “link Poilievre and Trump” to gain more popularity with the public (Wherry, 2025). Mark Carney, the prime minister of Canada and leader of the liberal party, has been urging voters to consider this association, campaigning against an Americanised Canada (Wherry, 2025).

Coming into the 2025 election, with changes in the United States regarding DEI, Alberta, an already conservative province, is adapting to mimic these changes. The University of Alberta, after also changing its title to ACB's, credited the adaptation to evolutionary patterns necessary to maintain the "university's commitment to the principles of inclusion and removing barriers to access for students and staff, according to administration" (Liddle, 2025). The true intent behind the restructuring of EDI to ACB at the University of Alberta and ABC at the University of Lethbridge remains unknown. However, it is apparent that this is due to shifting political views. Regardless of its new name and future titles, this research seeks to build on current policies and practices, ensuring Black women athletes a platform to voice their experiences and contribute to impactful discourse.

Given the political climate, in which EDI remains a controversial topic, anonymity remains essential to protect administrators' identities. In this case, the research conflated the identities of administrators interviewed into one profile.

When administrators were asked about the change from EDI to ABC and what this meant for the athletes at the University of Lethbridge, they remained unsure, advocating for more communication with the university's EDI office and the athletic department. They empathized with the amount of work and decision-making the EDI office was going through, given the new changes, they wanted stronger relationships with all the departments. In the case of athletics, administrators also noted that no significant steps had been taken to address the EDI changes other than the newly available scholarships offered by USport to marginalized athletes. Administrators also contended that EDI remains a highly complex issue in athletics and were unsure how the new title would address it. They hoped that, ultimately, students would stay at the forefront of these changing conversations. They stated:

The piece for me that the million-dollar reason for that is that there's also conflicting ideologies with high performing sport and EDI and so that's it's really complicated, and we actually see this in the transgender conversation. High performing sport, naturally, is not inclusive. It is the best of the best, right? It's built around not being inclusive, whereas EDI initiatives are around, mainly surround being inclusive. We can have inclusive aspects within high performing sport, but the nature of sport is not to be inclusive. It's who's the best? Who's going to win the Canada West Women's Basketball Championship, yeah, and so, because those ideas are so conflicting, I actually think it's really important that we have athletes involved in the EDI design of policies and procedures, because they're the ones that actually live in an environment that is designed to not be inclusive. That's actually been the, probably one of the reasons why this whole transgender thing in sport has been so combative and so polarized, because the nature of the two of them are completely separate. Because of that, I would say that having Black athletes or visible minority athletes involved in the design of policies would be huge and very important.

Administrators also noted that diversity and inclusion work remains under scrutiny, regardless of what side you fall on the political spectrum. The “fear of erasure” became an important concept to acknowledge when considering these critics. Administrators claimed that hegemonic systems work to misinform and divide groups of people in this regard. Often, this leaves behind resentment due to fear of being left out. They stated:

The political climate we are seeing is one, one because of a very well-coordinated misinformation attack. And two, it's also a fear of erasure. Yeah, can you and when I see, when I say a fear of erasure is like a lot of people who, who consider our position themselves as white, think that they're going to be there, they're going to be excluded or removed, and, and, and I keep going back to the point that equity works for everybody, because it could be your queer white kid, or it could be your disabled male student who has an invisible disability that nobody knows about, but because we've thought about, how do we make this accessible for all they all get access to it. But the assumption is that when we do equity work, we're only thinking about Black people or anything about Indigenous people. I said we're thinking about all the complexities and the layers of who people are, that's what we're thinking about, and that's what we have to address but we cannot negate the historical elements that have told us historically that indigenous and black people have had the hardest roads in Canada.

Administrators expressed hope for the changes associated with the ABC's title. They believed that change, if carried out with intent, could serve as a refresh for stalled, rigid ideologies around equity work. In their experience, people needed to move beyond the language of jeopardy associated with equity, diversity, and inclusion. For them, EDI had become a buzzword, digestible for the use of popular media. In the future, ABC meant going back to the basics, which they deemed necessary for ensuring "fair and equitable access for all." The basics also meant taking away "distractions" whilst continuing intentional and vital work. For them, the shift from EDI to ABC provided such a path. They stated:

What's in the word, what you want to focus on is getting the work done. But getting the work done means that you are navigating a very complex, polarizing space where you're getting pushed from the right and you're getting pushed from the left. The left is saying you're not radical enough. You're not too activist enough. The right is saying you're discriminatory, reverse discrimination. And so how do you stay focused? You have to sometimes leverage what you're trying to do, and make sure you can communicate in a way that's clear enough and it doesn't hijack the work. So for me, I have no concerns with moving towards access, with belonging and community, because I think when I think of access, I think of equity. When I think of belonging, I think of fair and equal and inclusive spaces. When I think of community, I think community for all. Yeah, so like we, we need to, if we have looked at the evolution of the nomenclature for equity, diversity, inclusion, it has evolved so many times that sometimes I think the word is being repurposed

Administrators also suggested that improvements were needed in the reporting portion of harassment and discrimination claims. They hoped that, during their time at the university, they could establish a simplified, step-by-step sequence for students to follow when reporting to the university. If they were to be successful in their role, they would have “removed the barriers that impacted access and provided “fair access to education, fair access to scholarship, fair access to opportunity, and fair access to resources.” As for student-athletes, Administrators hoped to continue to “create more feedback loops” between the two departments, stating:

I've had a lot of consultation, like, when people like stuff happens... [other university departments] would reach out and say, Hey, I need guidance. What do I do here? I don't know how to not navigate that.

Ultimately, Administrators believed their institution was changing for the better. They hoped even through a very intense political climate, Black students and faculty would continue to engage in critical discourse concerning the racist and sexist structures that remain at work. In their relatively new role at the university, their primary goals included working more closely with the Black Student Association, providing more spaces and events specifically for students of colour, and continuing to dismantle barriers related to accessibility. They hoped to achieve these goals by “keeping their ears to the ground,” collaborating with students, and establishing opportunities for feedback regarding what is working. They concluded that:

I think they're getting more informed about it. Okay. I think I've seen a complete shift in when I first got here to now. I think a lot of people are asking complex questions. I think before maybe there was a degree of comfort to do it, and one of the things I've really tried to work on is creating that comfort to ask those questions. What I can tell you, there are some fantastic Deans administrators who are so knowledgeable of it, but I have seen them grow in understanding the challenges like black students face and stuff like that. So I would say yes. I think I would totally say yes, that they're growing.

They acknowledge that working within the system, they could understand how “the left would say they were not radical enough, not activist enough” while the right would say they were creating platforms for “reverse discrimination”.

Working within the university, they had to “leverage” what they were trying to accomplish, clearly communicating to not get “hijacked” or derailed. The shift away from EDI to ABC created an opportunity to achieve this. They stated that the EDI movement had always been ever-changing and adaptable. Working within the university, there had always been political components to doing “this kind of work.” For administrators, it did not matter if the new terms were more palpable for the left or the right. What mattered was their commitment to improving the lives of all students and faculty.

When considering administrators' perspectives, this thesis must also account for the potential disconnect between these narratives and those of Black women athletes. It is apparent that for administrators, the institution's reputation often remains at the forefront of their professional concerns. They often consider the comfort of conservative and hegemonic thought. In this case, the accuracy of administrators' reports may be compromised to protect the university's integrity. To rectify the disconnect between administrators and the lived experiences of Black women athletes in USport, this thesis centers on the individuals to whom these policies directly impact: Black women athletes.

Conclusion

Canadian identity is often correlated to multiculturalism and inclusivity. Canadian universities strive to convey similar values within their institutions. Attempts at inclusion are

demonstrated through the utilization of EDI policies. In line with these expectations, students from all backgrounds are entitled to a safe and fair university experience. For Black students, in particular, the effectiveness of these policies determines whether they continue and succeed in these spaces. For student-athletes, these policies are directly correlated to their experience in sports. The positionality of Black women athletes remains central to this research. Their gendered and racialized experience in sports provides insights into the current EDI policy gaps.

Several themes emerged regarding the effectiveness and performativity of EDI policies. For the Black women athletes involved in this research, there was limited awareness that EDI existed at their universities. Athletes were generally aware of the intent behind inclusionary initiatives; however, they could not provide concrete examples of the impacts of EDI on their personal experiences in USport. The policies provided by both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary utilized vague and complicated language, remaining inaccessible to these students. Administrators also failed to educate student-athletes about the available pathways to reporting. As a result of these shortcomings, Black women athletes have had to internalize such behaviors, labeling racist and sexist acts as common within their institutions. The issues faced by these athletes are then understood as individual problems rather than systemic or structural. In this case, this research concludes that more work needs to be done to improve the impacts of EDI on all students of colour.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

In this MA thesis, I sought to understand the experience of Black women athletes in USport. More specifically, in this study, I explored the institutional structures that influenced the past and continue to influence gendered and racist assumptions concerning the Black woman's body in sport. I considered the intersection of race, class, and gender, as well as Black athletes' status as first-generation or new immigrants to Canada, and how this influenced the mental and physical capacities of Black women athletes in this study. This project also used both oral histories of Black women athletes and one-on-one interviews with current university administrators to identify the gap between the intent of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies at Southern Albertan universities and their actual impacts. Black women's exclusion from institutional spaces provided unique and complex case studies to assess how misconceptions regarding the Black body continue to permeate Canadian sport. In this study, as a Black woman in sport, there were various considerations for both athletic and academic performance. Black women, as this study's findings show, must consider not only how they perceive themselves but also how others perceive them. As a result, these women have had to learn to accept and get used to discriminatory behaviours.

A Summary of Findings

Several themes emerged throughout as I worked through the experiences of the nine Black women athletes interviewed in this study. Their oral histories revealed that Black women

athletes lacked access to higher forms of sports, relying heavily on familial support systems to access elite teams. As a result, the athletes felt they needed their peers on their side and often gravitated towards lower-maintenance sports during their childhoods. These findings were demonstrated during the college recruitment process of athletes. Athletes' oral histories additionally revealed a lack of knowledge concerning the recruitment process. Black women athletes in USport also relied on community members, such as high school coaches and teachers, during the recruitment process when choosing a university. In addition to Black women athletes, administrators from the University of Lethbridge. Both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary's current EDI policies were additionally analyzed, with consideration of Black women athletes' experience.

Integration in Sports

In this MA thesis, I also considered integration into university institutions and the relationship between being a USport player and their national identity. For Black women athletes, feeling welcome at their universities remained quite complicated. Despite their diverse backgrounds, Black women athletes sought to build close-knit communities through their participation in sports. However, the women interviewed portrayed themselves as often being outsiders during recruitment and during their first few years as student-athletes. During this first year, most athletes interviewed were met with various forms of discrimination and racism. As a result, Black women athletes felt alienated, struggling to establish a balance as student-athletes. These women also felt there was limited space for them in these institutions, although these student-athletes reported that being on the USport team enabled them to experience Canada's

multiculturalism by introducing them to athletes from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. They also indicated greater motivation to join national teams as they move further in their athletic careers. Ultimately, Black women athletes hoped to form and establish communities within their institutions.

Using Black women's oral stories, this project considered the perspectives of university administrators in the lives of sports women. Administrators agree that an athlete's first year was vital to the overall experience. They believed that student-athletes needed to feel that they were integral parts of both athletics and university culture. To achieve this, administrators enlisted various strategies to ensure that athletes felt included. This involved establishing personal relationships with individual athletes, hosting mandatory athletic and student events, and having roster caps. Administrators also acknowledge that Black women athletes have a unique experience in USport; however, they failed to recognize how this can be addressed or realized by the institution.

Stereotypes within Usport

Black women athletes at both the University of Lethbridge and Calgary also revealed the presence of ongoing stereotypes linked to historical assumptions of the Black body. These stereotypes included intellectual and physical capacities of Black women athletes, harsher punishment compared to their White peers, and hair discrimination. Black women athletes were also asked about the impact of representation on reporting cases of discrimination.

Some athletes reported being discouraged from taking challenging classes to remain eligible for the athletic season. In contrast, others reported feeling very encouraged by both their

coaches and teammates to excel academically. Athletes' oral stories also revealed that, although these women acknowledged the relevance of the dumb jock stereotype in USport, education remained an essential aspect of their journey. Black women athletes, especially those from an immigrant background, experienced external and internal pressures to succeed academically. My study found that the assumptions of Black women athletes' physical capability closely correlated with dumb jock stereotypes, one of which is that Black women athletes were perceived as natural athletes. As a result, Black women athletes in this study reported feeling extra pressure to excel on the field and the court. They were also labelled lazy and undeserving of opportunities by their peers. However, the assumption that Black women athletes are naturally gifted was held by coaches, peers, administrators, and, sometimes, the athletes themselves.

Another stereotype perpetuated by these groups was the notion of harsher punishment. Black women athletes at the University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge reported feeling that they were punished more frequently and harshly compared to their peers. Some Black women athletes reported that their coaches assumed they could handle more physically and mentally demanding tasks. This assumption was often accompanied by public lashing. Some athletes also reported being intentionally provoked by coaches to improve their athletic performance. Black women student-athletes also recall being punished for having Black hair. This was apparent during competitions, when officials accused aggressive gameplay of being due to Black hair. As hair remains culturally intertwined in Black culture, the exclusion of Black hair in USport demonstrated ongoing covert systems of oppression and racism. Participants also point to other forms of discrimination, including expectations of being "the loud Black woman" and the responsibility of entertaining the collective.

Effectiveness of EDI

The topic of EDI has recently become highly controversial, which is obvious in the political discourse both within Canadian and American settings. As a result, EDI and the principles it embodies have evolved over time, adapting to the changing political climate in which they exist. I illustrated such changes. Both the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge, as indicated in previous chapters, have undergone EDI initiatives or made changes to EDI. The most prominent of these changes has been the retitling of EDI to accessibility, belonging, and community (ABC). Following the name change, I concluded that administrators continue to have an optimistic perception of the equity policies. More specifically, they hoped that returning to basics would allow for a fair and equitable experience for all students. Administrators hoped that these changes would mitigate the performative nature of EDI. I also found a lack of communication regarding the changes to EDI in athletic programs.

There were additional concerns regarding the effectiveness of current EDI practices. Both the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge employed overarching policies to ensure students' safety and comfort. However, when addressing specific instances of discrimination, this research concluded that the EDI policies presented by these institutions could be interpreted as performative rather than impactful. These policies utilized vague language, lacked institutional accountability, and failed to provide coherent pathways for racialized students to report instances of discrimination. According to the oral stories, Black women athletes also lacked awareness concerning the applicability of EDI policies in athletic settings. Based on various accounts, Black women athletes were unaware of what constituted discrimination and harassment. As a result, they often accepted inappropriate behaviours from

coaches, peers, and administrators. Most Black women athletes interviewed also reported feeling uncomfortable reporting or discussing instances of racism with their current administrators. These women believed that their institution lacked the necessary structures for reporting and addressing instances of discrimination. Ultimately, I concluded that more intentionality was required to address the gap between the intent of EDI and the experience of Black women student-athletes.

Representation

Both the oral interviews from Black women athletes and administrators highlighted the importance of representation in the success of Black women athletes. According to Black student athletes, representation within team settings, specifically with their peers, created a safe space to discuss their feelings and an opportunity to build community. Black women athletes also examined the impacts of representation concerning administrators. They agreed that bonding appropriately and culturally with administrators could help bridge the gap between their experiences and institutional structures. However, some Black women athletes additionally emphasized the importance of intention. They concluded that it was not always necessary to have the same background for administrators to be empathetic to their unique experiences as racialized and gendered individuals. Administrators echoed a similar perspective; however, they emphasized the importance of qualification alongside lived experience.

Conclusion

The experiences of Black women athletes in USport are complex. In this study, I provide concrete evidence of ongoing racist and gendered behaviours towards these bodies, while simultaneously addressing the lack of institutional accountability. For Black women athletes, their identity is one rooted in historical assumptions. This identity is constantly negotiated, adapting and shifting in response to the political climate in which they exist. The oral histories presented in this thesis highlight the gap between EDI initiatives in Southern Alberta universities and their actual impacts on Black women athletes. According to the experiences of these Black women, there is an ongoing ignorance concerning racism in sport. The performative nature of EDI allows for both negligence of racialized communities and the false projection of equality within USport and Canadian universities. The process of combating such structures may not be straightforward. However, it should first involve Black women's voices. The goal of this thesis was to initiate that process, centering the voices of Black women athletes.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the current EDI initiatives at both the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary and taking into consideration the experiences of the Black women athletes interviewed for this study, I have composed the following recommendations.

Administrative responsibility

USport Responsibility to Information Regarding EDI Initiatives

- a. I call on USport and USport universities to implement policies assigning responsibility to Administrators, EDI office personnel, and all other applicable institutional positions to inform internal and external parties about ongoing EDI initiatives. These parties may include, but are not limited to, organizations or individuals seeking research on EDI initiatives and policies, students, community members, or student groups. As EDI initiatives become highly political and controversial, USport and USport institutions must remain involved in these discussions, providing the public with information as needed.

Composition of EDI

Taking Institutional Accountability

- a. I call on USport and USport institutions to acknowledge the colonial and racist past of Canadian educational institutions concerning the treatment of racialized students. By formally recognizing that such structures exist within current policies and current practices, I hope this will keep USport universities accountable in their active pursuit not only to dismantle the prejudiced systems but also to work towards impactful and lasting change.

Change in EDI Language

- a. I call on USport and USport institutions to revisit current EDI policies and make these policies more specific to the demographic they claim to be helping. Based on the analysis presented in this study, current EDI policies lack specific, direct

objectives. For these policies to have a meaningful impact, institutions must eliminate broad, vague promises about inclusionary practices.

Collaboration with Black Students

- a. I call on USport and USport universities to consider the experiences of Black student-athletes when addressing gaps in current EDI policies. I encourage USport universities to collaborate with Black student athletes, leveraging their experiences to inform the changes needed to make EDI practices meaningful. As in this study, each athlete offers a unique perspective on their experience within these institutions. Their experiences should be considered when addressing policy gaps. This could take the form of various approaches, such as appointing a Black student-led committee to address the issue or collaborating with established Black groups on campus.

Athletic processes

Administrative Specific Education

- a. I call on USport to provide additional mandatory educational training for administrators working within the University, concerning both the institution's stance on EDI and what athletes can report as discrimination and harassment. The platform for these educational sessions may be provided through external anti-racism workshops, mandatory online training, or USport-led initiatives specifically catered to administrators. However, it is essential that, regardless of

the platform, administrators demonstrate their learning and address exclusionary practices as they arise within their institutions. This way, USport gains a broader perspective on the issues it should address as an organization.

- b. I additionally call on USport and USport institutions to explore the Canadian anti-discrimination laws and how Black legal scholars criticize current practices, pushing for more intentional frameworks to address inequity in university settings. This must be an ongoing task for the institution, ideally led by anti-discrimination experts.

Athlete Specific Resources

- a. I call on USport and USport institutions to create athlete-specific resources outlining both the organization's initiatives to maintain an inclusive and safe space for athletes and the organization's definition of discrimination and harassment. For this resource to be practical, it must be concise and accessible to all athletes, regardless of their educational or language background. It must be readily available following the athletes' introduction to USport. I would suggest including this resource in the "USport athlete registration" process, where athletes are expected to declare basic information, such as the team they are a part of and their eligibility status. Please see USPORTS Central. (n.d.). *Student centre*. USPORTS. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from <https://usportscentral.ca/StudentCentre/> for information regarding this registration.

- b. I additionally call on USport and USport institutions to provide a concise resource detailing the step-by-step process to report instances of discrimination and harassment for athletes specifically. This resource should include what the organization and or institutions define as discrimination and harassment, and the processes necessary to address such claims. This resource, like addressing EDI initiatives, should be concise and accessible to all students upon arrival.

Administrative Hiring Practices

- a. I call on USport and USport institutions to reconsider current hiring practices, prioritizing racialized candidates. I urge administrators to consider hiring personnel based on applicants' qualifications and lived experiences. It is essential to note that this recommendation aims to avoid the tokenism of Black bodies; instead, it urges USport to consider the impacts of representation for all athletes. The oral stories demonstrate that when Black women athletes saw women with similar identities in positions of power, it motivated them to strive for the same roles. Black women athletes also felt more comfortable addressing and acknowledging discriminatory acts in these cases.

Athletes Integration

Community Based Initiatives

- a. I call on USport and USport institutions to establish more community-based events specifically for Black students during their first year in USport. These

events should be an opportunity for student-athletes to begin building community with their team and like-minded individuals.

- b. I also call on USport and USport institutions to form partnerships or establish Black-led student groups. In collaboration with these groups, I recommend that USport and its institutions host various events throughout the year to celebrate diversity within athletic spaces. These events should be ongoing, not limited to the designated diversity months (e.g., Black History Month in February).

Incorporation of Anti-discriminatory Workshops in Athletic Orientation

- a. I call on USport and USport institutions to incorporate anti-discrimination workshops during athlete orientation. This workshop should outline the expectations for both administrators and student-athletes regarding appropriate behaviours.

Based on the experiences of Black women athletes in this study, I believe that these recommendations, if implemented, would address discriminatory practices in both USport and its associated educational institutions. These recommendations aim to enhance the experience of all student-athletes by creating a safe and inclusive environment where all individuals, regardless of their background, can succeed.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR ATHLETES

Icebreaker question: Who is your favorite professional athlete? Do you keep up with them or any sports team?

Background in sport

2. How did you first get involved in sports? When did you start playing or participating in a structured/institutional manner? (10 minutes)

- Tell me about this journey.
- Did you have family members that played (how did family support you throughout this process)

3. Can you tell me one of the first memories you have of playing the sport?

4. Once you did start playing, how accessible was organized sport to you growing up and what was this like?

- What made you consider going further in sports, past the high school level?
- Was this always the plan?

5. How was recruitment like for you throughout this process?

- Where there any barriers in this process such as connections, access exc.
- Do you believe that this process (the recruitment) was influenced by either your gender or your race?

Integration into sport

6. Once integrated into your given sports team in Usport, did you feel welcome and comfortable with your peers and/or coaches? (if yes or no, give expanded examples)

- If no, how do you think your specific sport welcomes Black women athletes?
- (Do you believe that certain sports are more accepting of Black women's participation)

7. How do you believe your identity and integration into this sports team has or impacts your identity as a Canadian athlete?

8. How do you think this experience (feeling welcome or unwelcome) was impacted by your racial identity?

9. Are there any specific examples that you can think of where you were singled out or targeted during sporting events such as practices or games based on your racial identity in your athletic journey at your given school? (this may be overt or subtle)

- Was this different for your peers?
- Have you ever heard of or experienced other women of colour going through discrimination such as this? Explain

10. How have these behaviors impacted your general experience in sport, whether this is about mental health, or ability to perform?

Education

11. As a current athlete, how do you balance schoolwork and athletic responsibilities?

- Are there any expectations by your coaches regarding the success in both areas (explain)

12. Have you ever felt like there were moments when you had to pick between both priorities as a student-athlete

- How was that impacted by your coaches or teammates?
- What do you think is more important for your identity as a Black women athlete to be better at?

13. Have there ever been any instances where you felt overwhelmed by the pressures to succeed in either academics or athletics (explain)

- How have you been encouraged by your coaches to approach school and athletic responsibilities?

Mistrust and punishment

Obviously, as athletes, we know a thing or two about adversity, and things not exactly going to plan.

14. In your role as an athlete can you tell me about a time when you may have been reprimanded by your coach or any sort of administration and how did you negotiate that?

- Compared to your other teammates, how do you believe that this treatment changes or stays the same?
- Does everyone get the same treatment based on expectations that you do? (give me an example)

15. Has there ever been an instance where you felt that you have received punishment for something disproportionate in your sports experience?

- Why do you think this happened?
- Do you believe that this had any correlation to your identity as a Black woman athlete?

Mistrust

16. How would you describe your relationship with your coach and teammates?

- Has this always been the case?
- Would you say there is a lot of trust in this relationship?

17. Would you consider yourself a leader on your team?

- If yes, do you believe you are able, in your current position to make an important decision whether that is concerning the team on and off the court?

18. In your current role, how would you describe your current responsibilities?

- Do you believe that you are capable of making important decisions and why
- Do you believe that your coach trusts you to make those decisions?

Representation

19. Are there any assumptions about Black women athletes that you believe to remain relevant even in your own experience as a black woman

- How have you seen this for other Black women athletes in USport?

20. Do you feel that you have been appropriately represented in all levels of sports leading to your college experience?

- How do you think having coach or administration representation would have or would currently impact your role as a Black woman athlete in USport?

21. Do you feel that your identity as a Black woman athlete and the consequences of such an identity is well understood by administration, coaches, etc.

- Do you feel comfortable addressing cases of racism and or discrimination with current sports staff?

EDI

1. Have you ever heard of or explored your institution's EDI? (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policies), if not have you ever been told about these policies by your coach or administration throughout your athletic experience?
2. Do you believe that there are alternative structures in place in your institutions to combat such behaviors? Have you ever felt the need to access them?
3. Have you ever felt the need to access your school's EDI policies and if so, how easy was this process?

Conclusion: Do you have any other things you would like to discuss or any further questions for me?

Interview timeline: “Thank you for participating in this research, your contribution will make an important impact. This interview once analyzed will be transcribed. If you want a copy of the transcription, feel free to let me know right now or email me at a later date. If there are any questions or concerns about the transcription this may also be indicated in the email and edits may be made upon your request. Thanks again!”

Disclaimer: Interview questions are subject to change

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR ADMISTRATORS

Ice breaker questions

Background

1. Can you please tell me about your current role at the University of - and how long you have been in this position
2. What was the journey like getting this position?
3. What has been your favorite part about working in this field?
4. Can you describe any recent challenges you faced in this current role?
 - How were you able to mitigate those challenges
5. How has your experience been as a part of Usport?

Integration into sport

6. Often retention for athletes usually happens within the first few years of their athletic journey, how important do you think athlete integration into their teams in this case?
7. What are the structures put in place for athletes, regarding their integration into athletic teams
 - For example, are there courses or seminars that athletes must undergo before their first season a *pronghorn*
8. How do these structures differ for athletes of colour?
 - Do you believe that they should should → why or why not?
 - Do you believe that this experience is different for athletes of colour or women athletes?

9. How do you believe this step (integration) in an athlete's journey differs for women and or athletes of colour?

- If you do not think it differs, can you provide examples on why?

10. Are there any examples during your time working within Usport and your institution that an athlete has expressed not feeling welcome based on racial or gender issues? ?

Addressing stereotypes

11. Are there stereotypes about Black athletes, specifically women athletes that you believe to be detrimental to the athlete experience?

- Have there been any instances of this while you have been in your position (be specific, no names needed)

12. Do you believe that staff, coaches, and administration are well equipped to acknowledge, and address instances of racism and prejudice for athletes of colour?

13. What structures have been put into place to formally complain about these instances, especially if it is from an administration/coach?

14. Are these structures well-known by the athletes?

- Can you provide an instance of when they were formally informed of these structures before their recruitment to the institution?

Representation

16. How impactful do you believe representation, whether this is with coaches of colour or admin, is on the experiences of Black athletes?

17. Currently, do you feel that these athletes are appropriately represented in all levels of sports leading to their university careers?

18. What tools do you utilize to help athletes of colour if you do not personally identify as a person of colour?

EDI

19. What can you tell me about your institutions current EDI policies and practices

- Do you feel that these policies are impactful or performative?
 - Please provide examples supporting your points

20. How do you feel that these policies have been utilized by Usport athletes (of colour) to better their experience?

21. Have any athletes had to access these policies while you have been in your position?

- How successful were these policies in protecting the athlete?

EDI vs ABC's

There have been recent changes to EDI (it's name)

22. How do you think these changes will impact the original intent of EDI (explains original intent if necessary)?

23. What institutional changes will accompany these changes?

24. How involved will students and athlete of colour be regarding these changes

- Do you believe they should be involved?

