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# **To Act or Not to Act?: Student-Athlete Perceptions of Social Justice Activism**

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Racism and racial inequality are issues that are deeply ingrained in the history of the United States (West, 2017). However, these issues have received renewed attention in the general public due to a number of political and sociocultural factors, supported by contemporary social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Hargons et al., 2017), that have placed them at the center of a variety of sociocultural contexts (Craig, et al., 2018). Sports is one context that has grabbed headlines due to professional and collegiate athletes increasingly using their platforms to raise awareness about social injustice (Kluch, 2020). When it comes to racial inequities specifically, athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, Serena Williams, LeBron James, and Megan Rapinoe are recognizing the significance of their platform and have been using it to speak out on race-related social justice issues. These athletes' actions have not gone unnoticed by the media and spectators, and many high-profile athletes now seem to perceive sharing their opinion on social justice issues via their platform as part of the contemporary sports landscape.

Despite having almost half a million participants annually, college athletics has received less media attention around social justice activism than their professional peers. Even though college students have an interest in social justice and diversity initiatives on campus and in their communities (Broido, 2000; Torres-Harding et al., 2014), little is known about how student-athletes' perspectives related to race, racism, and social justice activism affect their experiences at the collegiate level. Further, even less is known about collegiate athletes' intentions to engage in social justice activism to combat racism, as many professional athletes have done recently. Given the scarcity of research on student-athletes' perceptions of climate surrounding racism and social justice activism, we suggest that there are at least two major reasons why student-athletes should be studied as a unique group outside of the non-athlete student population in U.S. higher education.

First, stemming from their roles and responsibilities on campus, student-athletes have a unique identity on campus compared to non-athlete students. Student-athletes represent the university in many public events and face added pressure due to their frequent isolation from the regular student body (Bowen & Levin, 2003) – a trend that is exacerbated for minoritized populations (Beamon, 2014). Additionally, staff and non-athlete peers on campuses sometimes hold negative stereotypes of student-athletes (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2011). Due to these negative stereotypes, student-athletes can feel less welcomed at their institutions and perceive the climate to be more hostile, especially when at a predominantly White institution (PWI; Comeaux, 2012). Collectively, these factors position student-athletes in a unique but challenging position. Further, due to their visibility on campus, student-athletes may have increased potential to bring about social change (Kluch, 2020), yet they may have to negotiate conflicting messages from their institutions, some of which may hold a corresponding expectation that these athletes are required to not just represent themselves but also the university at large in a 'responsible' manner – which can promote conformity to well-established rules and team norms that constitute a barrier to developing a civic consciousness needed for effective activism (Staurowsky, 2014). The solidarity of the University of Missouri's men's football team in their demands during the 2015/2016 academic year was a pivotal moment to have then school president Tom Wolfe resign and underscores the significant platform that college athletes possess. More recently, student-athletes have used their platform to call attention to the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd and similar incidents (Pettit, 2020). Given that activism can have severe consequences for athletes speaking out on social injustice (Kaufman, 2008), the activist space is a complicated one for student-athletes to navigate. These insights are especially critical to better understand collegiate athletes' perceptions of why they are engaging, and oftentimes not engaging, in acts of social justice activism.

## **Race, Racism & Student-Athletes in U.S. Higher Education**

U.S. higher education remains a space that is fraught with systemic racial inequities that present stark barriers to people of color's full participation and success in college. Indeed, institutional racism – which can be defined as the “policies, practices, and behaviors that disadvantage racial groups within a system” (Museus & Park, 2015, p. 552) – manifests itself in various ways in the lives of students of color during their time on campus. For example, Smith and colleagues (2016) have shown that Black men at PWIs are often the target of hypersurveillance by their White peers and are subject to anti-Black stereotyping that constructs Black men through one-dimensional identity scripts such as the Black man as criminal/predator, an embodiment of ghetto culture, an athlete-student with little academic merit, or an anti-intellectual. Similarly, scholars have called attention to how Asian American college students experience racist campus climates. One such study found that Asian American students often feel pressure to racially assimilate, are subject to frequent racial harassment, experience racial isolation, and overall perceive their campus climates to be hostile towards them (Museus & Park, 2015). For racially minoritized populations in college, racialized aggressions do not only occur on campus, but often are extended to the realm of social media (Gin, et al., 2017). Given the stressors emerging from systemic racism, it is not surprising that racially minoritized students' experiences as members of a marginalized group on campus can have a significant impact on their motivation and success in college (Hurtado et al., 1998; Museus et al., 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Like their non-athlete peers, racially minoritized student-athletes may struggle to adjust to the cultural norms of their collegiate institutions, which can reduce their sense of belonging and, by extension, their success in college (Gayles et al., 2018). Research has shown that racially minoritized student-athletes often feel like they are not welcome or supported by their institutions (Bimper, 2016; Cooper, 2017), which can lead to feeling a sense of isolation (Rubin & Moses, 2017) and developing a lower sense of belonging on campus (Gayles et al., 2018). In addition, these student-athletes are the target of instances of racism (Cooper & Dougherty, 2015) and have to fight stereotypes that construct them as less intellectually capable compared to their White peers (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014). When it comes to support systems, racially minoritized student-athletes are shown to struggle with developing relationships with faculty and administrators (Chen et al., 2014), a trend that is supported by a lack of representation and validation for racially minoritized student-athletes across college campuses (Museus et al., 2017). Navigating racism and systemic inequities can have a devastating effect on these athletes; for instance, they can negatively impact the mental health, quality of life, self-esteem, and overall well-being of racially minoritized populations (Melendez, 2008; Smedley et al., 1993; Solberg & Viliarreal, 1997).

### **Racially Minoritized Student-Athlete Activism for Social Justice**

In addition to the perceptions of the campus climate, student-athlete perceptions of social justice and intentions to engage in social justice activism are important to understand for stakeholders who strive to best support their actions. Social justice as a concept can be elusive and is ever-evolving (Novak, 2000). Using a sport metaphor, social justice is viewed as concerns and actions that involve a “levelling” of the playing field and the elimination of injustices and inequities in society – a view that is supported by sport scholars who have looked at social justice in the context of sport (Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Cooper et al., 2019). As such, social justice is aligned with a sense of action that is aimed at the breaking of an unjust status quo and the promotion of a more just balance of power (Torres-Harding et al., 2011). For instance, for researchers such as Constantine et al. (2007), social justice involves,

A fundamental valuing of fairness and equity in resources, rights and treatment for marginalized individuals and groups of people who do not share equal power in society because of their immigration, racial, ethnic, age, socioeconomic, religious heritage, physical ability, or sexual orientation status groups. (p. 24)

Therefore, investigating individuals' views on social justice can help researchers and practitioners better understand why student-athletes engage, or do not engage, in actions that are social justice based.

One population within higher education that has been mostly neglected in studies about students' action toward social justice is student-athletes. However, with the re-emergence of the activist athlete in the public domain, student-athletes, especially those identifying as a minoritized population, are striving to use their voices for social good (Kluch, 2020). Much like their counterparts at the professional level, Black student-athletes have historically been at the forefront of social justice movements in sport, particularly those aimed at eliminating racial inequities in higher education (Ferguson & Davis III, 2019). During the Civil Rights Movement, for example, athletes such as Lew Alcindor (who later changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) became campus leaders calling attention to racial

injustices on American college campuses across the nation (Smith, 2009). A similarly prominent role can be attributed to Black student-athletes during the more recent Black Lives Matter movement, which is perhaps best evidenced by the role Black athletes played in the 2015 University of Missouri protests (Ferguson & Davis III, 2019). The Missouri protests are also an apt illustration of the re-emergence of the Black student-athlete voice in contemporary social justice movements, a voice that had lost some of its momentum due to Black athletes' perception that their focus should be on their athletic careers and financial gains rather than the pursuit of activist agendas starting during the 1980s and remaining through the late 2000s (Agyemang et al., 2010; Ferguson & Davis III, 2019).

There have been several studies that indicate that barriers exist to engaging in social justice action. For example, Fuller and Agyemang (2018) identified several barriers to activism including the exclusivity of one's athletic identity over other identities and the relative lack of impact their acts might result in due to their age and lower level of competition. Indeed, research on the climate of intercollegiate athletics points to structural barriers that make it harder for student-athletes to participate in activism compared to their non-athlete peers (Frey, 1986; Sage, 1998). For instance, Bowen and Levin (2003) found that student-athletes are sometimes isolated from the rest of the campus community by athletics departments – particularly on Division I campuses. Similarly, Kaufman (2008) found that athletes are often reduced to their role as athlete and any engagement of athletes in social or political causes may result in intense backlash. Student-athletes, then, Kaufman and Wolff (2010) have argued, struggle with the framing of sport as an apolitical space given their primary function as students on campus, who should be civically and socially engaged.

### **Theory of Planned Behavior, Athletes, & Social Justice Action**

One theory that is particularly beneficial in understanding athletes' engagement in social justice action is the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Although originating with voting behavior, the theory has been a fundamental part of behavior change research and has been shown to be insightful in a variety of contexts including education, health, and communication processes (Hagger et al., 2018; Torres-Harding et al., 2012). According to Ajzen (1991), a person's intention to engage in a specific behavior can be reasonably predicted by understanding three precursors: personal attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. An individual is more likely to hold high intentions to engage in a behavior if they hold positive beliefs toward the behavior and the desired outcome (attitude), if an individual perceives significant others' hold positive views toward the behavior (subjective norms), and if the individual holds high efficacy in performing the respective behavior (perceived behavioral control). Further, the theory posits that an individual who holds high intentions to engage in a specific behavior will have a higher likelihood of subsequently engaging in that behavior. Therefore, engaging in a specific action can be understood as a rational decision weighing the three precursors influence on behavior. As Ajzen (1991) states, this process can be measured and, by extension, influenced and changed.

In one of the few studies examining contemporary student-athlete activism, Fuller and Agyemang (2018) utilized the Theory of Planned Behavior to examine the experiences and perceptions of ten NCAA Division III Black male athletes engaged in activism. They found that these student-athletes thought it was their duty to participate in activism, yet oftentimes they were not "exceedingly involved" in activist efforts for political or social causes (p. 197). Athletes identified support of their coaches as critically important in determining their engagement in activism, with several athletes indicating that coaches might be unsupportive as they would view these acts as negatively impacting the image of their sport program or institution. Although providing valuable insight into the experiences of a small group of student-athlete activists, the low number of athletes and the qualitative nature of the study provides limited ability for generalization of the findings to the larger student-athlete population.

Given the need for more research on the current (re-)emergence in student-athlete activism, the purpose of this study was to extend the findings of Fuller and Agyemang (2018) in the Theory of Planned Behavior framework by measuring athletes' intentions to engage in social justice action by assessing student-athletes' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as it related to social justice. Relatedly, we investigated how race and gender moderated this relationship as several studies have found that students' perceptions differ depending on several identity variables (Museus & Maramba, 2011; Museus et al., 2018). Finally, this study aimed to assess student-athlete intentions to engage in social justice work; a critical first step in predicting their action in this space.

## Methods

### **Participant Recruitment, Data Collection & Procedure**

The current study is a secondary analysis of data collected by (blinded for review). In the initial data collection, athletic directors or other contact individuals at each university sent an online link to student-athletes at their school, where they completed an online survey that included demographics, perceptions of the national, university, and team climates, and student-athlete perceptions toward social justice. In some cases, this group was the entire student-athlete population at a school while other groups consisted of certain teams or student-athlete groups (e.g., Student-Athlete Advisory Committee) at the school. On the survey website, student-athletes provided consent and completed the survey (approximately 15 minutes). After completion of the survey, (organization blinded for review) provided school-specific reports to the athletics departments and, in many cases, completed programming on race and racism with student-athletes. In addition, (organization blinded for review) created a report outlining some descriptive statistics that was made available to directly to their stakeholders.

### **Participants**

In total, 2,092 participants completed the online survey. Participants' average age was 19.61 ( $SD = 1.36$ ) and the sample was closely split between male-identifying athletes ( $n = 937$ ; 44.8%) and female-identifying athletes ( $n = 1152$ ; 55%), with one athlete each identifying as non-binary and gender queer. In terms of race and ethnicity<sup>1</sup>, there was a high percentage of athletes who identified as Caucasian/White ( $n = 1,537$ ; 73.4%), with other athletes identifying as African-American/Black ( $n = 211$ ; 10.0%), More Than One Race ( $n = 141$ ; 6.7%), Hispanic ( $n = 99$ ; 4.7%), Asian ( $n = 69$ ; 3.3%), Pacific Islander ( $n = 10$ ; .5%), Native American ( $n = 8$ ; .4%), and Other ( $n = 17$ ; .8%). Participants represented a variety of class standings with the highest number indicating they were first-year students (first-year students  $n = 831$ , 39.7%; sophomore  $n = 453$ , 21.7%; junior  $n = 400$ , 19.1%; senior  $n = 389$ , 18.6%; graduate student  $n = 13$ , .6%; not indicated  $n = 6$ , .3%) and were drawn from 21 schools from all three NCAA collegiate divisions (Division I  $n = 1,226$ , 58.6%; Division II  $n = 327$ , 15.6%; Division III  $n = 539$ , 28.3%). Athletes also reported a wide range of achievement in the academic realm skewed toward higher grades (on a 4.0 grade scale; 4.0  $n = 22$ , 1.1%; 3.4 - 3.99  $n = 515$ , 24.6%; 3.0 - 3.39  $n = 491$ , 23.5%; 2.5 - 2.99  $n = 199$ , 9.5%; 2.0 - 2.49  $n = 31$ , 1.5%; <2.0  $n = 3$ , .1%).

In addition, athletes came from a wide variety of sports. Groups representing more than 5% of the sample included soccer ( $n = 307$ ; 14.7%), cross country and track and field ( $n = 304$ ; 14.5%), football ( $n = 269$ ; 12.9%), swimming and diving ( $n = 158$ ; 7.6%), basketball ( $n = 148$ ; 7.1%), crew ( $n = 142$ ; 6.8%), softball ( $n = 122$ ; 5.8%), lacrosse ( $n = 109$ ; 5.1%), and baseball ( $n = 107$ ; 5.1%). Athletes self-identified their background overwhelmingly as *middle class* ( $n = 1,425$ ; 68.1%) with others identifying as *upper class* ( $n = 440$ ; 21.0%) and *working class* ( $n = 200$ ; 9.6%). In terms of their parents' educational background, a majority of student-athletes had two parents who had graduated with a college degree ( $n = 1,351$ ; 64.6%), while others indicated that one parent had a college degree ( $n = 449$ ; 21.9%), neither parent had a degree ( $n = 274$ ; 13.1%), or that they did not know their parents' educational background ( $n = 18$ ; .9%).

## Measures

### **Social Justice Scale**

The Social Justice Scale (SJS; Torres-Harding et al., 2012) is a 24-item scale designed to measure social justice-related attitudes and values with theoretical foundations grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The SJS contains four subscales that measure attitudes toward social justice, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intentions. The attitudes subscale contains 11 items and assesses an individual's attitude toward social justice issues (e.g., "I believe it is important to make sure that all individuals and groups have a chance to speak and be heard, especially those from traditionally ignored or marginalized groups"). The subjective norms subscale contains five items and assesses individual's perceptions of societal norms around an issue (e.g., "Other people around me feel that it is important to engage in dialogue around social injustices"). The perceived behavioral control subscale contains five items and assesses an individual's perception of control in their own actions (e.g., "If I choose to do so, I am capable of influencing others to promote fairness and equality"). Finally, the behavioral intentions subscale contains four items and assesses the individual's perception of how they would act in the future (e.g., "In the future, I intend to

engage in activities that will promote social justice”). All items were scored on a six-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 6 = Strongly Agree. In a series of studies, Torres-Harding et al. (2012) demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity for the scale.

### **Statistical Analyses**

Prior to main study analyses, we conducted a number of preliminary tests that included a series of Cronbach’s alpha analyses to assess the internal consistency of the subscales used in the study and tests for skewness and kurtosis to test for normality of our variables. In addition, as we wanted to compare perceptions of White student-athletes and student-athletes of color, a MANOVA was conducted to test perceptions between the three largest racially minoritized groups in our sample to determine if these minoritized groups held similar perceptions to each other. Following these preliminary analyses, descriptive statistics for all study variables were computed and correlational analyses were conducted to examine the degree of correlation between all study variables. For the main study analyses, a number of analyses were conducted. First, a two-way MANOVA (gender  $\times$  racial groups) were conducted to assess differences in the SJS subscales. If the overall MANOVA was significant, univariate ANOVA follow-up tests were conducted. Due to the large number of participants in the sample, we decided to utilize the criterion of  $p < .01$  for significance in this study. Finally, we conducted a series of multiple linear regressions. In the first model, we investigated if gender and race/ethnicity predicted intention to act. The second model assessed the relationship between race/ethnicity, gender, the three predictor variables of the SJS (attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control) with intention to act. The final model included the previous variables but also tested the potential moderation of gender and race/ethnicity on the three subscales of the Social Justice Scale. Where appropriate, we also tested for multicollinearity between the predictor variables with tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF), a histogram of standardized residuals, and a normal P-P plot of standardized residuals.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analyses**

We conducted a number of preliminary analyses to ensure the assumptions for the main study analyses were fulfilled. Specifically, the internal consistency of the subscales used in this study was assessed through use of Cronbach’s alpha analyses. These results (Table 1) revealed coefficients above .70 (a criterion recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) for all subscales. In addition, we conducted tests for skewness and kurtosis and, by criteria specified by Kline (2016), results of these tests indicated normality. Finally, because we wanted to better understand if student-athlete participants of color shared similar perceptions on social justice, a MANOVA was conducted to test these perceptions. The MANOVA comparing athletes who identified as African-American/Black, More Than One Race, and Hispanic on the social justice scales was not significant ( $F(8, 890) = .99, p = .67, \eta^2 = .01$ ). As the MANOVA was not significant, no Univariate ANOVA follow up tests were needed. Therefore, for the main analyses involving the social justice scales, we analyzed the three racial groups (African-American/Black, more than one race, and Hispanic) together.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for all study variables are provided in Table 1. The results indicate student-athletes scored well above the midpoint with highest scores on social justice attitudes and subjective norms. In terms of correlation between variables (see Table 2), the Social Justice Scale subscales were also strongly positively related to each other.

### **Main Study Analyses**

To test if there were differences in perceptions of the various aspects of social justice, we conducted a  $2 \times 2$  MANOVA (race/ethnicity, gender). Investigation of the interaction effect between gender and race was non-significant ( $F(4, 1981) = 1.00, p = .42, \eta^2 = .00$ ). However, both the main effect for race ( $F(4, 1981) = 5.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$ ) and gender ( $F(4, 1981) = 50.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ ) were significant. Univariate ANOVA follow up tests were significant for race for attitudes ( $F(3, 1984) = 14.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$ ), perceived behavioral control ( $F(3, 1984) = 11.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$ ), and behavioral intentions ( $F(3, 1984) = 11.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$ ). The univariate ANOVA follow up for subjective norms did not reach significance ( $F(3, 1984) = .35, p = .52, \eta^2 = .00$ ). Investigation of means indicated that student-athletes of color held higher levels on attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intentions

compared to White student-athletes. Univariate ANOVA follow up tests were significant for gender for attitudes ( $F(3, 1984) = 169.20, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ ), perceived behavioral control ( $F(3, 1984) = 48.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$ ), subjective norms ( $F(3, 1984) = 7.52, p < .01, \eta^2 = .00$ ), and behavioral intentions ( $F(3, 1984) = 74.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ ). Investigation of means indicated that female student-athletes held higher levels of all social justice beliefs compared to male student-athletes.

To test if student-athletes' race/ethnicity, gender, attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms and interactions between gender and race and the three social justice scales predicted behavioral intentions for social justice action, a series of regressions were conducted (see Table 3). The initial regression with race and gender in the model was significant, ( $F(50.86(2, 1987), p < .001$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .05. Both predictors were significant with male athletes and White athletes identifying lower behavioral intentions than female athletes and student-athletes of color (see Table 3).

A second regression was conducted that included race/ethnicity and gender but also included attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms. Due to concerns of multicollinearity with the three predictor variables, we tested the assumption of collinearity. Tests indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern (intensions, attitudes = Tolerance = .45, VIF = 2.23, subjective norms, Tolerance = .61, VIF = 1.65, perceived behavioral control, Tolerance = .43 VIF = 2.35). Further, the histogram of standardized residuals and normal P-P plot of standardized residuals indicated that the data contained approximately normally distributed errors. This second regression was also significant, ( $F(732.41(5, 1982), p < .001$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .65. The  $R^2$  change was significant at the  $p < .001$  level. In the second regression, race/ethnicity was no longer a significant predictor, but gender and all three social justice subscales were significant predictors. A third and final model included all previous predictors but also included interaction effects between both race and gender with the attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms. This third regression was also significant, ( $F(354.46.41(11, 1976), p < .001$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .66. The  $R^2$  change, although small, was significant indicating that the interaction effects significantly improved the fit of the model. As in model two, race/ethnicity was not a significant predictor but gender, attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms all significantly predicted behavioral intentions. Further, all three of the race/ethnicity interactions were significant while two of the three interactions with gender were significant (attitudes and subjective norms). The final model indicated that attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms were positively predicted to behavioral intentions and male athletes, compared to female athletes, had higher levels of intention to engage in activism when considered outside of the interactions. In addition, the relationship between perceptions of attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms and intentions differed depending on student-athlete race/ethnicity and gender. When we investigated the race interaction, attitudes were a stronger predictor of intentions in White student-athletes, compared to student-athletes of color. Conversely, for student-athletes of color, perceived behavioral control was a stronger predictor of intentions compared to White student-athletes. When we investigated the gender interaction, male athletes' attitudes became less important and subjective norms became more important when compared to female athletes.

## Discussion

In terms of overall student-athlete perceptions of engaging in activism, scores were well over the midpoint on all four predictors of behavior indicating that student-athletes had an overwhelmingly positive view on engaging in activism. However, as the four predictors of activism engagement were all high, it leads to a more practical question of why we do not see more instances of actual engagement of activism behavior at the collegiate level. One possibility explaining the mismatch between intention and action could be that collegiate student-athletes do not want to deal with the negative consequences of engaging in activism. Kaufman (2008) indicated that student-athletes who engage in social or political actions often face backlash, and the recent negative consequences for professional athletes who have spoken out may be a warning to college athletes thinking about engaging in activism. The cost of engagement might be seen as too high for actual engagement, especially at the college level, where coaches and athletic departments hold a great deal of influence over athletes' success. However, it is possible that these high values might partially explain why more athletes tend to engage in social justice work once they enter the professional sphere and are no longer in the collegiate system. Future studies should investigate how coaches, athletic directors, or other support personnel view activism and how these views influence athletes' willingness to engage in activism.

Additionally, there were differences in the perceptions of social justice in terms of race and gender. Athletes of color, in comparison to White athletes, had stronger positive attitudes toward activism, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intentions to engage in activism. Similarly, female athletes, in comparison to male athletes, had stronger positive perceptions of perceived behavioral control, attitudes toward activism, subjective norms, and behavioral intentions to engage in activism. In essence, those student-athletes in the study who held less privileged identities in American society (i.e., BIPOC vs White; female vs male) scored higher on predictors of engagement and were more likely to indicate they would engage in activism. Given that one potential expression of privilege is that systemic oppression and discrimination remain invisible to those occupying a privileged position (Wildman & Davis, 1996), it is not surprising that these individuals are less likely to see these issues as important, relevant, or something in which they feel comfortable engaging. Further, less privileged groups were more likely to hold perceptions that would indicate their favorability to engage in activism, which is likely due to the fact that they have personally experienced discrimination in some manner and feel that they need to act so others are not exposed to the same issues. Recent research has indicated the relationship between activism action as predicted by behavioral intentions has not always been present (Kelley & Breinlinger, 1995) and the relationship can be impacted by a number of other constructs including self-identity and group membership (Fielding et al., 2008), and self-efficacy (Lee et al., 1989). Therefore, other relevant variables should be included in these models whenever possible to best predict actual action.

In terms of the final regression model, predictors explained 66% of the total variance associated with intentions to engage in activism. As expected, perceived behavioral control, attitudes toward activism, and subjective norms predicted students' intentions to engage in activism; similar to other studies on a range of behaviors (Hagger et al., 2018; Torres-Harding et al., 2012). Of deeper significance, both race and gender were significant predictors of intention in the initial model, yet in the final model, only gender was a significant predictor of intention. Instead, gender and race/ethnicity moderated several of these relationships with the predictors of the Theory of Planned Behavior. More specifically, the relationship of how male and female athletes and White athletes and athletes of color view the predictors of behavior was a key piece in understanding the overall model. Differences in race and gender primarily manifested in how they influenced perceptions on the three predictors of intention. In regards to race, White athletes' attitudes toward engaging in activism were stronger predictors than athletes of color and perceived behavioral control was a stronger predictor for athletes of color. These findings might indicate that changing White student-athletes' attitudes toward engaging in activism might be more important than improving their perceived behavioral control. Goodman (2000) notes that empathy and self-interest are key sources of motivation for privileged groups. Possibly, because of their standing in society's hierarchy, it was their attitudes toward activism and not behavioral control that was a strong predictor to engagement. Conversely, for student-athletes of color, influencing their perceptions of control might be especially important to move them toward engaging in activism, especially if they feel they are not able to enact change due to some systemic barriers. Similarly, there were differences in the way that gender predicted student-athletes' intent to engage in activism. Subjective norms became a much stronger predictor of intention to engage in activism for male-identifying student-athletes than for female-identifying student-athletes while attitudes were a much stronger predictor for female-identifying student-athletes in comparison to male-identifying student-athletes. These findings indicate that for male student-athletes the influence of subjective norms is critical to understand as they think about engagement, while for female student-athletes it might be more beneficial to influence their own attitudes to engaging in activism.

Another critical factor to possible engagement in activism to consider may be the barriers to engagement. Historically, action by professional athletes (e.g., Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Muhammad Ali, and Colin Kaepernick) have been met with critique and stark personal consequences. Recently, Sappington et al. (2019) found that a general/non-athlete sample identified a number of potential barriers for athletes engaging in activism. These included perceptions that the public and fans might be upset or angry, that such action might create tension and conflict within their team, that people would question whether as an athlete their role was to comment on such matters, that people would question their qualifications or competence in speaking about such matters, and that there might be real social or financial implications to their actions. Athletes' must weigh these potential negative public relations issues when considering engaging in activism. Further, various structural barriers exist that make it harder for student-athletes to engage in activism (Frey, 1986; Sage, 1998) and therefore, it is not surprising, that student-athletes might be especially reluctant to engage in any action that might be met with critique and sanction. Supporting this assertion, Fuller and Agyemang (2018) identified a coaches' resistance to activism as a primary barrier to engagement with another concern being the lack of perceived impact. This finding suggests that athletes who want to engage in social justice work are constantly evaluating the practical consequences of their actions and balancing it against the impact that their work may have.



Further study should be engaged to identify mechanisms that might spur action in social justice actions outside of the factors identified by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) which might include support from teammates, coaches, administrators, or non-sport peers.

### **Limitations, Directions for Future Research, & Implications for Praxis**

Even though the study fills a gap in the growing literature on athletes and their engagement of activism, it is not without limitations. First, the survey assessing the four constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior assessed student-athlete perceptions of activism generally and was not specific to one type of activism or action. As Ajzen (1991) indicated, context is critically important to understand specific levels of engagement. This examination of general attitudes and not specific instances of activism might be one reason why student-athletes' intentions were high in our sample, yet their engagement in activism at the collegiate level is relatively rare. Future studies need to assess student-athlete perceptions about specific types of activism (i.e., protest, financial contribution, community outreach) to better predict actual engagement in these actions. Relatedly, barriers to engaging in each of those types of activism should also be studied in more detail. Second, even though data was collected from over 2000 collegiate student-athletes, responses were collected from schools that were open to programming surrounding race, racism, and social justice. It is possible that athletes at these schools differ from other institutions where this type of programming is not as welcome. As such, future research should investigate the current study's findings across different types of institutions. Finally, over 70% of the current sample identified as White/Caucasian. Further, our sample lacked a large number of several racially minoritized groups (e.g., Asian/Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American) which limited the analyses that we could run including these groups. Even though this distribution mirrors the most recent NCAA demographic information for student-athletes (specifically, 64% of student-athletes identified as White; NCAA, 2019), further investigating minoritized voices should be a priority for future studies to further empower such voices for leading efforts for progressive social change.

#### **Implications for Praxis**

In addition to the suggestions shared above, there are important implications for praxis emerging from this study, particularly for intercollegiate athletics professionals working closely with student-athletes, such as coaches, student-athlete development staff, and athletics administrators with sport oversight responsibilities. This study indicates that, despite a relatively low level of engagement in such activities, student-athletes generally have a favorable view of activism. College administrators, both those housed in athletics and in the wider campus community, are often discussing ways to build leadership skills in their students. These results point to a need for the development of strategic programs that allow student-athletes to engage in activism as a viable mechanism. Such strategic efforts can include creating leadership development opportunities, launching campus organizations and initiatives focused on social justice work, and engaging in national social justice movements. In this way, student-athletes and students more broadly will perhaps be more motivated to take leadership opportunities.

Second, our findings indicate that those athletes holding privileged identities struggle to see racism as a prevalent issue and are more hesitant to participate in social justice action. Given the central role of allies in social justice work, it is not sufficient for only student-athletes who hold marginalized identities to be engaged in social justice work. Athletics departments should provide opportunities for athletes holding privileged identities to deconstruct their identities, make their privilege visible, identify broader social injustices, and challenge them to find ways to be an ally in social justice efforts. This is a crucial step in developing the critical personpower essential to drive broader social change.

Third and finally, athletics administrators and coaches should actively work towards creating team cultures that embrace and empower student-athletes wanting to use their voice for social justice efforts. If athlete activism is perceived as desirable behavior in the team context, more student-athletes will be empowered to use their visibility on campus to create lasting, progressive social change both on their campus and beyond. Ultimately, sport must serve to prepare and develop our society's future leaders – and what better way to do that than allowing student-athletes to use their platforms to promote social justice efforts, call attention to discriminatory practices, eliminate structural barriers to inclusion, and improve the lives of those groups who have historically been kept on the margins of society.

## Note

1. Much like gender and sexual orientation, we acknowledge that racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed (see e.g., hooks, 1984; Madison, 2012). To document participants' racial and ethnic self-identification, participants were thus given the option to select one or more of the following descriptors: Black/African-American, White/Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, East Indian, Pacific Islander, and More than one race. Participants were also given the option to select "Other" if they identified outside of the categories provided. It is important to note here that race and ethnicity, albeit being two distinct social constructs, were combined in one question for analysis purposes.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and MANOVA results for total sample, male and female athletes, and athletes identifying as White, Hispanic, Black/African American, and Mixed Race (Athletes of Color).

Variable	Total Sample (n = 2092)		Male Athletes (n = 938)		Female Athletes (n = 1152)		White Athletes (n = 1537)		Hispanic, Black/African American and Mixed Race Athletes (n = 450)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. SJS – Attitudes	5.27	(.77)	5.00*	(.87)	5.50*	(.60)	5.37*	(.75)	5.25*	(.77)
2. SJS – Subjective Norms	4.66	(.92)	4.57*	(.95)	4.73*	(.89)	4.68	(.94)	4.66	(.91)
3. SJS – Perceived Behavioral Control	5.05	(.79)	4.90*	(.85)	5.17*	(.72)	5.16*	(.79)	5.03*	(.78)
4. SJS – Behavioral Intentions	4.84	(.93)	4.63*	(1.00)	5.01*	(.83)	4.95*	(.90)	4.81*	(.93)

Note: Comparisons were made between male and female student-athletes and White and Hispanic, Black/African American and Mixed Race athletes with \* denoting  $p < .01$ .

Table 2. Pearson Correlations and internal reliability among all Study Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. SJS – Attitudes	-			
2. SJS – Subjective Norms	.70**	-		
3. SJS – Perceived Behavioral Control	.53**	.61**	-	
4. SJS – Behavioral Intentions	.71**	.72**	.67**	-
$\alpha$	.97	.91	.91	.92

\*\* denotes  $p < .01$  level

Table 3 Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Behavioral Intention for Social Justice Action

Model	Predictor Variables	F-Value (df)	R <sup>2</sup>	Chg R <sup>2</sup>	B	t-value
1	White	50.86 (2, 1987)	.05	-	-.07**	-3.35
	Male				-.21**	-9.68
2	White	732.41 (5, 1982)	.65	.60**	-.02	-1.55
	Male				-.03*	-2.26
	SJS – Attitudes				.33**	16.44
	SJS – Perceived Beh Control				.28**	13.86
	SJS – Subjective Norms				.32**	18.57
3	White	354.46 (11, 1976)	.66	.01**	-.09	-.91
	Male				.25*	2.35
	SJS – Attitudes				.34**	6.97
	SJS – Perceived Beh Control				.44**	9.17
	SJS – Subjective Norms				.14*	4.13
	Race × Attitudes				.34**	2.36
	Race × Perceived Beh Control				-.55**	-3.91
	Race × Subjective Norms				-.30	3.46
	Gender × Attitudes				-.79**	-5.90
	Gender × Perceived Beh Control				-.03	-.19
	Gender × Subjective Norms				.57**	6.40

\*  $p < .01$

\*\*  $p < .001$

Reference group for race is White;

Reference group for gender is male