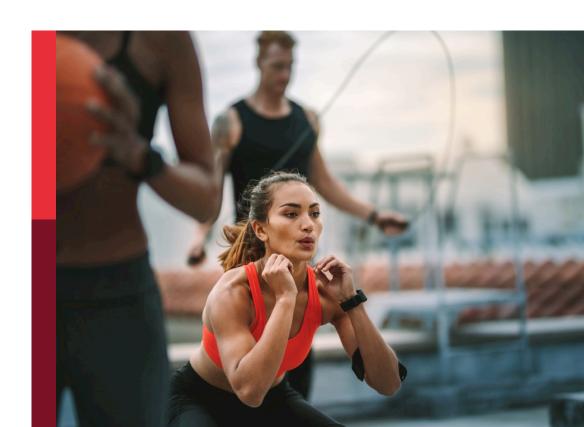# Thinking and doing intersectionality in sociology of sport

**Edited by**
Akilah Carter-Francique, Madeleine Pape and Lucie Schoch

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# Thinking and doing intersectionality in sociology of sport

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# Editorial: Thinking and doing intersectionality in sociology of sport

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Thinking and doing intersectionality in sociology of sport

Since the field of sport sociology was formalized in the 1960s, starting with the International Committee for the Sociology of Sport in 1965 (now ISSA), proponents of the field have sought to "promote, stimulate, and encourage the sociological study of play, games, and contemporary physical culture" (1). Across diverse national contexts, sociological research has sought to understand the legislation, advocacy, and activism needed to create equitable and inclusive sporting structures and practices. Arguably, these efforts have had meaningful impacts: for example, in 2016, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recognized widespread sexual and psychological harassment and abuse in sport (2), reflecting decades of work by feminist scholars to compel decision-makers to take action (3). Much of this research has highlighted the role of gender, sexuality, racialization, nation, disability, and class as systems of difference-making and hierarchy that generate inequalities in and through sport.

Less attention is given to how these systems intersect in sporting contexts, with consequences for whose experiences of oppression are made visible and become worthy of sociological inquiry, despite sport demonstrably lending itself to intersectional analysis (4, 5). Consider, for example, the unspoken Whiteness of the standard swim cap, with a swim cap for Black hair rejected by the international governing body for swimming as not fitting "the natural form of the head" (6).

We came together with the desire to amplify the concept of intersectionality and how it serves as a tool to understand and redress social inequities in sport. We are self-identified scholar advocates that use our scholarship to expose inequities and amplify practices to promote social change. We have seen in both our work and lived experiences how intersectional approaches are necessary to explain and address the forms of inequality, exclusion, and violence that continue to mark the sporting experiences of many people.

The concept of intersectionality has become a defining paradigm for critical scholarship, growing out of the legacy of Black feminist thought and efforts to hold White institutions, White feminists, and civil rights movements to account for obscuring the experiences and voices of Black women (7). At its core, the concept challenges a focus on singular categories (e.g., women) or systems of difference-making (e.g., gender) as rendering invisible those who find themselves multiply marginalized (e.g., women with disabilities). Far more than a theory of individual identity, intersectionality conceptualizes the

structure of social life as a "matrix of domination," in which systems of difference-making and inequality are always co-present and mutually constitutive (8).

Yet, questions about the relevance and utility of intersectionality remain: has it become a "buzzword" devoid of critical content (9), divorced from its Black feminist roots and appropriated by White feminisms (10)? (How) can it be translated from theory to a mode of inquiry and practice, given the complexities of operationalizing simultaneous systems of difference-making and oppression (11, 12)? In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the intensification of protest related to racialized and gendered injustices, and growing institutional attacks on critical scholarship and teaching across numerous countries, the moment is ripe to reflect on the concept of intersectionality and its relationship to sport sociology.

We are excited to share eight works from scholars that employ an intersectional lens to examine the reproduction of difference and inequality in and through sport. Two articles offer the perspective of "outsiders within," highlighting the voices of women of color in the United States and Global South. Ajhanai Channel Inez Keaton examines how five Black women who are Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Officers at US universities perceive organizational inclusivity. Keaton shows how these women translate their positionality as "outsiders within" predominantly White departments into a form of expertise, which they use to challenge conditions of intersectional marginalization. Nana Akua Achiaa Adom-Aboagye writes from her positionality as a Black African feminist scholar, reviewing the sociological literature on women coaches to show how the experiences of women in Africa are typically absent. So, too, are African scholars missing among those who are frequently cited in relation to coaching. Adom-Aboagye calls on Global North scholars to look to the African continent as a space of original knowledge production, insights which are necessary to have a more complete understanding of women's coaching experiences.

Three further articles also consider understudied intersections in sport sociology. Laurent Paccaud examines the co-conditioning of dis/ability and gender, using an ethnographic study of powerchair hockey to create a powerful account of the need to study the margins in order to render visible the hidden workings of gender relations and inequality in sport. Paccaud's article shows how gender ideology can be reproduced even in the absence of (assumed) gender differences in sporting ability, while allowing powerchair hockey to tell its own story as a study site in its own right. Griffin et al. offer a social media analysis of the body positivity movement, illustrating how it has become divorced from radical forms of resistance, co-opted by privileged women, and transformed into a neoliberal, gentrified, and cis-heteronormative tool for reproducing the worthy (White, able-bodied, "fit") body. An article by Reynolds et al. focuses on spectator behavior and youth sport, showing how gender and race mutually shape the actions of parents in youth sport settings.

Three articles consider alternative structures and spaces of resistance. Symons et al. offer a case study of the Outer Sanctum podcast, showing how this Australian sports media platform has increased the profile of underrepresented voices, thereby contributing to making Australian media coverage of sport more intersectional in its representation and content. Bell et al. consider whether and how online fitness platforms could offer LGBTQ2S+ people alternative spaces for creating community and engaging in physical activity. They suggest that in addition to building intentional communities for the LGBTQ2S+ communities, education programming is needed to ensure that coaches, fitness trainers, and owners provide safe and inclusive spaces for diverse patrons. Emma Calow reflects on how the sporting field and the sociology of sport classrooms can serve as spaces of protest and transformation. Calow argues that athlete activism is always already intersectional and that the sociological classroom is always already a space of social justice action, with both offering allies the opportunity to advance intersectional causes.

Combined, we hope that the contributions to this research topic will support reflection and discussion in the sociology of sport community on the role of intersectionality and how it can serve as a tool to understand and redress social inequities in sport.

# Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

# Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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# Brief Research Report: "Nothing About Us, Without Us": A Case Study of the Outer Sanctum Podcast and Trends in Australian Independent Media to Drive Intersectional Representation

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Alternative and independent sports media platforms create custom content that reflects a diversity of voices and representation of athletes, sports and issues that are not covered in meaningful ways in traditional sports media. While these new media outlets often set out to redress the lack of diversity and intersectional approaches to traditional sports media, they are also seeking ways to drive even more change. This in an interesting and important movement to interrogate as these platforms are not only predominantly unfunded, passion projects created by those marginalized groups. This brief research report provides a case study into this emerging alternative media space and its impact in driving change in an ever-evolving sports media landscape. We also discuss the problematic nature of intersectional-redressing work falling on those who still occupy the margins. This report uses a case study of an independent Australian rules football platform, *The Outer Sanctum* podcast, to focus on these key areas. The case study investigates how this outlet has worked to increase the visibility and profile of marginalized and underrepresented voices discussing football in new ways. It follows their journey as they have taken steps to improve their own diversity, enacting their mantra "nothing about us, without us," and proactively becoming more intersectional in their content producing journey. This research report will present key findings from the work of this media outlet to drive change and point to the learnings mainstream media can adopt to meaningfully embed intersectional approaches to sports media as core business.

Keywords: sports media, new media, *The Outer Sanctum* Podcast, intersectionality, diversity, podcasting

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital media and its capacity to offer alternative and accessible ways to create and distribute content has seen great shifts in the modern media landscape with sports media no exception (Duncan, 2020). In the sports media space, specific content is now being created by passionate fans, bloggers and aspiring journalists, adding to an already oversaturated field of sports news, opinion and analysis. Importantly, new digital media offerings are proving productive

for those from traditionally marginalized communities to add their voices to the sports media landscape. These content creators draw on easy to use and often free platforms such as podcasts, blogs, websites, newsletters and social media accounts to add their voices to sports media. They challenge what is perceived to be a continuation of a media model that excludes coverage of women's sports (Symons et al., 2021), disability sports and niche sports, a model that silences, or ignores, complicated issues within sport and only offers platforms to voices that are mostly white, cisgender and heterosexual (cishet) men (Cooky et al., 2015; Sherwood et al., 2017). These creators seek to engage with diverse sports, diverse communities, and engage with challenging issues with nuance and appropriate cultural understanding.

Alternative and independent sports media platforms create custom content that reflects a diversity of voices and representation of athletes, sports and issues that are not covered in meaningful ways in traditional sports media. While these new media outlets often set out to redress the lack of diversity and intersectional approaches to traditional sports media, they are also seeking ways to drive even more change as they work on becoming more intersectional and representative, not only in the content they produce but also in the voices they include and amplify. This in an interesting and important movement to interrogate as these platforms are not only predominantly unfunded passion projects created by those marginalized groups who have not been afforded opportunities in traditional media spaces, but continue to produce unpaid work in the hope of driving change from a bottom-up approach.

The momentum in alternative sports media digital content creation suggests there is a significant appetite for intersectional diversity in sports media, so much so that the platforms and content creators that already sit outside of mainstream sports media because of its traditional lack of diversity, are themselves proactively becoming more reflective of their smaller, niche audiences in their own practices.

This brief research report provides a preliminary investigation into the strategies some alternative and independent sports media platforms are employing to be more intersectional and inclusive in their content production, the challenges that exist for independent sports media to do so, and the impacts these platforms can have within communities while challenging the practices and systemic newswork routines (Sherwood et al., 2017) of mainstream sports media.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Intersectionality in the context of the Australian sports media landscape is an emerging and underdeveloped area of research. While intersectionality aims to make visible the interconnected nature of social categories such as gender, race, class, age and sexuality and how these interact to reproduce social inequalities (Collins and Bilge, 2020), gender identity has generally been prioritized by sports media academics, often without considering that gender inequality can be mediated by other systems of discrimination (Bruce, 2016).

In her paper about sportswomen and media representation, Bruce (2016) highlights that "because gender is privileged as *the* defining difference, other axes of identity are not always acknowledged as relevant," yet in reality, sports bodies and sports media organizations are "never only gendered, they are infused by meanings relating to multiple intersecting relations of power" (Hills and Kennedy, 2009). As a result, the "sportswoman" discussed in many research studies is most likely to be "white, elite, heterosexual, able bodied, middleclass" (Bruce, 2016).

Studies conducted over the last 30 years have consistently found the representation of women working in sports newsrooms is close to 10% (Henningham, 1995; Whiteside and Hardin, 2006; Nicholson et al., 2011), while women's sports coverage accounts for <10% (Lumby et al., 2014; Cooky et al., 2015, 2021). Further, when women's sport is covered, rather than being prioritized, it is generally treated as secondary, or peripheral to men's sport. This subordinate treatment of women's sports by newsrooms is highlighted by Cooky et al. (2021) who found that only two percent of 251 news broadcasts they analyzed led their bulletin with a story about women's sport.

Additionally, sports media professionals are more likely to be white men and "the sports media newsroom has been a particularly male-dominated, hegemonic environment" (Cooky et al., 2015, 2021; Sherwood et al., 2017). Sherwood et al. (2017) highlighted sports newsrooms are generally run by men who prioritize men's sport, believing it to be more newsworthy and that the majority of sports news consumers want to hear about men's sport. Of course, male dominated newsrooms are not confined to the Australian sports media landscape. The most recent *Sports Media Gender and Racial Report Card* (Lapchick, 2018) revealed 91.5% of sports editors and 90.2% of assistant sports editors in the United States were male. In their study of women's sports representation in US televised sports news and highlights shows, Cooky et al. (2015) found that over 95 percent of sports news and highlight anchors, and 96 percent of "sports analysts," were male. When the study was expanded to include ancillary reporters on sports shows, female representation grew slightly to 14.4%. A 2019 follow up study by Cooky et al. (2021, p. 367) found little had changed from their previous research, highlighting "the majority of anchors, co-anchors, and ancillary announcers/ analysts featured were white men."

The representation of other minority groups is similarly unbalanced with 88 per cent of Australian sport journalist being Australian born (Nicholson et al., 2011). Three-quarters of Australian mainstream media have an Anglo-Celtic background, while only 6 percent have an Indigenous or non-European background; the majority of those from a culturally diverse background believe this is a barrier to career progression (Arvanitakis et al., 2020).

Yet, there are signs of change within the Australian sports media industry regarding the representation of alternative voices (Nicholson et al., 2011; Sherwood et al., 2017; Sherwood, 2019). The advent of social and digital media platforms has disrupted hegemonic narratives (Bruce, 2016; Thorpe et al., 2017) and democratized the sports media landscape (Miah, 2017). Digital media has empowered audiences to become content creators and share their experiences. This form of citizen journalism

has provided a voice for underrepresented groups to create independent digital sports media products, including blogs, websites and podcasts.

Research has highlighted how digital platforms can be used to advocate for gender equality, provide a platform to discuss and celebrate female, trans and non-binary athletes and sport, discuss important intersectional issues and stories that are largely ignored by mainstream media outlets, and legitimize women talking about both men's and women's sport (Antunovic and Linden, 2014; Sherwood, 2019).

There has also been a noticeable, albeit modest, shift in the presentation of sport in mainstream media. Perhaps spurred by the introduction and popularity of new women's professional and semi-professional sporting leagues in Australia, television networks have introduced more women and non-binary voices into their coverage of popular sports, including male dominated sports such as men's cricket and Australian rules football. However, while there are now more women and non-binary sports media professionals in more prominent media roles, they remain a distinctly underrepresented voice in mainstream coverage of sport (Sherwood, 2019).

Rather, it is the digital sphere that is best providing alternative independent media producers with the opportunity to push the boundaries and truly represent diverse communities (Sherwood, 2019). Many of these products have proven to be extremely successful, generating large audiences and stimulating interaction from diverse, vibrant, engaged communities. Some, such as *The Outer Sanctum* podcast have previously been "picked up" by mainstream media organizations and incorporated into their suite of products and channels, however there are significant challenges associated with producing alternative independent media (Sherwood, 2019).

In today's ultra-competitive media landscape, it is extremely difficult to monetise alternative online media products, particularly those that are not supported by larger mainstream media companies. Those producing alternative media generally "use significant unpaid labor to produce their sports media products" which can "have a high potential for burnout" (Gleeson, 2016; Sherwood, 2019). Those who are supported by mainstream media face their own challenges. Given the mainstream media economy and sports-media-business nexus is still largely built on the widespread appeal of sport, most mainstream media organizations continue to place a significant emphasis on producing content that attracts and engages mass, mainstream audiences (Evans et al., 2013; Nicholson et al., 2015; Duncan, 2020). Thus, due to the commercial importance of ratings and engagement metrics to attract advertisers and other funding (Nelson, 2019), it is possible mainstream media organizations will attempt to influence the editorial content of alternative media products to ensure they appeal to a broader audience. Alternatively, the hosts and producers of alternative media products may be encouraged to be more controversial or sensationalist in order to create headlines and invoke a reaction from mainstream consumers, thus ensuring the product is topical and newsworthy (Nelson, 2019). These practices, while potentially commercially advantageous, can corrupt the vision, spirit and purpose of the product.

Furthermore, while many alternative independent media products have been created to provide a voice for underrepresented communities, far fewer products have sought to consciously represent the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race, age, social class, sport ableness and other forms of disadvantage and discrimination (Bruce, 2016). Thus, while the digital age has given rise to alternative voices representing minority groups in sport, there remains a gap in sports media that considers and addresses broader intersections of discrimination, disadvantage and power relations.

One media product that has actively developed and evolved to become more intersectional is *The Outer Sanctum* podcast.

This brief research report uses *The Outer Sanctum* podcast as a case study to understand the role of alternative, independent media through an intersectional lens. To research the creation, impact and challenges of *The Outer Sanctum* podcast this report draws on the existing literature of Australian based alternative and independent sports media platforms, the rise of digital media and state of play for intersectional sports media coverage alongside publicly available records (media articles, interviews, essays and audio recordings) that reference and/or discuss *The Outer Sanctum* podcast or were produced by members of *The Outer Sanctum* podcast. The case study brings together these elements to create a narrative of *The Outer Sanctum* podcast's inception, growth in popularity, opportunities, proactive moves toward diversity and inclusion and the ongoing challenges in this space. By viewing the inception and growth of The Outer Sanctum through an intersectional framework, we are able to interpret and understand the opportunities, impact, challenges and limitations that exist for media that consciously represent minority communities and intersections of discrimination. Through applying intersectionality theory to a case such as *The Outer Sanctum* podcast, a preliminary investigation, which raises important discussions, issues and questions, is formed, which can be drawn upon to guide future research.

## CASE STUDY: *THE OUTER SANCTUM* PODCAST

*The Outer Sanctum* podcast is one example of an alternative independent media product that has grappled with representing the voices of diverse communities in sport and has actively worked to become more intersectional.

*The Outer Sanctum* Podcast was launched in 2016 by six Melbourne-based women. Sisters Emma, Lucy and Felicity Race, Nicole Hayes, Kate Seear and Alicia Sometimes first bonded together as a group through their mutual support of their Australian rules football team, the Hawthorn Football Club. The group of six wanted to extend their conversations about football to a wider audience, believing their approach to discussing the game they loved as women was something lacking from a largely male-dominated mainstream sports media (O'Halloran, 2018).

As Sherwood (2019) details in their work on women independent sports media producers in Australia, *The Outer Sanctum* podcast team were, and are, part of an emerging trend in

alternative sports media that is utilizing the growth of accessible digital media.

> In Australia, a growing cohort of women is taking advantage of the digital age by using websites, podcasts and digital and social media to produce independent sports media products. As stated above, these have attracted unique audiences and have seemingly been legitimized as media products. (Sherwood, 2019, p. 184)

It did not take long for the podcast to gain attention as it grew a highly engaged and loyal following of fans who were also seeking a different football discourse to that of mainstream media; their conversations also called attention to the darker misogyny of sports media, putting the podcast in the spotlight (Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)., 2016).

Sherwood details that the podcast "had been live for only a few weeks in 2016 when it made headlines" (Sherwood, 2019, p. 184).

> They called out comments made on radio by [former] Collingwood Australian Football League (AFL) club president and AFL commentator Eddie McGuire, where he discussed drowning prominent female football journalist Caroline Wilson. However, before the intervention of *The Outer Sanctum* Podcast, the mainstream media had largely ignored his comments. The six women's subsequent condemnation of McGuire's and others' words and the misogynistic environment of professional sports became the subject of widespread criticism, and McGuire and others were ultimately forced to apologize for their comments. (Sherwood, 2019, p. 184)

Co-founder Nicole Hayes wrote of the experience for the *Griffith Review* to navigate the surprise and shock that the group encountered during this time.

> While none of us had the slightest notion of the scale of controversy our podcast would engender, when we first formed *The Outer Sanctum* we knew it would give voice to stories not ordinarily heard. The point was to have fun while creating a safe and welcoming space for everyone; but mostly, we wanted to discuss the issues that matter to us, as women, as parents, as people—though always, ultimately, as fans of the game. (Hayes, 2016)

While the women experienced negative and deeply sexist media attention, most notably from former co-host of *The Footy Show* (former popular long-running Australian sports panel show) Sam Newman who referred to the women as "cowardly excrement" (see Hayes, 2016), the subsequent catapult into Melbourne's highly saturated football media for the show was rapid and somewhat welcomed by traditional mainstream media outlets who were struggling to drive diversity within their sports coverage. *The Outer Sanctum* found itself with coveted mainstream media opportunities such as being invited by Melbourne broadsheet daily newspaper *The Age* to cover the first season of the AFLW (national Australian rules women's competition) and from 2017 to 2021, the podcast was produced and distributed by Australia's national broadcaster, the *ABC*.

As the podcast developed to cover both the men's and women's elite Australian rules football seasons, the show continued to encourage difficult conversations about language, inclusiveness,

and the wider social impacts of the game. Most notably, the podcast first coined the term "AFLM" to bring attention to the problematic nature of creating a women's product by adding a "W," while leaving the men's iteration untouched and therefore portrayed as the "real" or "normal" version of the competition.

In an article penned for *The Guardian*, *The Outer Sanctum* co-founder Seear wrote, "These tendencies in language—to privilege men and erase or omit women—are pervasive, widespread, and continue to linger today (Seear, 2020)." The use of "AFLM" when referring to the men's competition is now widely used within the women in sport and women's sports loving communities in Australia and is an identifier of membership to, and support of, this community.

The other expression the collective adopted was a "nothing about us, without us" approach. Synonymous with movements to amplify consideration and input from persons living with a disability (see Charlton, 1998), the expression acts as a reminder to acknowledge the voices in the room, and more importantly, the voices not in the room when discussing issues or making decisions that impact the lives of others outside of your own lived experience. In this regard, *The Outer Sanctum* took proactive steps to engage with guests, experts and community representatives in episodes discussing issues outside of their lived experience as a group of white, cis-het women.

In 2020, *The Outer Sanctum* made the conscious and strategic decision to evolve from just using the "nothing about us without us" mantra in a special guest format, to move from a group of six to ten, adding Shelley Ware, Tess Armstrong, Julia Chiera and Rana Hussain to the line up to include voices to represent Indigenous Australians, the LGBTIQA+ community and include multicultural and religious diversity. Journalist Kirby Fenwick expresses this audience consideration as, "[t]he community that exists around [*T*]he Outer Sanctum is as original and distinctive as the podcast itself. For the team, the audience factors into a lot of their thinking. Who they are and what they want or need" (Fenwick, 2021 in *Siren Sport*).

For Hussain—a proud Muslim woman of Indian descent and someone experienced in the patience required to see such change occur for more diversity in appointments, this move was meaningful. In an article for *Siren Sport*, Hussain, a diversity and inclusion in sport expert and media commentator, reflected on the invitation to join the team:

> "[They were] very clear about the fact that they were a group of white women and wanted to make sure that they were representing the community as best they could. And so instead of going, 'oh, well, there's already six of us, we'll just have to wait." They went "no, let's just open up our doors and invite more people in to be part of our group'." (Hussain in *Siren Sport*, 2021)

This active intersectional inclusion and "opening of doors" that Hussain speaks of is exemplary intersectional inclusion that is rarely seen in sport or sports media. The myth that is perpetuated is that one must patiently wait for an opening, for someone to leave a position, and be in the right place and the right time. But the environment that surrounds alternative and independent media allows for a flexible and innovative approach to inclusive practice. Rather than keep things as they were and maintain that

*The Outer Sanctum* is and therefore must remain only six people, they took steps to change their composition to be more reflective of the community they connect with and represent.

*The Outer Sanctum* as a media product and platform still faces challenges and continues to grapple with the best ways to approach sensitive and complicated issues while also maintaining their own identity in the sport media space. This was a reason cited for the decision to amicably part ways with the *ABC* in 2021. Co-founder Lucy Race detailed her thoughts on returning to the independent media space for *Siren Sport.*

> "The thing that we are so committed to is always staying true to trying to be a voice for people in the outer and trying to elevate the voices of people in the outer. It's actually a big reason why we've gone back to being independent." (Race in Siren Sport, 2021)

Race indicates an interesting challenge for the development of intersectionality within mainstream sport media. While it is positive that platforms such as the national broadcaster (*ABC*) and *The Age* engaged with *The Outer Sanctum* to amplify more diverse content, ultimately bringing in an independent platform into mainstream media systems didn't fully allow for the original vision and spirit of the show to continue. For Race, she articulates this return to independence as "[wanting] to be able to speak our truth," continuing to say that "independence gives us a way to cover football and to cover especially the AFLW, which we love with our whole hearts, in a way that we really feel honours it." (Race in *Siren Sport*, 2021). Hussain goes on to say the move back to an independent platform will see "deeper conversations, that extended nuance and really grappling with issues." (Hussain in *Siren Sport*, 2021). These comments indicate that in a mainstream media partnership, these styles of sports coverage were not possible. It can be assumed that in this setting, the show had to adopt the style, standards and practices of a mainstream media organization which has the potential to lead to the issues highlighted previously in the pressure to drive audience and revenue for a broadcaster and cater to a mainstream media strategic vision (Nelson, 2019).

This creates a specific conundrum in the drive for more intersectional content, and content creators, in mainstream sports media as while sports newsrooms maintain standard practices and routine newswork (Sherwood et al., 2017), bringing in and/or partnering with independent media who can assist with diversification can require complicity with structures that have not historically embraced and championed intersectionality.

## DISCUSSION

As we see in the case study of *The Outer Sanctum* podcast, there is a trend that exists alongside the growth of digital media allowing more independent and alternative media offerings to enter the sports media landscape. Many alternative sports media platforms that have been created to challenge or redress historical and current exclusions of coverage and voice in sports media also hold themselves accountable in a way we do not see in mainstream media to be more reflective of the communities they are championing. This can create a catch-22 for these independent content creators as, with most independent media platforms creating content for free or little cost that may only involve small operating funds sourced through crowd-funding platforms or small sponsorships, the work to champion intersectionality and diversity is also continually done by mostly unpaid labor from representatives from marginalized communities. For *The Outer Sanctum* team, this is a key consideration as Race puts it, "we are all trying to fit in something alongside other jobs. We do need to be able to financially support ourselves and to support what we're doing. It is a passion project" (Race in *Siren Sport*, 2021) but also notes that "it is really important to us that we're able to pay people who do work for us, because if we all keep working for no money, then it's just, it's not viable. We need to find ways to make it sustainable" (Race in *Siren Sport*, 2021). Thus, as an independent media platform, *The Outer Sanctum* must navigate both the additional labor of ensuring they are representing their audience through inclusive practice and elevating diverse voices, while finding ways to monetise their product. This commitment to sustainability of their venture and remunerating those involved ensures the labor of diversity does not impact those doing the work to educate, and drive diversity, but commitment to this cause is also labor intensive.

In the case of *The Outer Sanctum*, over time the group has been able to leverage partnerships with mainstream media and the group's members have been offered opportunities to write columns and articles for various publications, provided with guest speaking opportunities and other media appearances. As such, the unpaid labor of the podcast production can lead to additional opportunities, but as highlighted in the case study, these opportunities are fragmented and short-term. Reflecting on this, we must ask how then, can media and organizations use the important intersectional work being done by independent sports media to drive change and implement more intersectional practice within mainstream media in a meaningful, long-term way that sustains the efforts of those creating the content? What our case study suggests is that this cannot be achieved as when this content is brought into the current mainstream media platforms, they are instead shaped and governed by existing rigid media practices that alternative media find challenging to replicate and can feel morally obligated to refuse to perpetuate.

## CONCLUSION

While challenges exist for independent sports media to continue their work in driving diversity, *The Outer Sanctum* podcast as a media product has produced significant cultural impact on a specific sporting community. This is a community that loves Australian rules football, has felt ignored and/or actively excluded in mainstream media coverage of Australian rules football, and also includes those new to Australian rules football by wanting to support the women's competition and women in sport media. What *The Outer Sanctum* podcast has created goes beyond the show, they have created their own community and connected intersecting communities within football fan spaces, both AFLM and AFLW as well as the amateur and community sporting space. This kind of impact needs further investigation and consideration

to determine the extent of its capacity to drive change as currently such media products and content are not given attention and indeed, the respect they deserve when they are continually challenged to not be "real" journalists or part of the mainstream media (Sherwood, 2019).

Yet the case study also highlights significant existing limitations that should be addressed and sought to overcome. These include limited resources and capital, an over-reliance on volunteerism, the potential for burnout (Sherwood, 2019), and for those adopted and embraced by mainstream media— the possible manipulation or corruption of the product to make it more representative of "mainstream" society or to fit within the existing rigid conventions of mainstream sports media and systemic organizational cultures. From this scoping investigation, it appears that until the focus shifts from placing diverse voices into existing structures that perpetuate a routinized (Sherwood et al., 2017) and inflexible approach to content creation, style and dissemination, genuine intersectional media representation and practice cannot be achieved and intersectional representation in

sports media will continue to remain in the outer *via* independent and alternative media platforms.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

KS prepared the case study and discussion. SD prepared the introduction and literature review. ES provided narrative construction to connect key ideas and arguments throughout the article, reviewed related literature, and recent research. All authors contributed for providing concluding arguments to develop the conclusion. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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# Perspective: Advancing spectator behavior research in youth sports through a closer examination of racial differences

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Inappropriate spectator behaviors are a recognized challenge within both amateur and youth sport settings. These behaviors occur during youth sports contests and involve several sources of interaction, and impact the experience of child athletes, coaches, parents, and referees Spectator misconduct reflects a failure to self-regulate amidst disagreement with the coaching practices, officials, and poor performance from children. Despite widespread recognition of spectator misconduct and an emphasis by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to improve parent behavior, limited empirical research is available to promote understanding of both contributors to these actions, more specifically, what parents are observing from others and the frequency of such behaviors. A path to enhance research in this area is a closer examination of intersectionality, especially race and its influence upon parent observations and their personal behaviors as youth sport spectators. Based on research conducted in Louisiana, this perspective piece reflects on a study that found race as a contributing factor to differences in spectating behaviors of parents. The authors unpack the nuances of these findings through a lens of both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and implicit bias and provide a platform for future study, especially in states such as Louisiana where laws and the role of police have been advanced to mitigate spectator behaviors in youth sport settings.

KEYWORDS

youth sports, critical race theory, implicit bias, spectator behavior, policing of youth sports

## Discussion of current advances

This article aims to share some advances in parent spectator behavior research in youth sports settings. These advances involve scholarship concerning new laws designed to create legal consequences and an expanded role for law enforcement to address these challenges. Inappropriate spectator behaviors can be characterized as common,

impulsive, and with limited legal consequences (Fields et al., 2007; Goldstein and Iso-Ahola, 2008; Walters et al., 2016; Block and Lesneskie, 2018). Negative spectator behaviors (often represented by parent misconduct) predict negative athletic behaviors of children and reduced enjoyment for all participants (Arthur-Banning et al., 2009; Bean et al., 2014; Logan and Cuff, 2019).

In recent years, The National Federation of High School Sports (NFHSS) has contended spectator behavior misconduct has reached epidemic proportions (Niehoff and Bonine, 2019). In addition, spectator misconduct has become so problematic that according to data from the National Association of Sports Officials (2017), contended spectator behavior was responsible for the mass exodus of referees across sports settings. While there are frequent mass media and social media stories about these incidents, there is limited empirical evidence to understand the frequency and nature of spectator behaviors (Goldstein and Iso-Ahola, 2008; Omli and Lavoi, 2009; Knight, 2019), especially when laws are created to legislate such behaviors.

To contextualize the link between laws and spectator behaviors, the authors used existing tools and researched perceptions of spectator behaviors within 6 months of a law passed to a new law in the state of Louisiana. Omli and Lavoi (2009) provided a foundation for research in this area. They surveyed parents in 2009 and developed a 10-item, five-point Likert scale survey through which they captured parent experiences as spectators. Behaviors on this survey list included examining parent interactions with other spectators, children, and their personal activities. The scales had appropriate levels of reliability in both the Omli and Lavoi (2009) study and the discussed study (Reynolds, 2020). This study used a similar scale, with minor modifications to items to be more descriptive and appropriately capture spectator experiences.

## Louisiana context of spectator behavior challenges

While there was not a shortage of concern about spectator behaviors nationally, Act 355 was passed in Louisiana to expand both what constituted inappropriate actions and the role of law enforcement in such settings. The impetus for this study was to examine how legislation shapes parent behaviors and the negative publicity associated with these actions (LHSAA, 2019a,b).

The legislation extended the scope of spectator laws to define verbal and physically abusive activities that were previously limited to the assault on referees. Act 355 called for the expansion of the role of police in a state already challenged by public acts of police brutality that captured national attention in both the years preceding and after the passage of Act 355. Notable crimes included the public

deaths of the African-American men, Alton Sterling (on 5 July 2016) and Ronald Greene (on 10 May 2019) at the hands of White police officers and ongoing assertions that Blacks are less likely to be treated fairly police and the use of excessive force fostered a tense-policing environment in the state. Added to this is the history of racism in sports (Davis, 2007). Given that such a large portion of youth both in the state and nationally participate in sports and publicly display their behaviors as spectators, it is important to look at spectator behaviors as another avenue through which both Blacks and Whites have contact with the police and report their observations to law enforcement. Important to consider is how race influences parents to modify their behaviors not only to avoid contact with police but also due to fear of injustice and or retaliation.

Act 355 impacts all the sanctioned athletic events (competitive and recreational) in the state and outlined consequences for verbal and physical abuse of all the participants, both on and off the field. The law prohibits behaviors (both verbal and non-verbal) that potentially place an individual in harm's way because of experiencing physical or verbal abuse (Act 355). The legislation obligates schools and youth sports organizations to enact additional safety protocols (LHSAA, 2019a,b). Violators are subject to fines, jail time, and community service (LHSAA, 2019a,b).

The purpose of this expanded discussion is to connect differences in reporting personal and observed youth sports spectator behavior in the context of new legislation (i.e., Act 355) to mitigate maladaptive spectator behavior in a tense-policing environment. This piece provides a lens into the reporting behaviors of parents when regulating others and considers the impact of such legislation on referees and parents of minoritized demographic backgrounds. Furthermore, we posit that differences in spectator behaviors are informed by race. These differences should be considered when creating legislation for other states. There are two reasons why our study is unique: 1) We examined parents perceptions of their personal spectator behaviors and those they observed from others in the state within 6 months after the passage of Act 355 and 2) We explored how variables such as race influenced parent behaviors (both personal and observed).

## Method

In the Spring of 2019, the lead author of the study became aware of Act 355 and its signing into law in August of 2019. Upon receiving IRB approval from the sponsoring institution, the author used an adapted version of Omli and Lavoi (2009) 10-item questionnaire concerning spectator behaviors to survey parent spectators (ages 18–64 years) whose children

**FIGURE 1**
Spectator behavior means comparison by identified race.

(ages 6–18 years) had participated in a team sport in the state of Louisiana and resided in the state during the past year. The same 10 items were used for both observed and personal behaviors, and both were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from (1) Never to (5) All of the time. Upon completion of the survey, the 10 items were totaled, resulting in an aggregate score of both observed and personal behaviors that ranged from a low of 10 to a maximum score of 50. A score of 10 represented parents who reported "Never" personally participating in behaviors listed on the survey. A score of 10 on the observed scale meant the participant never observed such activities at a youth-sporting event.

Snowball sampling strategies *via* social media recruited participants during the months of December 2019–February 2020. From recruitment, 106 youth sports spectators (75% women) participated in this study with 23.8% of participants African-American or Black (73.6% White and 2.8% Asian or Pacific Islander). Demographic information about the individual's race was collected. The participant's city of residence or geographic location were not collected in the survey to preserve confidentiality. In addition to the spectator behavior (observed and personal) items, participants were asked about their awareness and knowledge of Act 355, received a nine-slide educational PowerPoint presentation regarding Act 355, and completed Omli and Lavoi (2009) adapted survey pre- and post-PowerPoint presentation. Results were analyzed using *t*-test and repeated measures ANOVA. This perspective expands the discussion from the Reynolds (2020) study.

# Results

Reynolds (2020) used the 10-item adapted Likert scale from Omli and Lavoi (2009), which results displayed differences among those surveyed ($N = 106$) specifically between the observed and personal spectators of Whites and minority youth sports parents. White participants who identified as parents of a youth sports athlete ($n = 78$) in the study on average reported a 10-point total difference across all the items between their observations of spectators and their personal behaviors, whereas African-Americans and other minorities ($n = 28$) members reported a smaller difference between these two variables.

## Differences in reported behaviors

Across Reynolds' (2020) sample, and the 10-item Likert scale (1 to 5 points) in which participants assessed the frequency of behaviors (personal and observed). Scores ranged from 10 to 50 points. Overall, observed behavior revealed a mean score of 23.78 (SD = 6.03), and a large difference from personal behaviors ($M = 14.62$, SD = 5.44). When broken down by the identified race, there were notable differences in personal scores for the Caucasian parents ($M = 14.04$, SD = 4.12) and those who identified as members of minority groups ($M = 16.38$, SD = 8.07). Observed behavior scores also demonstrated statistically significant differences by race with the Caucasian parents ($M = 24.05$, SD = 5.439) and minority parents ($M = 22.96$, SD = 8.483; Figure 1). There was less of a gap in differences between observed and personal behaviors of

minority participants who prompts future research to delve more into these associated nuances.

## Author perspective

While it is a part of human nature to have different experiences, this study provided a unique context to examine spectator behaviors. The state of Louisiana provides an important context for approaching spectator behaviors, especially, as Act 355 emerged during a tense-policing environment and widespread social unrest. There are several manifest contextual factors to consider with regard to this legislation, especially as law enforcement increases interactions with spectator behaviors. Other factors to consider include but are not limited to (a) the structure of police departments, (b) reporting differences between blacks and whites, (c) perceptions of police, and the theoretical perspectives of both implicit bias and critical race theory.

## Structure of police departments

Act 355 places the responsibility of enforcement upon local police departments. Like most police departments in the country (Leatherby and Oppel, 2020), the majority of police in Louisiana are White and men (Mustian, 2018). After Mississippi, Louisiana, at 32.8% has the country's second-highest proportion of the African-American residents, (Mustian, 2018). In light of the growing national and local attention on law enforcement's excessive force on Black bodies and disproportionate arrest rates (Haynes, 2020; Srikanth, 2020). Several scholars have asserted White officers target Black people, because they inherently perceive them as more dangerous and criminal than other races (Weitzer and Tuch, 1999; Nix et al., 2017; Robertson and Chaney, 2019; Jackson-Jefferson, 2020). Thus, it is important to examine the circumstances by which Blacks and Whites have contact with, initiate contact with police, and report their observations to law enforcement. In Louisiana, this is now more possible, given the heightened expectation and role of law enforcement in addressing spectator behaviors in youth sports settings.

## Reporting differences between blacks and whites in Louisiana

Our study revealed race plays a role in how parent spectators perceive both their observed and personal spectator behaviors. Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' 2015 Police–Public Contact Survey (PPCS), a supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is especially informative. Whites were more likely than Blacks, Hispanics, and persons of other races to contact police to report a

crime, a non-crime emergency, or to seek help for some other reason (Davis et al., 2018). Since most police officers in the nation are White (Najdowski et al., 2015), it is logical to assume that White men would be more likely to initiate contact with police than Black men. Thus, it is essential to determine how Blacks and Whites view police, particularly concerning perceptions that police will treat them fairly, especially in sport-based settings where sportsmanship and fairness are valued.

## Comparisons between how blacks and white view police

There are other contextual factors to consider, especially related to the perceptions of police, who now have an enhanced role in enforcing laws and norms related to spectator behaviors. Compared to Whites, African-Americans generally have less confidence that the police will treat them fairly (Tyler, 2005; Brunson, 2007; McLeod et al., 2020). One noteworthy study found found that when compared with Whites, Blacks were approximately twice as likely as Whites to believe the police do not have valid reasons to stop people, that police are too tough on people they stop, and that police are verbally or physically abusive toward citizens. Nearly, 30% of Blacks hold these views, as compared with 11–15% of Whites (Weitzer et al., 2008).

In a setting such as youth sports, where fairness and good sportsmanship are expected, it is important to consider perceptions of fair treatment by police. Recent data indicate that African-Americans have little trust that police will treat them fairly. The findings of a 2019 Pew Research Center Survey revealed that 84% of Black adults said they are "generally treated less fairly than Whites," while 63% of Whites had this view. Similarly, "87% of Blacks and 61% of Whites said the U.S. criminal justice system treats black people less fairly. Black adults are about five times as likely as whites to say they have been unfairly stopped by police because of their race or ethnicity (44 vs. 9%)." While there is much to be explored concerning the dynamics of these findings, it warrants viewing these findings through two important theoretical frameworks. Future research must consider these dynamics within spectator behaviors, especially when there are notable differences in findings and expectations of police to enforce such laws.

## Implicit bias

The sports setting is one in which allegiance to one's team and support of their own child is paramount to parents. This also extends to those perceived as different or "the opponent." As such, humans generally perceive members of their own racial

group more favorably than they generally perceive those who are not members of their group. In contrast to explicit bias, which is conscious, overt demonstrations of racial prejudice, implicit bias operates from an unconscious level and allows individuals to assess everyday circumstances and categorize the individuals with whom they come in contact. Implicit bias is not necessarily a bad thing. As Lawson (2015) wrote, "Implicit bias can be found in good people of every racial background. The tendency for police officers to view their own actions in the best light possible, or to shade or stretch the truth to protect their personal interests, reflects the human condition." (p. 344). The propensity to perceive members of one's own group positively is intrinsic to the human condition. Lawson (2015) explained, "One reason for such associations is that we humans are wired to view our own groups as superior to others and to exaggerate differences between our own group and outsiders." (p. 348). Since implicit associations about social groups influence every aspect of our environment (e.g., family, schools, television, newspapers, and movies), continued exposure to racial stereotypes inevitably leads to implicit associations and implicit racial bias. An example of an implicit racial bias is the propensity for law enforcement officers to assume that a Black man at a sporting event is more likely to behave erratically at a sporting event than a White male. Since the police are sworn "to protect and serve" all individuals in society, implicit racist bias may invariably motivate them to treat civilians differently (Chaney and Robertson, 2013). How can the implicit racial bias of police affect African Americans? Essentially, although ingrained, individuals can consciously decide against allowing racial biases to determine their actions (Plant and Peruche, 2005).

Police implicit racial bias can cause African-Americans to fear being judged by the public and to demonstrate certain behaviors to minimize these fears. Najdowski et al. (2015) conducted research that investigated how Blacks experience encounters with police officers, in particular, whether such encounters induce Blacks to feel stereotype threat, or concern police will judge them and treat them unfairly. As predicted, Black men, but not Whites, reported concern that police officers stereotype them as criminals simply because of their race. In addition, Black but not White men anticipated feeling stereotype threat in the hypothetical police encounter, which involved experiencing more anxiety and regulating their behavior. Police officers frequently perceive regulated behaviors as suspicious.

Since the negative stereotype of criminality can cause Blacks to feel police will negatively judge them and treat them unfairly (Najdowski et al., 2015), it makes sense that Blacks may feel this way in various environments. Our findings suggest this could extend to the youth sports setting and may suggest that African-Americans may modify their behavior to avoid contact with police.

# Critical race theory

Race is a social construct, and humans have used this construct to socially advantage some individuals and disadvantage others (Morning, 2007). Since race is embedded within various systems (i.e., educational, governmental, penal, sports), one must acknowledge how race may determine how Blacks and Whites behave in certain settings. Sport is also a domain embedded with a history of racism, exclusion, and exacerbation of white privilege (Davis, 2007). Critical race theory (CRT) is an academic framework that places race in the center of all human interactions, recognizing that how people perceive and conduct themselves is inextricably linked to race (Chaney and Robertson, 2013). Thus, CRT acknowledges racism is more than mere demonstrations by individual people with prejudices but is a systemic issue that recognizes how the legal system disadvantages minorities. CRT recognizes the various experiences of people of different races. Essentially, CRT acknowledges that while members of some races can avoid police scrutiny, members of other races are targets of police. This suggests African Americans may self-regulate, intentionally behaving in ways that decrease the likelihood Whites will perceive them negatively during sporting events and thus avoid contact with members of law enforcement, who are generally White males.

# Shaping future research

This study makes important contributions to the literature, especially concerning how race shapes parent perceptions of both their personal spectators and those observed in youth sports settings. As Block and Lesneskie (2018) explain, documenting the nature of spectator behaviors is complex and limited studies have documented the frequency and nature of spectator behaviors. Reynolds (2020) affirms previous research from Omli and Lavoi (2009) concerning frequent behaviors of parents and suggests that race is a variable in shaping perspectives on spectator behaviors. Furthermore, as both legislators and the youth sports environment grapple with how to develop laws to protect spectators from harm and create a civil youth sports environment, they must consider nuances that shape enforcement of laws and policing practices. They must consider the historical challenges associated with the racial tensions within both the sports environment and broader society, along with the biases one may bring to reporting incidents of inappropriate behavior. In addition, it is important that scholars examine these intricacies, particularly regarding how they both shape how parents perceive their behaviors and laws and various factors that influence policing in youth sport settings.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

JR is the lead author on the project. JR completed the research for the article and oversaw the development of and execution of the manuscript. CC was JR's dissertation advisor and she made many of the contributions related to critical race theory and implicit bias in the manuscript. OH helped craft the introduction, the theory application within this article and the data analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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# Where are the African voices and perspectives of women in sport coaching?

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## Introduction

With sport recognized as a global phenomenon, it would be reasonable to assume that current studies and research would reflect the diversity and complexity within this field and its various branches of representation. However, what research often depicts and projects is the continued marginalization and under-representation of Global South scholarship as well as limited representation of sport's heterogeneity, particularly surrounding women and sport (Adom-Aboagye and Burnett, 2019). This is reflective of sociological trends and theories that broadly portray Global North perspectives, whilst positioning support for post-colonial knowledge production. This could in part be attributed to a (unintended) superficial understanding of indigenous knowledge and experiences (Connell, 2007) by Global North scholars.

Current studies on black African women and their lived experiences are limited. My own research has shown that the sociology of women in sport mostly produces and disseminates knowledge related to Global North experiences, leaving out black (African) women living in the Global South (Adom-Aboagye and Burnett, 2019). Their voices and experiences are scarce, pointing to a clear need within sport and gender studies research to attend to the intersections of race, gender, nationality and region.

My own positionality is that of an early career black African scholar. At the start of my academic career nearly a decade ago, I noted that although scholarly output on various women and sport debates and issues provided good foundational arguments and recommendations, they usually did not reflect the true lived experiences of black African woman in sport (Burton and Leberman, 2017; Evans and Pfister, 2021). These are indeed experiences that world-renowned scholars have recently admitted need further exploration and inclusion (Burton and Leberman, 2017; Evans and Pfister, 2021). In response to this call, I use this research essay to undertake an intersectional analysis of how sociological knowledge is being produced on women in sport coaching, a topic of increasing interest to feminist sociologists working in the domain of sport (Kane, 2016; LaVoi et al., 2019).

With respect to women in sport coaching in Africa, there is currently no central database that provides a statistical account of women and their representation across various levels and sports in Africa. One would have to undertake the laborious work of a sport-by-sport analysis in order to investigate the gender representation within its coaching structures, with limited research funding available to do so in Africa. Such work

is primarily possible at elite levels of sport coaching and not necessarily at lower levels of coaching. As an example of women's under-representation in African coaching: at the Women's Africa Cup of Nations football tournament staged in Morocco in July 2022, only three of the 12 teams were coached by women (CAF Online, 2022a,b,c; Soccerway, 2022; SuperSport, 2022). Two further countries replaced their women coaches with men soon after qualifying for the tournament. By contrast, the Women's European football tournament, which was held concurrently, has six female coaches, out of 16 teams being represented (UEFA, 2022). Although this is a slight increase in comparison to the African teams, we still need to understand the specific factors that hamper the advance of female coaches in Africa, without relying too much upon Global North research to tell a master narrative about "the" experience of women in sport coaching.

Within the realms of feminist thought and sociological debates, intersectionality was born from the need to holistically represent the differences amongst women, especially amongst women of colour and the continued marginalization and inequality that the feminist movement unintentionally masked (Hayes, 2017). Institutionally, intersectionality is often reflected in the drive to promote diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) across society.

Sport is one such sub-sector of society where the calls for diverse and equitable representation have been strong. The formalization of the women and sport movement in 1994 is one such example (Matthews, 2014). The women and sport movement and historical moments galvanized sport as a social development agenda (Kidd, 2008; Darnell et al., 2019), also helping position the fledgling field of sociology of sport as a scholarly field that could provide inclusive and equitable knowledge outputs (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Darnell et al., 2018). Yet such studies often lack critical self-reflection and an acknowledgement that the eventual output lacks indigenous knowledge reflections, considerations and contributions from scholars and advocates within regions beyond the Global North (Toffoletti et al., 2018).

Thus, the purpose of this research essay is to highlight the unexplored dynamics of women in sport coaching in scholarly research. I argue that Global South and African knowledge production can provide context specific contributions to women in sport coaching research, that could be of benefit to Global North scholars. As Global South scholars, if given the chance, we can offer original—and indeed necessary—insights into the dynamics of inequality and exclusion that continue to characterize global sport issues.

## Methodological approach

The method used in this review of the existing literature is motivated by Evans and Pfister (2021) systematic narrative

review of women in sports leadership. Evans and Pfister's review recognized the over-representation of Global North perspectives in women in sports leadership research. The question that guided my review of the women in sport coaching literature was: *What evidence exists regarding the extent to which African experiences and perspectives are represented in studies examining women in sport coaching?*

Data collection involved the utilization of EBSCOhost Web, made available through my institutional library. The search resulted in 60,400 hits, using a combination of the following search terms: women, female, coaching, coach, gender inequality, gender equity, gender equality and sport. This search process was refined, using Boolean search strings, limiting searches to publications (articles, book reviews, book chapters, news articles and opinion pieces) after 1994—the year the *Brighton Declaration* was adopted. This adaptation produced 1634 hits, and was later narrowed down to 592 articles, when I factored in English only publications. The removal of duplicates left me with 367 publications. I scanned the publications, focusing on female coaches (as subjects under investigation—wholly or in part) and their experiences. This left me with 124 publications, of which I could only access 101 for download. Secondary searches were conducted on WorldCat (which garnered no new publications) and Google Scholar (which garnered 24 new publications). This left me with 125 publications to review. Of the 125 publications, 65 were from the United States; 29 were from Europe; 18 were from Canada; nine were from the Asia Pacific and four were from Africa (South Africa).

## Representation of women in sport coaching

A review of the literature highlighted four main recurring themes concerning women in sport coaching: stereotypes and misconceptions; lack of knowledge; cultural expectations and family challenges and opportunity and structural barriers. Misconceptions on a woman's ability to coach stemmed from gender stereotypes. Stereotypes that posit that because female sport is deemed less professional than male sport, and there being fewer opportunities for women to reach elite levels of competition than men—women are therefore not as knowledgeable and/or competent as their male peers in coaching (Kilty, 2006). Lack of knowledge within coaching for women, has been linked to the limited amount of time women are perceived to spend in sport in relation to men, due to societal expectations. Expectations that have been superimposed by cultural expectations and family challenges. Most of the publications referring to cultural expectations, pinned their arguments on gendered cultural norms and their traditional gender role expectations (Wicker et al., 2019). Often, these are expectations that make women feel guilty for pursuing coaching

excellence if they have families and paradoxically has them questioning themselves and their womanhood if they do not have families (Norman, 2014), in lieu of coaching. These issues all converge upon structural barriers and the opportunities (or lack thereof) that they generate.

It is well known that men still hold the seats of power, access and resources in sport (Fisher, 2019). Thus, it can be argued that patriarchal hegemony still permeates sport structures. And with stagnated gender reform at this level, it is not surprising that there continues to be a lack of opportunity and support for women in coaching (Norman, 2008). However, research suggests that such dynamics are even more complicated in the African region, where women face additional patriarchal, hegemonic and misogynistic challenges to autonomy, such as femicide, child marriages, female genital mutilation and inheritance rights issues (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2013; Petroni et al., 2017; Obiora et al., 2020; Boonzaier, 2022).

The highlighted themes from Global North scholars are generic, yet relatable to women in coaching from various regions of the globe. However, with the global drive towards DEI and greater representation, only a few of the publications reviewed touched on race and/or class as an additional layer to the challenges faced by women in sport coaching (Thomas, 2006; Walker and Bopp, 2011), with no references to the African context. With other publications, there was not enough data obtained to represent the influence of intersectionality on women in sport coaching (Norman and Rankin-Wright, 2018; Fisher, 2019), especially a developing view.

As previously stated, there were only four publications from (South) Africa, and they acknowledged the generic themes that I have presented (in varying forms) (Surujlal and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2015; Kubayi et al., 2017a,b, 2020). These four publications bridged over a period of 5 years (2015–2020), representing at least some contribution from a non-Global North context to this important field. The authors acknowledged where their research converged with international scholars and contributed information that global publications did not highlight (Kubayi et al., 2020).

What these studies discovered was that in South Africa, most female coaches were volunteers, often receiving minimal stipends and if they were paid, it was generally not enough to subsist upon alone (Kubayi et al., 2017b, 2020). This can be attributed to most (female) coaches in South Africa not having formal coaching qualifications (not a formalized requirement in the country currently), which was identified as impacting upon their level of remuneration and career advancement opportunities, irrespective of their years of experience (Kubayi et al., 2017a, 2020). All of which culminates in experiences of job insecurity for female sport coaches in South Africa (Surujlal and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2015). By comparison, more training, development and professional opportunities appear to exist for female coaches in the Global North, although still under conditions of inequality.

A further point here that is important to emphasize: research participants in the above four South African publications were mostly black African, whereas previous publications reflected mostly white participants. This is significant, because we cannot always assume that research from the Global South is always inherently inclusive. A country like South Africa for instance has a history of white supremacy (apartheid) and this has had in influence on knowledge making institutions within and outside the country.

In addition, there have been numerous studies from the Global North on the experiences of black women coaches in sport (Borland and Bruening, 2010; Carter-Francique and Olushola, 2016; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). Although relevant to the body of knowledge being produced, such studies are not representative of the experiences of black African women, who often face differing sociological challenges as to their Global North counterparts (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2013).

# Discussion and conclusion

The literature reviewed shows a gap in scholarly output with respect to the jointly racial and regional representation of women in sport coaching. Bar the South African examples, research thus far has not gone beyond the commonly recognized barriers of patriarchy, misogyny, pay inequality etc. experienced by female coaches (Norman, 2008; Fisher, 2019; Kraft et al., 2020). This highlights the need to explore and investigate the nuances relating to power imbalances and inequalities experienced amongst female coaches of different classes, races, nationalities, sexual orientations and disability. Nuances in the era of DEI, that seem to forget that women are not a homogenous group within sport, especially women of colour. For example, Norman (2014) touches upon race and culture, but does not delve into unpacking its intricate complexities, especially for women of colour in a Global North country. If she had, this would have provided an opportunity for an exploration or comparative analysis of the differences and similarities that race and culture creates amongst female coaches in developed and developing nations.

As a scholar of colour located in the Global South, I am evidence that there are scholars who can provide feminist, decolonial contributions to global knowledge production within sport. It is not that we don't exist; rather, it is perhaps that our views and writing styles do not subscribe to Westernised output and expectations. Region and/or nationality of scholarly origin and the high costs of research and publications (Roberts and Connell, 2016), also contribute to impeding Global South and specifically African knowledge production. These impediments likely also impact upon the production of knowledge around women in sport coaching.

Future research studies would also do well to utilize appropriate feminisms from the various regions of study that

speak to the women under investigation, particularly for groups of identified women whose voices are absent in women in sport coaching literature. For example, the studies reviewed and touched on above, would not be entirely appropriate as terms of reference for the under-developed African context, as they are devoid of the lived experiences of black African women within their unique patriarchal systems. These systems have been influenced by colonial trends (Morountodun, 2019), poverty, oppressive traditions, cultures, structures and practices (Chiweshe, 2018)—which now find themselves intersecting with recent decolonial demands. Moreover, and taking heed of the insight from postcolonial scholars like Mohanty (1988) and Spivak (1988), who posit that Global North representations tend to homogenize women living in the Global South, as scholars, we should look to discover the diversity of experiences for women coaches who live and work on the African continent.

It is one thing to *speak of* intersectionality and its importance to scholarly output. However, the greater challenge is to ensure that scholarly output *reflects* the heterogenic make-up that is global women in sport coaching. This can be attributed to intersectional erasure—which is perhaps unintentional, but has effects nevertheless. If the experiences of black African women coaches are not researched and reported upon going forward, (akin to studies in the Global North), views and outputs for gender and sport studies will continue to be skewed towards a specific point of view. This is not just in opposition to continued calls for intersectional representation: it undermines the knowledge base that we rely on to challenge the entrenched under-representation of women in coaching and other areas of sports administration and leadership.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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# #BodyPositive? A critical exploration of the body positive movement within physical cultures taking an intersectionality approach

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Feminist activists and critical sport scholars in the global north have advocated for more inclusive representation of bodies and more accessible physical cultures. Body positivity, a contentious movement and concept, has been taken up in various ways by different groups. Some scholars believe it holds power to liberate individuals from patriarchal, neoliberal, capitalist, and colonial ideologies of what constitutes a "good" body. On the contrary, critics assert this movement has been gentrified by white-centered politics. Intersectionality has a similar genealogy as body positivity, with a rich history in Black feminist thought but now considered by many as coopted and whitened. In this article, we trace the rich and divergent legacies of both movements and explore at the structural level how body positivity is represented within physical cultures on Instagram. We use a social-justice oriented intersectionality framework exploring #BodyPositivity and #BodyPositive across a total of 141 posts using reflexive thematic analysis. We organize our findings into four themes: 1) Disclosure-Privilege of Body-Related Journeys; 2) The Absent-Present; 3) Consuming Positivity; and 4) Disrupting Normative Body Positivity Posts. Overall, we found that only certain bodies (and transformations) were visible within the data: those of (now) lean, white, cis-gendered individuals, many of whom were engaged in bodybuilding, and who were sharing their bodily transformation. We observe a remarkable absence of BIPOC, 2S LGBTQAI+, fat/thick/thicc/curvy, older, gender-nonconforming, and/or disabled representations. We also note the myriad ways that body positivity has been commodified and packaged into a product or service for consumption. Lastly, we outline and celebrate the exceptions to this norm where a minority of posts align more closely with the original intentions of the body positivity movement. We conclude with our position on how to *do* intersectionality research, and call on researchers to honor Black feminist origins and rich social justice history in these movements.

KEYWORDS

fat activism, intersectionality, physical activity, body positivity, black feminism, bodies of difference

# Introduction

Body positivity—the idea that all bodies are good bodies—is a social movement and concept that is contested. It holds different meanings to different people, living in and with different bodies. It also has contradictory uptake within the movement, fitness, and wellness industry, wherein there is an inherent paradox between the predominant focus on body performance, improvement, and transformation vs. the body positive message to accept the body regardless of appearance or function. The body positive movement originated from fat, Black, and queer activism in response to certain bodies being so rarely visible or held as valuable in discourses and visual media (e.g., fashion or physical cultures). However, scholars question whether the #BodyPositive movement preserves, rather than disrupts, the status quo of white, straight, cis, and thin embodiments.

Similar to the body positivity movement, intersectionality has its roots in Black feminist thought, including the work of nineteenth-century anti-slavery and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth and Maria Stewart (1), and late twentieth-century theorists like Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and members of the Black lesbian Combahee River Collective. The term was officially coined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a theory and analytic tool (2). Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (3) followed by introducing the idea of the "matrix of domination" to describe the social organization of Black women's lives "in which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" (p. 228) to highlight the importance of recognizing the complexity of intersecting structural dimensions of lived oppression, including body-related prejudice (gender, race, body size, etc.).

Intersectionality also has contentious uptake, as some Black scholars stress that intersectionality has been coopted. One example is the erasure of the history of intersectionality within intersectionality projects and write-ups, which Sirma Bilge (4) describes as part of a trend toward "depoliticizing intersectionality" (p. 405). This whitens and eliminates its function as an instrument for political change. Thus, intersectionality in research must recognize its rich history, and orient to interrogating the dynamics of power and oppression that are characterized by a reckoning with its founding purpose within Black feminist activism and scholarship (5). Intersectionality involves the exploration of race, gender, disability, sexuality, class, age, and other social categories and the interrelationship with systems such as colonialism, neoliberalism, and white supremacy (to name a few) that co-produce fluctuating and interlocking relations of power and oppression (6, 7). As intersectionality continues to gain traction (e.g., within the context of sport and physical activity), concerns have been raised that the social justice intent behind the movement may be sidelined when it is used merely to manage or analyze large amounts of complex data. For this reason, some

social justice researchers (1, 5) call for social justice to be at the center of any research claiming intersectionality. This requires a deep commitment to anti-racist and feminist scholarship (5).

This context forms the backdrop for our paper, where we employ a social justice-oriented intersectionality framework to interrogate how the original activist intention of the body positivity movement can be understood or observed today on Instagram, specifically within physical cultures. We explore Instagram because in recent years, body positivity has become popularized through this photo-based social networking site. The body positivity movement is believed to have surfaced on Instagram in 2012, aiming to confront the unrealistic expectations and unrepresentative portrayals of women in media and advertising (8). Today, a search on Instagram of the hashtag #BodyPositive reveals 17.8 million posts and 9.8 million posts for the hashtag #BodyPositivity (Instagram, March 2022). Thus, social media activity surrounding body positivity offers a fruitful site of analysis for understanding complex intersectional privileges and harms embedded in this online space.

In what follows, we provide theoretical background on the body positivity movement as Black fat activism. Then, we provide empirical findings on how body positivity has taken shape on social media and the effect that has had on people's sense of embodiment and belonging. Subsequently, we present our analysis of a snapshot of body positivity Instagram posts, outlining how they privilege the disclosure of only certain body-related journeys, through a consumerist model of body positivity, in juxtaposition to a minority of posts that disrupt and resist these normative body positivity posts. Lastly, we explain how these insights and general approach can advance how to *do* intersectionality research in the sociology of sport.

# Body positivity: A movement for racial and fat justice

Although body positivity is intended to challenge body-related oppressions, such as exclusivity within physical cultures, fitness industries and popular culture have appropriated and commodified the body positive movement (9, 10) and have excluded older people, people from diverse races, individuals with physical disabilities, and gender non-conforming people (11, 12). Critics (who identify as body positivity activists) have lamented that the dominant norm for the "positive" body is still a young, white, lean, able-bodied, cis woman, and even though the movement often speaks about diversity and claims of intersectionality, it does not often show it (13). Sonia Renee Taylor, a Black and body positive activist, argues that if the movement is only positive for some bodies, it is not a body positive movement (14). Black Lives Matter activist Shackelford (15) refers to the coopted version of body positivity an example of "white feminism" within which the goal is not to challenge

the systems that oppress all women—patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, racism—but to succeed within them in ways that center white women. Cooper (16) identifies the current state of the body positivity movement as the product of gentrification, given its use has been appropriated, its origins erased or distorted, and a new white-centric version is sold back to the community to uphold white supremacy. On the contrary, some scholars still grasp on to hope that these types of movements can provide a haven for self-expression and individuality (17, 18) and that their basic original principles may well hold promise when it comes to promoting inclusion.

Body positivity was rooted in Black fat activism to resist the rise of anti-fat discourse in North America (19), and to refuse mainstream white thin appearance-focused representations that (continue to) discriminate against Black bodies. In general, fat activism is an unapologetic embrace and acceptance of fatness as a political identity and culture, seeking to challenge unjust stigmas and discrimination against people who are unjustly positioned as less worthy based solely on body size (16). Strings (20) traces the racial origin of the fear of fat, outlining how the contemporary ideal of slenderness both is racialized and racist, where fatphobia is not about health, but is instead a means to validate (whilst concealing) racial prejudice. Indeed, fat oppression can be traced through entangled systems of power and deeply rooted histories— many of which work to racialize fat, creating constructions and ideologies of fatness that are morally laden with stigma and judgment (21). Historically, Black bodies have endured problematic representation since, for example, the displaying of Saartjie Baartmen, the "Hottentot Venus." Baartmen was a Black enslaved woman of size who was put on display in the early 1800s for white people to gawk at and touch for their own amusement (20). Barbara Christian, an American Black feminist critic, claims that, "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society's Other" [(22), p. 160]. Collins (3) points out that maintaining and controlling images of Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression— and objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. Importantly, even as the initial conditions that foster controlling images become less visible, such images prove to be enduring—because they work to subjugate, to marginalize, and to maintain intersecting oppressions. In today's general popular culture, the representation of Black bodies is either hyper-visible (i.e., via stereotypes) or invisible [i.e., erased; (23)]. For example, it is consistently found that fitness and sport magazines are dominated by white, young, tall, thin, seemingly affluent, happy, and able-bodied representations (24), and Black, fat, aging, and disabled bodies are nearly completely absent (25). In response to the often-problematic representation of bodies in media, queer theorists, disability scholars, and sociologists of the body have echoed calls from the body positivity movement to recognize the vast and valuable heterogeneity of the human

bodily form (26). In response, many groups have advocated for more inclusive representation of diverse bodies and more inclusive and accessible physical cultures and spaces.

In early days of fat activism (1970's), a distinction emerged between radical and mainstream fat activism (27). Radical fat activists saw fat liberation as linked to other struggles of oppression, and mainstream fat activism often shut out the voices of people of color. The result was that this important movement, created to help marginalized folx, was experienced by some as marginalizing. As the fat rights movement grew (in the 1980's and 90's), the term "body positivity" was not yet being used—but enthusiasm for fat liberation was beginning to spread. Activists were drawing attention to fatphobic advertising, the damaging diet industry, and advocating for all to love their bodies. With the rise of the Internet, and social media in particular, the new millennium saw this movement spread online and body positivity became a social media buzz phrase influenced by capitalism. The distinction between radical and mainstream body positivity persists, but where early fat activism had not always made space for fat Black and brown people, Black and brown fat people were more able to carve out their own spaces online. Intersectional influencers who were dealing with oppression in more than one area were often the most outspoken, with women of color and queer folx often leading the way. The shift from a grassroots radical movement on the streets, to a mainstream commercialized social media movement, marks the beginning of a shift in how body positivity was taken up, losing touch with its origins.

## Body positivity on social media: Existing research

Achieving health, well-being, and the ideal body are often portrayed as a choice, achievable through individual concerted effort (28–33). Anyone who appears to "fail" to adopt a healthy lifestyle becomes a "failed citizen," and their inability to take personal responsibility for their health explains and even *justifies* their discrimination (21, 34). Furthermore, individuals who cannot achieve the supposed "ideal body" (i.e., white, thin, affluent, and able-bodied) may be and/or may feel unable to access wellness and physical cultures and spaces, thus missing out on the positive health and social outcomes associated with physical activity and sport (35). Indeed, many spaces earmarked for physical activity proliferate dominant notions of ableism, racism, fatphobia, cis-sexism, heterosexism, and heteronormativity, erasing bodies of difference or, at best, casting them as non-normative (36–38).

With the growing use of social media, body image and physical activity have become a primary research focus among images on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (39). The literature suggests that exposure to

media cultivating beauty ideals impacts body image, eating behaviors, and self-esteem (40). Positive correlations have also been observed between social networking site usage and body image concern in young adults and adolescents, internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction, dieting in adolescents, disordered eating level in young adults, and low self-esteem in young adults (41). Linking this to physical activity, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (42) explored the trend of "fitspiration" (fitness inspiration). Widely utilized on the social networking site Instagram, the "fitspiration" hashtag tends to be associated with images of women, typically engaging in exercise or dressed in exercise gear, or healthy food. The general philosophy is one which emphasizes strength and empowerment, but as Tiggemann and Zaccardo (42) explain, the narrow range of bodies depicted (thin, toned, white, etc.), and the motivational language that tends to focus on appearance-related benefits and objectification of body parts within the #fitspiration trend has the potential to have (unintended) negative consequences on body image.

There is an emerging literature exploring the effects of viewing body positive social media posts, but currently the findings are equivocal [e.g., (8, 11, 43–46)]. For instance, Cohen et al. (11) found that body positivity posts in their sample depicted a broad range of body sizes and appearances with messaging about positive body image (and de-emphasis on appearance) and that viewing body positive posts was associated with improvements in young women's positive mood, body satisfaction, and body appreciation, relative to viewing thin-ideal and appearance-neutral posts. Using ecological momentary assessment, Stevens and Griffiths (45) found that university-aged students viewing body positivity content on social media (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Snap Chat) led to them experiencing higher body satisfaction and improved emotional well-being. They concluded that there is preliminary evidence to suggest that encouraging social media users to follow body positivity social media accounts may be a useful way to protect and enhance users' body image.

Adding to this literature, Tiggemann et al. (46) found that the visual imagery of a body positivity Instagram post was a more potent contributor to body image than any accompanying text or caption. Images of average-sized women as opposed to thin women had a more positive effect on body image in their sample of young women. On the contrary, Vendemia et al. (47) found in their experimental study that women who were exposed to sexualized or digitally manipulated body positivity posts on social media led to increased objectification (of self and others). This finding suggests that when body positivity imagery is sexualized or digitally altered (e.g., photoshop or filters), the result on people's body image actually undercuts the intended aims of the movement. Similarly, Brathwaite and DeAndrea (48) found that body positivity posts on Instagram that contained self-promotion or products were viewed as less morally appropriate and less effective at promoting body

appreciation and inclusivity. In our study, we build on this body of work by demonstrating how social media enactments of body positivity may not recognize or honor the Black fat and queer feminist origins of the movement, thereby privileging only normative body-related journeys through a white consumerist model of body positivity.

## Current study

Interestingly, very few publications have used an intersectionality framework or acknowledged the vibrant Black and queer activism that started the body positivity movement. We address these gaps by exploring the hashtags #BodyPositivity and #BodyPositive on Instagram using the lens of intersectionality, exploring how Black, queer, fat, and other bodies of difference are represented and mobilized in these spheres in (what was) a social justice and activist movement.

We are engaging with intersectionality by leaning into a social justice-oriented framework to understand the twists and turns of the body positivity movement, with a close examination (a snapshot) of how that has materialized online in Instagram, with respect to physical activity or movement. We do this by not merely exploring micro-level "differences" or "identities," but the macro and structural-level entanglements that may explain operations of power in our data. Thus, we take an anti-racist, -ageist, -ableist, and -sexist feminist lens to explore from a critical vantage point: (1) how body positivity manifests and is leveraged by certain/particular bodies in active and embodied spaces (physical cultures); (2) how body positivity as it pertains to, or is associated with, movement subverts or reproduces oppressive body-related logics; and (3) how the original activist intention of the body positivity movement can be understood or observed today. We also uphold a conscious awareness of intersectionality's origins and commit to a critical application of this framework to understand how both intersectionality and body positivity, as Black activist movements, have been coopted, diverted, reshaped, and whitened.

Since we are engaging in intersectionality research, and to be consistent with calls for critical reflexivity when *doing* intersectionality (5, 49) we feel it is important to delve into some of our own positionality to the topic. Doing so provides an opportunity for us to disclose our research motivations (what brought us to ask these questions), but also to make evident that our positioning situates our chosen theoretical, methodological, and analytical processes—most importantly, shaping how we both collected and interpreted our data, and how we here seek to communicate our findings (50). We have varying degrees of relationship to non-normative embodiment and take a critical feminist orientation within the study of leisure, recreation, kinesiology, and social psychology. All of

us are cis women, two of us are white settlers (one with Irish descent and the other with English, Irish, and Scottish ancestry), and one is of colonized Filipinx ancestry. We have varying relationships to queer, thick/thicc, and Mad identities, and complex histories of eating/dieting/exercising/sport-related struggles. Lastly, we all reside on Turtle Island (also known as Canada), in Southern Ontario. While this brief positionality statement does not fully capture the nuance and fluidity (50) of our relationship to our research and the complexity of intersectionality, we believe it is important to provide the reader a sense of our subjectivities.

## Data collection and procedures

We collected data from Instagram over a 5-week period in October-November 2021, a time period selected to provide a breadth of representation while limiting the quantity of data (so as not to be overwhelmed). We pulled posts from a Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, on separate weeks across different times of the day (morning, afternoon, and evening), seeking to control for and/or include weekend vs. weekday patterns and time of day idiosyncrasies. We sought to avoid the inclusion of holidays and special occasions (in our case, Yom Kippur, Thanksgiving, and Halloween), as we were trying to capture everyday patterns rather than be influenced by special occasions. It is important to note that data were collected during the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, which may have shaped online practices, habits, and activities—including social media use. Only publicly available posts were included, where an individual's profile and posts can be seen by anyone, on or off Instagram, regardless of whether they have an Instagram account. Private posts, where only approved followers can see what is shared, were not included in our sample. We chose Instagram because it has catapulted to being one of the most popular social networking sites and photo and video-sharing platforms. Currently, it has two billion+ active users, 25 million+ business profiles, and 500,000+ active influencers, who are approximately split according to a gender binary (48.4% female, 51.8% male, no data on other genders), are of all ages (largest age group is 25–34), and racially diverse (51, 52). Furthermore, Instagram is home to both feminist-related discourse and activism but also concomitant with a problematic rise in misogyny (53) and other neoliberalized, colonized, and gendered imperatives about "worthy" bodies (54).

We began by searching for the hashtags #BodyPositivity and #BodyPositive, pulling 50 of the most recent posts of each on each day. After some deliberation and exploration, we selected to analyze "recent posts' rather than "top posts" (which are the most popular posts tagged with the chosen hashtag) because the "top posts" appeared to be driven by influencers and be more normative (more white, thin, able-bodied, young, etc.), while recent posts captured representations

by anyone that chose to use the hashtag[1]. Our search resulted in 500 posts total, which we then searched through and coded for physical activity-related information and removed posts that were not written in English. We observed that our data, even the English-only posts, were internationally represented (e.g., Russia, United Kingdom, United States, Greece, Italy, and Brazil), demonstrating considerable reach of this movement on a global-scale. Posts were broadly coded as containing "physical-activity" if: the image(s)/video(s) depicted any type of physical activity or physical activity setting (e.g., gym, outside on a hiking trail), or if fitness/athletic apparel were worn (loosely defined: leggings, sports bra, shorts, t-shirt, swimsuit); the caption mentioned movement, sport, or activity of any kind; or if hashtags and/or comments mentioned physical activity in any manner (e.g., #Fitness, #BodyBuilding, #Dance). This resulted in a total dataset of 141 posts for the purposes of the current study.

We stored screenshots of all the posts in a Word document for analysis. Since we were using public Instagram posts that had no reasonable expectation for privacy, our university ethics board did not require a review of our study nor did we require informed consent from Instagram users. That said, we recognize that definitions of public and private are complex, nuanced, and dynamic, and relying on a simple understanding of "publicly available" is not sufficient for social media research to be ethical (55). As such, in our analysis below, even though we are legally allowed to re-use this publicly available information, we deliberately chose not to reveal users' Instagram handles or reproduce any of the images[2]. The choice to describe rather than reproduce the visual material alongside textual material (captions, hashtags, and comments), was made in an effort to draw greater attention to the actions of the images, discourses, and affects than to the individuals themselves, since this better aligns with our intersectionality approach to our work. We invite reflection on the ways that we (researchers and readers) may be implicated in the uptake and spread of problematic imagery and values. While this does not comprehensively address all ethical and privacy concerns (57), we also chose to present our data anonymously out of respect for individuals who may be grappling with body issues and body-related politics.

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1   This finding may well vary according to when Instagram is accessed and by whom, but the important thing to note is that our data captured current/recent posts on each day, and so does not necessarily speak to the posts that received the most audience engagement or reach but rather a mixture of influencers and everyday less popular users.

2   This choice was made because there is no guarantee that even those who publicly share their information on the Internet would be supportive of it being used in research. As such, there is a potential mismatch between the expectations of the researcher(s) and "the researched" regarding the public/private distinction (56).

## Data analysis

We approached analysis using Braun and Clarke's (58) reflexive thematic analysis to understand the data. In recent publications, Braun and Clarke (59) argue for new, theoretically rich, mashups of reflexive thematic analysis that take a critical approach to interpretation. We understand Instagram media as mixed media—as informing analysis across textual, audio, and visual data. From this view, Instagram might be thought of as behaving like other media in engaging all the senses to different degrees and in relying on text and other signs (e.g., sounds, what is absent) to generate meaning. The coming together of text and image creates a multimodal text (60) where we searched for meaning in image captions, hashtags, images and videos, as well as in interactions among images, videos, and texts.

We began by generating a reflexive thematic analysis through identifying and categorizing the image and textual content of the posts gathered. The authors familiarized themselves with the data by looking over the images and videos and reading the captions and comments (61). They then proceeded with an initial inductive analysis of the posts that described image content and composition, hashtags used, number of comments and likes, and other general patterns operating across posts (i.e., use of images, videos, captions, and comments). From there, posts were sorted into preliminary themes based on the coded commonalities and differences observed across text and images. The researchers completed this stage of analysis through regular meetings where they discussed possible theme names and content. An integral aspect of our theoretical approach to this project was taking up a social justice-oriented intersectionality lens with respect to these data. We explored how political and economical structures materialized within the body positivity and physical activity spheres in ways that either expand or limit possibilities for bodies of difference.

# Findings

## Disclosure-privilege of body-related journeys

Across the posts, we observed a tendency for people to disclose intimate and personal body-related stories as it related to their body positivity journeys. These disclosures included content about body transformation mostly regarding losing weight, gaining muscle or lean muscle mass, engaging in more physical activity, and learning to be kinder to their bodies. These posts comprised nearly one-half of the total dataset and included common hashtags such as #WeightLossJourney #WellnessJourney #WeightLossTransformation #FitnessJourney #Body Transformation #MyTransformation #SummerBody.

For us, this raised the question of why people were compelled to share intimate/ personal journeys about their bodies. We posited that this could be linked to accountability, wherein individuals were seeking to be transparent about where they started from and/or how hard they have worked (or need to keep working) in order to maintain momentum. Alternatively, in sharing these journeys, it could be interpreted as a claim to increasing body status and thus social capital. We also observed a significant trend within these data: that it was mostly white, thin/lean, bodybuilding (seemingly cis and able-bodied), men and women (within a gender binary) who were freely discussing these stories and displaying images of their bodies within this Instagram hashtag. This provoked the question: who has *access* or *permission* to share their personal body-related stories with more or less scrutiny?

Access to take up space, whether it is physical space in a room or virtual space within an online platform, is rooted in political, racialized, and gendered intersections of power, privilege, and oppression. Whose voices and representations are amplified (determined "worthy" of a click, or view, or a like) on Instagram is shaped by racist, ableist, ageist, sexist (and so on) structures that are embedded within the Global North (16, 21, 26). Accessibility to online spaces is significantly affected by gatekeeping, wherein so-called non-normative bodies (or bodies that do not align with the dominant ideal) are silenced by a set of unwritten but unambiguous rules about whose bodies "deserve" positivity (9, 12). Alternative creators (or representations) are thus silenced through these dominant and overlapping social forces that privilege some representations over others (13). We posit that although others within broader society may yearn for connection and validation through their Instagram posts, this comes with considerable risk—expressing vulnerability (through sharing images, personal stories, or experiences that are not typically celebrated) often results in trolling and/or bullying, bringing with it considerable concomitant mental health and safety implications. Within the posts in our study, white muscular men and thin/lean/toned white women who powerlift freely posted about their body-related journeys of fitness and body acceptance. For example, posts consisted of white men flexing their back toward the camera, women and men sharing videos of recommended exercise sequences, as well as before and after images of weight loss or muscle gain.

In one post, a white hyper-muscular male posted a before and after image of "6 months solid work with [tags another user] …," alongside one comment that said, "what a transformation in every aspect my man!!" The other comment on this post was a business proposition. In another post, a white lean woman is standing in a semi-squat position on her bathtub flexing her biceps and smiling. The caption read:

> Forgot to post how strong I'm feeling!!! I have rough days and today is NOT one of those days! Almost done with another program and after finishing each program makes

me so proud of myself for following through! I need to continue to follow through with things I would say it can be my downfall. But today we celebrate 🥳🥳🥳 I'm buying new clothes for this new body! (NOT WORKOUT CLOTHES EITHER).

Similarly, one user posted a before and after photo of her weight loss journey. The caption said:

> It's crazy how much I've changed in the last 2 years. The first photo with the gray cardigan I was weighing 175lbs and the second is my now and weighing at 130lbs. My wellness journey has not been easy but this is just beginning and I'm looking forward to my future. I'm giving it my all!! Let's get it. Don't ever give up!! Push thru it and your body, soul and mind will thank you.

This post was also paired with the hashtags #HealthyLifeStyle #WorkThruYourPain #SelfLove #MindBodyAndSoul #LetsGetIt #FitnessJourney #ILoveMe #BodyPositivity.

Another post was of a white woman and her young toddler. The caption read, "Not the best sleep night for this congested little man (or me) but he's in good spirits and this mama needs some movement 👏🏻👐🏻🏃‍♀️ HAPPY FRIYAY!! 💕🤽‍♀️👐🏻", and #BodyPositivity was paired with other hashtags including: #HealthyLiving #FitAfterBaby #FitnessMotivation #FitMommas #FitMom #Inspiration #FitMomsOfInstagram #PostPartumBody #FirstTimeMom.

One user posted an image of herself kneeling on the beach with short shorts and a sweater. The caption read:

> number one BIGGEST mistake when looking for help in your journey [is] copying what someone else is doing "oh, sally ate oats for breakfast, chicken and broccoli for lunch and dinner and hard boiled eggs for a snack and worked out 6 days a week and lost 15lbs, so I should do the same" and then you do and hate everything about food and working out and still don't lose 15lbs…..🤬

The post was accompanied by the hashtags: #LifestyleCoach #MindSetShift #FitnessGoals #LifeGoals #HealthyLifestyle #BodyPositivity #LiveALifeYouLove.

In summary, most users who dare to disclose these intimate body-related journeys and struggles are white, seemingly cis, straight, young, abled-bodied men and women who have very strictly (and successfully) abided by body disciplining instructions and narrow ideologies of what a body can and should be. These findings indicate a considerable departure from the original intention behind body positivity as a movement to disrupt white and Euro-centric logic about what constitutes a "good" body. By corollary bodies of difference either dare less to disclose, are fearful of social or other repercussions, or they actively decide not to align themselves

with a movement that no longer represents, supports, or serves them.

## The absent-present

It may be that the association of body positivity with certain transformative (and mainstream) representations—visible within the previous themes—may be distasteful to more activist-oriented individuals who are keen to disrupt such associations. Certainly, in these data, particularly within the disclosure of body-related journeys, we observe a conspicuous absence of explicit images of Black, Indigenous, Person of Color, fat, thick/thicc, plus sized people, disabled people, 2SLGBTQAI+ people, aging bodies, or overall representation of non-normative bodies, and a lack of diversity in types of physical activity modalities. Our metrics indicate that one third of the total posts are of bodybuilding or powerlifting, less than one fifth include BIPOC representation, only three posts of 2S LGBTQAI+ people (all of whom were gay men), less than one sixth of the posts included body size diversity, only seven with reference to aging bodies (only two with explicit visual representation), and only two posts containing any mention of disability.

This is noteworthy, considering body positivity as a movement began because of these very embodiments and body-related politics. Upon further investigation, we noticed that some racialized women would post within this #BodyPositivity sphere, but not with images of their bodies. For example, one post was of a zoomed-in photograph of a smart watch. The caption read:

> Your girl, Sam, got all her steps in on this Sunday. I must say I'm very proud of myself 👩🏾. It's been a struggle recently. But today I got it in, all while enjoying myself with my Sonshine at the zoo!! In the words of Ice Cube… today was a good day 🥰

When looking through her accompanying hashtags (e.g., #BlackPodcast #BlackGirlMagic #BlackGirlsDoYoga #BlackGirlsWorkout #BodyPositivity #PlusSize) we realized the user was a Black woman. Another similar post had an image of a pink background with text reading, "Love yourself enough to: feed your body with real food, find time to exercise, give yourself time to rest, cut off bad habits." The caption said, "Self-love is not just an abstract concept. Take action today to nourish your body and soul." The post included the hashtag #BlackWomenHealth and the user account was a non-profit wellness lounge tailored for BIPOC women to help mitigate health disparities. This, again, is another example with no explicit visual display or representation of BIPOC. It is difficult to speculate as to the unarticulated motivations of post creators such as this one, but we suggest that all such

choices are inevitably infused with body politics, and specifically the systematic oppression of Black female bodies. Perhaps choosing to not represent their bodies explicitly is tied to a structural tendency for BIPOC women to be either invisible OR hyper-visible and represented in stereotyped and commodified ways (23).

## Consuming positivity

Another significant trend within our data was that more than one quarter of the posts (38/141) included either a direct URL link to a product or service or a hashtag linking to an obvious product or service. For many, this included links to workout clothing (e.g., primarily sports bras, leggings, and swimwear).

One example includes an image of a young woman, blonde hair in braids and sitting on what appears to be a park picnic bench, measuring out some protein powder into a small scoop. Looking at the scoop and not the camera, she is wearing black leggings and a red sports bra-like top. The caption reads: "RED-y for a workout? [tagged another user] we are with you babe! Wearing the Kiwi Cross Back top in red 🥝 Shop online now 🛒 [with URL embedded]. The hashtags continue the sales pitch, reading: #KissMyPeachSwimwear #Bikini #BikiniBody #BikiniInspo #BikiniGirl #BikiniBabes #BodyPositivity #EveryBodyIsABikiniBody #Bikiniszn.

The idea, as we interpret it, is for the audience to purchase and thus emulate either the body depicted in the image itself OR the apparent empowerment being exemplified within the post/poster's body. Relatedly, protein powder and other nutritional supplements also featured heavily, particularly in the posts depicting bodybuilders, wherein #BodyPositivity would be mentioned in the same hashtag list as #PhysiqueFreak, #FitnessMotivation, and the like.

Also present were clinics selling aesthetic services, which mention #BodyPositivity in the same breath as various surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures focused on reshaping the 'problem' or non-normative body (e.g., #BodySculpting #BodyContouring #SkinTighteningTreatment #TummyTuckSurgery #BrazilianButtLift #Liposuction). Such posts are thinly veiled references to the idea that we all have problematic bodies (though, of course, some more than others) that require investment in the efforts of professionals to help to contain, control, and even create the supposed ideal body (which, once achieved/purchased, one could presumably be positive about).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, personal trainers and small gym owners featured heavily here. Indeed, the "count" could well be higher in that we did not include general references to personal training (e.g., where it said #PersonalTrainer, or #GymName, but it was not clear whether the post was driven by the trainer

or the gym, or just cited by the user of the service). We also did not include (in this count) the several instances where workout descriptions and/or demonstrations were posted, unless the reader was also encouraged to sign up for a larger "program" or service offered by the poster/trainer.

One example of this type of post includes an image of a dark-haired, tanned, toned woman who has one foot up on a weight bench, and is performing a bicep curl. The accompanying text is rife with affirmations:

> Believe in yourself and all that you are⚡
> Know that there is something inside you that is GREATER than any obstacle!!
> Train with a fire inside you and achieve your goals 🩸
> It only takes one spark to light a fire inside you, what's your spark?
> Click in the link in our BIO to come try 7 days of Unlimited classes.

The hashtags accompanying #BodyPositivity on this post underline the integral role of this particular gym in helping to shape a body worthy of being positive about: #CircuitTraining #FitnessJourney #FitnessGoals #LightYourFire #InstaFit #NotAGymButACommunity.

Other posts of this ilk used similar language and imagery, depicting an individual engaged in movement—usually strength training—or flexing their seemingly "hard-earned" muscles in a mirror selfie. Bodybuilders were frequently at the forefront in these posts, whereby personal trainer(s) demonstrated the product that their expertise could help to create, with an accompanying URL to purchase their training program. Here, #BodyTransformation was used more than once immediately alongside #BodyPositivity—a jarringly ironic juxtaposition.

Less aesthetically focused bodywork services were also present within the collected posts, with massage therapy being the predominant example. These practices were being marketed as a form of self-care, part of a larger body project that includes a responsibility to invest in your own wellness: #Massage #MassageTherapy #Spa #Relax #Wellness #Beauty #MassageTherapist #Health #Selfcare #Relaxation #Fitness #DeepTissueMassage #SportsMassage #Healing #Therapy #HealthyLifestyle.

The implication is that you must consume (and spend!) on these bodywork services in order to be positive about your body. The commodification of wellness is readily apparent in these data, broaching a wide range of products and services and perhaps best exemplified within the posts created by wellness coaches. Citing self-love via bodily practices (upon which they can advise!), these coaches used a range of hashtags and affirmational quotations to call the reader to action, "to nourish your body and soul." This is particularly insidious because at first glance, it largely aligns with the original messages of the

body positivity movement. For example, one such post features the text, "Healthy is an outfit that looks good on everybody," alongside the caption: "There is no one healthy shape, clothing size, weight, or age – everyone's version of a healthy body is different and equally valid." The accompanying image, however, is once again a toned/slim, white, blonde, and seemingly able-bodied cis-appearing woman looking downward and wearing a sports bra, weight-lifting gloves, and headphones around her neck.

Again, the message is that we can all be positive about our bodies, but doing so requires engagement in individualized and morally laden health practices including plenty of movement/activity, balanced nutrition, recommended amounts of sleep, etc. In so doing, we have the best chance of achieving happiness and are able (enlightened?) to "#LiveALifeYouLove." Regardless of whether this is true (for some) or not, it is evident that what started out as a social movement pushing for inclusivity and body acceptance is now one characterized by an imperative to try to attain the ideal body through consumption and discipline (#Hustle). Most important to note here is that consumption of the material goods associated with feeling positive about one's body—clothing, nutrition, exercise, massage, etc. —is contingent on structural and systemic parameters like economics, time, and resources which are well-documented to be inequitably distributed on the basis of race, class, gender, ability, and the intersections thereof (28–30, 33).

## Disrupting normative body positivity posts

It is worth noting that there were some posts (albeit a minority) in our sample that functioned to resist or interrupt the coopted body positivity and physical activity movement on Instagram. These posts disrupt some of the normative content or even interrogate it. This includes difference affirming images, captions, and hashtags, as well as race, body size, age, and physical activity diversity. A common trend in these posts was a focus on movement being for enjoyment rather than changing/altering/disciplining the body.

These five posts helped disrupt the normative content in the #BodyPositivity sphere by providing alternative perspectives and imagery that may even have a provocative effect. For example, one post had a gray-scale image of an older adult white woman in a white bikini, standing with a proud pose, hands on her hips, stern facial expression and eyes looking into the camera. The caption said, "The female body was never supposed to be smooth, firm, and flawless. It was designed to create life, to host life, to feed life…" and the user is an "African dance and fitness studio" owner. Another post was of an image of a racially and body size diverse group of people laughing and posing in front of the mirror in a Zumba studio.

The third post was a video of a curvy racialized woman demonstrating a high knees running on the spot exercise with the caption, "I get very conscious about how bad I look while running or jumping others must be making fun of me by saying see one panda is jumping …I've overcome from body shaming 😄 I love how it looks how huge it is, after all it's mine and we love each other 😄😄😎😎🤸🤸", and #BodyPositivity was paired with fat-affirming hashtags #CurvyWoman and #CurvyAndFit.

Another post advertised how to exercise for joy rather than fear, guilt, or shame. A series of five images was posted. The first image was of a white thick/thicc young girl smiling at the camera. She had a tattoo on her right arm, a messy ponytail blowing in the wind, and was holding yellow dumbbells in both hands. The second-third images were of four young-middle aged women/gender ambivalent people with arms locked and laughing. The fourth image was zoomed in on a young (plus-sized) woman's face as she smiled at the camera. The last image was of a thick/thicc middle-aged to older-adult woman outside on the ground on a yoga mat stretching her back and thighs.

The last example in this theme is a post with the juxtaposition between two images: one of a white baby's naked legs and baby fat rolls and the other of a young adult white woman in a bathing suit revealing fat rolls and cellulite on her legs. The caption said, "To which we say, if we love the one on the left, then you can absolutely, positively love the one on the right too 🤍". This post invites the viewer to question why fat is seen as adorable on babies but is approached with disdain when on adults (especially adult women).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our study supports findings and assertions that the body positivity movement is multi-faceted and deeply divided (62). Overall, we found that within our sample of body positivity posts depicting or referencing physical activity, there was a predominant representation of (now) lean, white, cis-gender individuals, many of whom used bodybuilding as their primary physical activity modality. Along with this finding was a conspicuous absence of fat embodiments, BIPOC, disabled people, 2SLGBTQAI+ people, or aging bodies. With just a few exceptions, the Instagram posts we found linked #BodyPositivity to physical movement/exercise/healthy lifestyle to a very narrow visual field that was overwhelmingly white, visibly physically able, and demonstrating strength by appearance and function. In our initial pull of 500 posts there was a mixture of fashion and physical activity related posts. In our observation, the physical activity posts were particularly problematic in representation. In the context of fitness and movement motivation-type posts, the use of #BodyPositivity is used to reify status-quo, idealizations of white bodies, coopting the more inclusive Black body positivity

movement. In some instances, it appeared that users somewhat haphazardly applied #BodyPositivity to their posts alongside, in some cases, dozens of other body/fitness related hashtags without acknowledging what the visual presence of whiteness and physical able-ness does in its occupation of space where the Black body positivity movement started.

With a few exceptions, what most of the posts we located fail to acknowledge, let alone refuse, are the structures that cause oppression of non-normative bodies. From an intersectionality lens, this is problematic because it works to make light of how the visual "in-club" or the gold-standard of fitness—the array of sculpted, light-skinned bodies—ignoring the sentiment of a movement meant to sit in critique of a system that oppresses bodies outside of this norm. An occupation of #BodyPositivity by the visual status quo, where previously absent, erases from where the movement began. In some cases, this re-territorialization of social media presence works toward elite capture or the promotion of capitalist ventures that privilege just a few (63–67) deepening the division between who is able to be represented as body positive and minoritized groups who started #BodyPositivity. In other ways it fails to address the tension between #BodyPositivity and potentially harmful practices (e.g., diet culture, disciplining the body) to attain specific body standards and how much more unrealistic it becomes for individuals who fit outside of the standard template to connect with #BodyPositivity as it has been claimed and reframed. The coopting of #BodyPositivity in this way changes the movement that once had a strong connection to Black activists and supported by other activists of color to that which is applicable to a few. #BodyPositivity instead of being a space for opening up an inclusion of all through allyship and celebration became, "reduced to an identity, not a movement" [(68), p. 6].

As a field, leisure studies has used inclusion as a guise for leisure being perceived as always "good" when it is marketed as "leisure for all" (57). Despite calls to adopt intersectionality more widely in leisure studies (69), efforts for inclusion consistently occlude the fact that leisure and leisure time is often systemically out of reach for individuals who are disabled, of color, old, fat, or queer [e.g., (70–73)]. While it has always been necessary to critique the exclusion or inclusion of individuals based on race, since recent and widespread awakenings to race it is more vital to describe what the intrusion of whiteness or exclusion of Blackness (and other communities of color) does to a movement based on optics, particularly while a greater proportion of people are becoming more sensitized to the damages that occur from these taken-for-granted relations of dominance. Based on hashtags, Instagram can give us a good sense of whether it is an intentional opening up to include folx outside the initial spurring of the cause, band wagoning, or other intentions to be seen through affiliations with #BodyPositivity (i.e., allyship) that is occurring. The Blackness of the #BodyPositivity movement simultaneously resisted dominations of white-body as the default beautiful-body while also making the Black body visible at multiple intersections (12, 69, 71). Like many other cultural

spaces, including those of leisure (i.e., music, art, dance, fashion, celebration), we are seeing a familiar migration of whiteness into #BodyPositivity, what was once a Black-centered movement to celebrate all-shaped Black bodies. Given the historicities of the various movements we discuss, race is central to the analysis of intersectionality and body positivity given their origins in Black feminism. Our data appears to take up race in ways that "legitimizes" fitness through alignments with whiteness and slimness. We believe it is necessary to critique leisure studies as being a predominately white institution that has conventionally failed to critique race by making bodies raceless through their emphasis on disability and class. It is critical that movements within disability, queer, and fat studies (and more) recognize their entrenchment in white supremacy. For example, queer inclusion tends to re-center whiteness and preclude Black queer experiences [e.g., (74)]; disability studies has "whitewashed" disability [e.g., (75)]; and fat studies has a tradition of centring white experience irrespective of the racist origins of fatphobia and "obesity science" (20, 21).

In this instance, #BodyPositivity has become another arena of appropriation where privileges are experienced very differently between person to person. Even the now-desirable "curvy" or thick/thicc body was born out of the need to recognize, represent, and celebrate Black bodies that were too often made invisible or worthless because of sizeism (16) and racism (20). The mainstreaming of thickness/thiccness (76) in itself is a maneuver to coopt a movement that privileges and promotes white voluptuousness over Black thickness, and the accompanying practices for body augmentation needed to acquire the various iterations of body ideals. The incessant and historical erasure of Black fat activists' radical and global lens on oppression is an integral aspect of body positivity's gentrification. Both body positivity and intersectionality share a similar genealogy, and we must confront and resist the cooptation and whitening of both movements. We observed that most studies on #BodyPositivity (particularly about body image) did not recognize the rich Black, fat, and queer history of that movement. This glossing over (or blatant erasure) has the insidious effect of re-asserting white supremacy through operations of ignorance. When *doing* intersectionality research within sport, physical activity, and leisure, we call for researchers to honor this history by bringing it to the fore and by doing so, seek a social justice-oriented lens in their work on intersectionality.

Feminist organizing in digital spaces, such as Instagram, has the potential for activism, resistance, and visibility, but may also continue to be shaped by unequal power dynamics (62). Movements such as #MeToo (about sexual harassment) and #TimesUp (a campaign to end gender-based discrimination in the workplace), turned into "real world" activism. However, this is concomitant with problematic sexist, racist, classist, sanist (and other "isms"), that subvert the original intent of some movements or, the blurring of boundaries of various feminisms (and postfeminist sensibilities). As Banet-Weiser

[(53), p. 11] points out, the "feminist" content that is likely to gain traction on Instagram is that which poses the least challenge to established heteronormative, patriarchal, gendered, racial and classed structures. It may be that Instagram, as a platform, constrains (and even suppresses) less palatable instances or frames for feminism, instead amplifying images and voices that align with (rather than deviate from, or protest against) the prevailing norm (77). However, given its reach and user demographic, how Instagram is used (and potentially subverted) by activists and other users alike warrants attention. With respect to the body positivity movement and its association with physical activity, this matters because whose bodies are visible/displayed as worthy of being positive, while doing or discussing physical activity, filters down into messages about who CAN do activity, how you should look while doing it, and what you should buy to get the most out of it. If "mainstream" body positivity continues to dominate the social media sphere, it is not a stretch to say that this is de-motivating at best, and discouragingly exclusive at worst for those not represented therein. Furthermore, the current body positivity's detachment from the original Black fat-centered radical movement functions to re-center whiteness and white supremacy, in potentially dangerous and insidious ways masked as "a good thing" (i.e., body positive). Thus, we echo other feminist scholars' [e.g., (1, 5)] call to re-center race in intersectionality research, which includes honoring the Black feminist and social justice history of the movement and interrogating the reproduction of white supremacy across social movements.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

MG conceptualized the original idea of the study and contributed to analysis and writing of the manuscript. KB assisted in conceptualizing the study, contributed to the study design, analysis, and writing of the manuscript. KL assisted with analysis and writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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# Activism for intersectional justice in sport sociology: Using intersectionality in research and in the classroom

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This perspective paper considers what scholars and teachers of sport sociology can (un)learn by applying the concept of intersectionality in research and in the classroom. I focus on contemporary forms of activism in the context of sport in the United States (U.S.) and demonstrate intersectionality's utility through three examples of athlete activism from the past 10 years led by sports people. Although each example is focused on a particular axis of difference and domination, such as sexual harassment (read: gender) and Black Lives Matter (read: race), I show that the cause at stake is always already intersectional. This has consequences for the field of sport studies/sport sociology; in engaging in intersectional research, sport sociologists and researchers alike can inform policymakers in sport in the decision-making process. In the final part of the paper, I offer insight from my positionality as a graduate student through reflection on how I—and my colleagues—might understand our role within the "matrix of domination" that characterizes both our subject and our field. As novice sport scholars, graduate students can translate the theoretical meanings and purpose of intersectionality into lived reality by being intentional in what and how we teach and research. In this case, I suggest that intersectional justice in sport does not just mean on the track/field/court; it can also mean in the classroom, thereby expanding our notion of what activism "in sport" is and looks like.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality, activism in sport, sport sociology, graduate students, athlete activism, methodology, teaching

## Introduction

Standing on the podium at the summer 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, U.S. shot-putter Raven Saunders raised her arms into an "X" shape above her head after the silver medal was placed around her neck. Her tacit and peaceful yet resounding protest represented the "intersection where all who are oppressed meet" (1). As a member of the Black and LGBTQIA community, as well as an avid advocate for mental health, Saunders used her "X" to symbolize the cultural, political, and social minoritized positions many are forced to occupy: "For me, just being who I always aspired to be, to be able to be me and not apologize for it…[and] show the younger generation that no matter what they tell you, no matter how many boxes they try to fit you in, you can be you" [(2), para. 6].

Saunders' very peaceful and very public protest represents a generation of fourth wave athlete activists who are deeply cognizant of and attuned to the sociopolitical

climate in which they compete (3). Many of this generation of athletes–both professional and collegiate–hold multiple minoritized identities [e.g., (4)]. As a result, athletes speaking out on systemic issues within and/or beyond sport are forced to confront the very issues they seek to eradicate (i.e., sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.). Moments of calls to action by sportspeople in recent years, like Saunders', have reenergized the collective global movement of Black Lives Matter and galvanized conversations across geographical borders about anti-racism, including the ways in which race as a system of classification and difference-making operates. The power intersectionality holds as a concept guiding methodological and analytical studies emerge from its ability to recognize how social and cultural processes of domination and difference-making are mutually constitutive.

Saunders' story as a Black American athlete who identifies as a queer woman is unique and not uncommon. However, the quick dismissal of a story like hers *is* common in academic and non-academic spaces. There lies a myriad of questions (and possible answers) as to what led to Saunders' decision to peacefully protest at this specific moment at this specific event in the way that she did and what it may mean. What can we learn from Saunders' story as an Olympian and her journey to get there in relation to what it means to live "at the intersection"? What barriers did she face and what obstacles did she overcome in sport as a person living "at the intersection"? In what ways can her experiences reveal the *intersecting oppressions* that Black queer women are often forced to confront in a system that privileges whiteness, maleness, and straightness (5–9)?

In the aftermath of first wave feminism that focused exclusively on the needs and wants of white women in the U.S., feminists of color argued that social equity does not mean giving the same to everyone; rather, it means acknowledging the diversity of experiences of women in U.S. society and meeting the individual needs and rights of different groups of women accordingly (10). In other words, a multidimensional way of being and living requires a multidimensional framework of inquiry (6, 11, 12).

Importantly, there is *no hierarchy of oppression* (13). First wave feminism intentionally hierarchized oppression by treating one form of discrimination as more important than other forms. In other words, sexism preceded racism, classism, ableism, etc., thus first wave feminism focused solely on white women's issues. The sexism *and* racism *and* classism *and* ableism, etc., experienced by women of color was consequently discounted. In perhaps the first to do so, Sojourner Truth captured these contradictions in her 1851 speech "Ain't I A Woman?" Here, Truth (14) expounded the nature of her experiences in enslavement as a Black woman, enforcing the realities of racist *and* sexist practices to her majority white audience.

This perspective paper thus considers what sport sociologists can (un)learn by applying intersectionality in research and in the classroom. To demonstrate this, I focus on three examples of athlete activism from the past 3 years led by sportswomen in

the U.S. Although each example is focused on a particular axis of difference and domination, my aim is to show that the cause at stake is always already intersectional. This has consequences for how the root cause of social (in)justice is explained by sports sociologists, coupled with how we can encourage sports policymakers to respond. In the final part, I offer insight from my positionality as a graduate student, reflecting on how I and my colleagues might understand our role within the "matrix of domination" that characterizes both our subject and our field. I suggest that intersectional justice in sport does not just mean on the track/field/court; it can also mean in the classroom, thereby expanding our notion of what activism "in sport" is and looks like.

## Intersectionality in sport sociology

Intersectionality's utility rests on dispelling oversimplifications or generalizations of a particular group of people and their lived experiences. Western patriarchal society is built upon various systems that interact to constitute a person's everyday experiences, treatment, and livelihood (i.e., racism, sexism, capitalism, ableism, heterosexism). These systems do not operate independently from one another. Intersectionality is a way to examine such interlocking nature of these systems and the ways in which they may simultaneously converge and/or diverge (11). Black women living in the U.S. experience sexism, racism, etc., often at the same time; the nature of that experience, however, differs among individual Black women (6, 11). That is, systems of oppression are not experienced in the same way. Intersectionality is a "complementary tool to other forms of knowledge for combating white racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, elitism, ageism, xenophobia, ableism, and ethnocentrism in qualitative research practices and paradigms" [(15), p. 14]. In this case, learning about and listening to individuals whose lives are lived at the intersection in sport serves as an integral, productive way to move forward with sport sociological research and teaching for intersectional social justice.

To think intersectionally is thus to think about how lives are impacted through a prism of multiple systems of oppression as they interact with one another to create "effects." This requires critical thinking about why and how the livelihoods of individuals living at the intersections, like Raven Saunders', are impacted in more ways than one in certain contexts, as well as how and where dynamics of power show up (or do not) (16). To examine the activism of athletes–who and how–and the effects of said activism–legal, social, and/or organizational consequences faced by athlete–is one way to go about facilitating this critical thinking and encouraging intersectional analysis into the classroom by examining the meanings made and sociological implications of such activism. This in turn challenges established ideas of what is known, enables deeper understandings of what

is yet to be known, and the impact of such on the knower (i.e., the athletes).

Because sport, culture, and society are deeply intertwined to the point of inseparability [e.g., (17)], sport sociology looks to examine the meaning of sport in/to society, and how sport–including physical culture, including dance and fitness (18), and sport organizations (19)–operates as a tool of socialization, as well as a barrier to inclusion–specifically, the ways through which sport facilitates structures of power[1] and the impact this has on its participants. Accordingly, examining sport through a sociological lens allows deeper understanding into the relationship between sport, cultural ideology, and politics. More critically, the function of sport in western society depends on who you ask: from a sociological perspective, the operationalization and purpose sport is complex, often enmeshed in larger institutional practices that serve a certain purpose for a certain people. As a critical framework, intersectionality allows for in-depth exploration into why and how power and difference-making operate, and what contexts and categories are unmarked or unaccounted for. Such exploration leads the way to revealing solutions by filling in necessary gaps. Intersectionality's relevance in the study of sport thus lies in its ability to reflect the complexities of living within systems of power that help certain groups of people in some contexts and hurt another group in other contexts since "no one is ever just privileged or oppressed" [(16), p. 133].

When written and presented in a way that is accessible for all (20, 21), sport sociology can and should *add nuanced reality* that informs sport policy and social practice (22). This way of studying sport has the potential to transform how people experience sport and how sport experiences people. As Newman (22) argues:

> To add reality is not necessarily to present one's politics as science. Rather, it is to dig deeper and to reveal new associations—to produce new gatherings—which might reveal how old associations are at work in the social world; to reveal the political physics of the hyperobject that is sport (p. 272).

A growing number of studies across a range of topics/issues in sport elicits the in-depth knowledge and meaning making possible when intersectionality is used as methodological and theoretical frameworks [e.g., (23)]. To study sport critically, then, means to examine the inequities it (re)produces and

enables as an institution that was historically created by and for white men. Rooted intellectually in Black feminism (11), intersectionality has made major contributions to these kinds of critical studies; what is known and can be known about the role and impact of sport on the experiences of women and minoritized communities is foundational to intersectional research and teaching.

Intersectional research reveals, for example, the impact of race and gender on the representation, opportunity, and experiences of Black women in sport (24–28), the role media plays in constructions of women athletes of color (29), the complexities of sports coaching (30, 31), the homogenizing nature of white feminist scholarship of sport and leisure (32), and stories of athletes with disabilities [e.g., (33)]. Further, a handful of sport sociology research that employs intersectionality is embedded in activism for social justice through its explicit aid in calls to action for inclusive, empowering practice within and beyond sport. For instance, intersectionality's use in youth sports policy and intervention for social inclusion and emancipation (34), intersectionality's purpose in exposing sport as a structure that contributes to racialization and economic injustice (35), and the benefit of intersectional research to understand the enabling factors for women in leadership positions in sport (36).

Utilizing intersectionality as a methodological and analytical framework in research design and practice would benefit the field of sociology of sport in ways that would deepen understanding and broaden knowledge about the interactions of, and contexts around, systems of power and privilege (16). For example, intersectionality could reveal valid and valuable information about not just how and why activism is occurring and by whom, but also the importance of when and where and why of that activism. These contextual elements provide a gateway into discovering the intricate relational, non-hierarchal, and non-linear workings of history, power, and privilege (16). As such, I consider intersectionality as system-centered (16); the interactions of systems of power and privilege that constitute the lives of individuals who are marginalized and privileged are processes that are "fully interactive, historically co-determining, and complex" (p. 129). Systems of power rely on the negative meanings society allocates to and reproduces in articulations of difference (11); to be perceived and thus categorized as different is to be lumped together as the 'other' to the point of assuming everyone in that group experiences sexism or racism, etc., in the same way. Yet, the "social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; instead it can be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction" [(11), p. 1242]. Moreover, grouping people by their social identities can lead to ignoring intragroup differences (11). For this reason, I see intersectionality as less group-centered (which can fetishize the study of "difference") as it is system-centered. In other words, questioning how and why and by whom "difference" is made,

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1  At this time of writing, I conceptualize "system" and "structure" as interchangeable, since both imply formidable scaffolding of organization, categorization, and treatment of individuals and institutions across the U.S. That's not to say they are definitively the same, however. Here, the terms structure/system are used in a connotative, rather than a denotative, sense.

and the impact this difference-making has on individuals on a structural, political, and representational level (11).

Intersectionality's relevance thus lies in its ability to reflect the complexities of living amidst such systems of power, and the operationalization of these systems in terms of helping some individuals in certain contexts and hurting many in other contexts–or "thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others" [(11), p. 1297]. Ultimately, employing intersectionality in sport sociology research can expose inequities, the realities of those inequities, and possible solutions that may not be otherwise discoverable.

## Examples of athlete activism that reveal intersectional causes

Activism can be defined as intentional action that challenges the status quo and aims toward positive social change and equity (37). Reflecting the heterogeneity of actions to achieve a certain goal in life, activism is not confined to one way of doing; there are indeed a myriad of ways to 'do' activism in and through sport. In what follows, I provide three examples of athlete activism from the past 10 years led by sportswomen. Because the lived experiences of all women in sport are always constituted by the systems of power that shape them (5, 7, 38), focusing on sportswomen's activism illuminates the reality that the cause at stake is always intersectional. Again, since "no one is only privilege or only oppressed" [(16), p. 133], stories like these are a way of underlining this complex reality.

### Megan Rapinoe

In September 2016, U.S. national women's soccer player, Megan Rapinoe, took a knee during a pre-game playing of the national anthem in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, former National Football League player. This very peaceful, very public protest was Rapinoe's nod in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, specifically police brutality against people of color in the U.S. Given the centrality of nationalism in U.S. soccer [e.g., (39)], this form of activism was perceived as unpatriotic through the refusal to conform to American ideals; therefore, Rapinoe's kneeling garnered significant backlash from sports fans online, specifically on social media [e.g., (40)], and from the National Women's Soccer League (USNWSL)–so much so that new polices prohibiting future kneeling were created in the aftermath of Rapinoe's protest.

Rapinoe has never been shy about speaking up for causes she believes in. For example, Rapinoe channeled a vibrant blue, red, and white suit accompanied by an unmissable sparkling red handbag bearing the words, "in gay we trust" at last year's MET Gala. Here, Rapinoe, through creative and personal style, capitalized on her social status as an athlete at a major cultural event to raise awareness for LGQBT+ rights within and beyond

sport. She was also a focal leader of the soccer team's case for equal pay to the courts and won (41).

This demonstrates, in part, her recognition of the platform from which she speaks (i.e., professional U.S. sport) and her continual courage in challenging the status quo and the powers that be.

Speaking to her kneeling during the national anthem, Rapinoe reflects on her identity and experience as a gay woman in the U.S.: "I know what it means to look at the flag and not have it protect all of your liberties. It was something small that I could do and something that I plan to keep doing in the future and hopefully spark some meaningful conversation around it" (42). Although Rapinoe was kneeling for Black Lives Matter, the cause of such kneeling stems from the complex realities of living as a person with multiple minoritized identities–in this case, as a gay sportswoman–due to sexism and homonegativism[2] (9, 43). In other words, Rapinoe's activism is intersectional because the relations between these systems affect her life intersectionally (16). The purpose of her protest was to challenge a single system of difference-making (i.e., racism), yet the cause and consequence of the protest accounts for multiple systems of difference-making and the interaction of such systems (i.e., sexism, homonegativism, capitalism).

In the context of the U.S., Rapinoe's whiteness affords her a privilege that her teammates of color and athletes of color in other sports are not[3]. For instance, in Kaepernick's case, kneeling during the national anthem garnered significant attacks online on his identities as a Black man; conversely for Rapinoe, kneeling called for questions and comments around athletes' role in sport and the larger society (40). Although Kaepernick and Rapinoe were both attacked online, the frequency and content of attack was not the same. In other words, Kaepernick's racial and gender identity was under persistent direct scrutiny, whereas Rapinoe's identities as a white gay sportswoman were not directly attacked. A reason for this may be that whiteness is the unmarked category wherein the "more powerful are defined as the normative standard" [(16), p. 133]. Rapinoe's activism was not perceived as threatening or exasperating as Kaepernick's because, in that moment, racism and white supremacy worked together to create different experiences for and treatment of the athletes. In this context, Rapinoe protested without any real threat to her life, unlike Kaepernick (44). Her intersecting identities mean that different forms of discrimination and privilege are always in

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2  The term homonegativism (9, 43) places more accountability on people than to merely excuse their discriminatory attitudes and behavior. Homo*phobia* implies an irrational fear of people who identify within the LGBQT+ community; homonegativism describes purposeful, not irrational, negative ideologies and behaviors, thus encompassing the social and cultural contexts that facilitate such behaviors.

3  Race is just one structure of privilege; Rapinoe is also an able-bodied successful athlete, but for this case I focus on race, specifically whiteness, given the issue she is protesting is racism.

process; the interaction of these systems that largely constitute and shape those identities (i.e., racism, sexism, homonegativism) mediate reactions to and meanings of her explicit activism toward a specific cause.

## Hailey Danz

In many cases, visibility and representation can serve as forms of activism wherein someone's presence in sport *is* the protest. U.S. Paralympian Hailey Danz, who won silver in paratriathlon at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, feels "for the first time in [her] life…proud to be gay" (45). Writing about her story of self-discovery and affirmation, Danz penned an essay on Team USA website:

> I know there are a lot of people who say that sexuality has no place in sport; that the press should stop sensationalizing who we love and simply focus on the game. To those people let me say this: it was by seeing openly gay athletes that I've been able to work through my shame and insecurities and accept who I am [(45), para. 16].

Although not a direct challenge to the powers that be nor, like Rapinoe, an action that many may consider a threat to American nationalism, stories like Danz's that are available to the public (and will be for long time on account of the internet) and written by athletes who are marginalized in a multitude of ways demonstrate the power of sport as a site for cultural visibility and representation. The inclusion of voices like Danz's in professional sport paves the way to reimagine the meaning and role of sport in identity formation, identity mediation, and, at times, identity negation (46).

That said, it is no secret that sport is an institution that privileges able-bodiedness [e.g., (47)]. Progress has been made relative to access to and participation in sport for differently-abled bodies. Problems persist, however, including stereotypes around and lack of holistic inclusion and care of disabled athletes in sport and physical activity, which is indicative of wider society's treatment and attitude toward people who have a disability (48, 49). Moreover, the centrality of the empowerment rhetoric by leaders in and organizers of elite disability sport (such as the Paralympics) implies that athletes with cognitive and/or physical disabilities are not empowered anywhere–that they are in constant influx of disempowerment (50).

Danz's explicit activism for LGBQT+ inclusion and rights cannot be divorced from her experiences as a gay female athlete with a physical disability. In this instance, multiples systems of power (i.e., ableism, sexism, and homonegativism) converge and interact with one another to create a process of difference-making. Danz paradoxically uses the very thing that often marginalizes her (i.e., sport) as a platform from which to speak about the ways sport is integral in the sociocultural formation and affirmation of people's identities. Seeing "openly gay athletes" in elite sport as inspirational and using this representation as a tool for self-acceptance infers that seeing straight athletes in elite sport is the norm. Moreover, like Rapinoe, Danz's whiteness is key to her story of activism, including how it is told (i.e., positive narrative framing in sport media) and how it is received (i.e., little to no direct attack on her character and life).

## Naomi Osaka

Before the 2021 French Open began, then-world number two Naomi Osaka revealed to the world her intentional absence from any press before or after matches, citing the lack of consideration for athletes' mental health and her personal "long bouts of depression" (51). Similar to Danz, although this was not an explicit action against a particular social inequity, it *was* an action that challenges the status quo and inadvertently called for meaningful change. In refusing to speak to press, Osaka disrupted the norms of professional sport culture by prioritizing her mental wellbeing. Accordingly, Osaka stood up for herself and athletes like her who so often are told to "shut up and do their job."

Osaka is not the first to decline press conferences and interviews (52); she is, however, one of the first among a new generation of professional athletes to leverage their sociopolitical power in sport (3). In this case, Osaka unapologetically supported people and causes close to her heart, especially for the communities of which she is a part. For example, during the 2020 U.S. Open amid the COVID-19 pandemic, she wore seven masks for her seven matches, each of which bore the names of unarmed Black Americans murdered by armed law enforcement. This peaceful protest demonstrated Osaka's discursive power as an athlete who holds multiple identities (53).

Osaka's activism for mental health is a by-product of the interactions of various systems of difference-making in sport and the wider society in which she competes, specifically toward Black women (6). Racism and sexism are rife for a Black woman in the U.S.; this is exacerbated in sport culture by constructions and (re)productions of hegemonic white femininity (54–56). That said, Osaka's age, ability, and socio-economic status no doubt warrants privilege in most, if not all contexts; these markers often mean that when Osaka engages in activism–whether direct or indirect–more power is afforded to her than others, and, ultimately, her message is heard (Calow, 2021). The interactions among and across other markers (i.e., race and gender) also mean, however, that her activism is sometimes met with criticism, particularly through media (57).

Moreover, to openly advocate for mental health as a Black sportswoman is to directly challenge common expectations about the role of the athlete in society. The seemingly rebellious act of prioritizing wellbeing over performance and profit–to effectively put oneself at the expense of others' entertainment–is to actively disrupt the dominant cultural narrative that athletes

can and should "do it all." Although the single issue at stake is about professional athletes' mental health, the cause is multi-issued about the livelihoods, treatment, and experiences of Black women in sport and beyond.

## What we can (un)learn from learning about intersectionality

Looking to the examples of athlete activism noted above, using intersectionality as a mode of critical analysis allows a recognition of and points toward the intricate realities and processes of what it can mean to engage in activism for social justice in sport, including the nuanced power dynamics that constitute said activism (58). For example, in Rapinoe's case, in what ways did Rapinoe's whiteness contribute to the reception of her activism for Black Lives Matter? What role do systems of difference-making, such as sexism and homonegativism, play in informing the causes and consequences of Rapinoe's activism? These are the kinds of critically evocative questions that intersectionality brings to the forefront as a methodological and analytical framework. Moreover, these examples of activism can be brought into classroom as part of a pedagogical premise rooted in intersectionality. In Osaka's case, for example, centering her voice and examining her activism valorizes a women of color's experience as a form knowledge-production (59). That is, a key action step teachers can take is asking students to unpack taken-for-granted sporting events/moments that expose the realities of discriminatory systems: What is going here? Who is making the decision and why? Who is impacted and how? In what ways can we address the inequity? What policies would you create/dismantle? Etc.

Choosing to teach, let alone to learn, about intersectionality is not an easy undertaking, especially in a predominantly white institution with majority first-generation students who most likely have never had to think about what it means to be minoritized in a multitude of ways. Like most things in life, to teach and learn about intersectionality is an ongoing, messy process. Nonetheless, the purpose of employing and embodying intersectionality in the classroom is to guide students in their critical understanding of the workings of systems of difference-making, in turn empowering them to become engaged thinkers and doers beyond the classroom in their local and global communities. The choice to undertake the teaching of intersectionality within a field whose history is unidimensional (i.e., the exclusion of non-white voices and the lack of critical attention to the multidimensional issues in sport that affect individuals/athletes of color) in a classroom is in itself a form of activism; this is perhaps the first key action step teachers of sport sociology can take.

As a doctoral candidate, I teach Introduction to Women's Studies, Introduction to Ethnic Studies, and Sport and Social Justice. It is in these classes wherein learning and unlearning moments materialize for students and I. These classes have different content but the same premise: how and why and where power operates in everyday society and culture. It is through these teaching experiences and moments that my understanding about the ways through which intersectionality can be used as a critical thinking tool to approach certain topics and issues deepens. It is in the classroom where I embody intersectional justice through pedagogical practices that in turn informs what and who is the focus of my research and in teaching. For example, including work by and voices of individuals who look different to students into class weekly readings is one practice I have seen is integral to facilitating learning about the purpose of intersectionality.

I think often about the ways in which I contribute to systems of difference-making and discrimination since I largely benefit from them[4], and in what ways I can disrupt this process. Learning about intersectionality and unlearning what I have been socially and culturally conditioned to believe and think has taught me thus far that I can use my positionality for meaningful change, albeit slow, steady change. As a graduate student whose work is rooted in feminist methodology, part of my task is to translate the complex theoretical meanings and purpose of intersectionality in ways that enable undergraduate students to relate, connect, and understand so as to apply intersectionality as a mode of thinking and/or doing in their own lives through different contexts and experiences. As such, intersectional justice in sport does not just mean on the track/field/court; it can also mean in the classroom, thereby expanding the notion of what activism "in sport" is and looks like.

In research, sport sociology needs intersectionality to fill in necessary gaps of how power operates in certain everyday sporting contexts and culture–gaps that may not be filled otherwise. Sport sociologists can and should be critically attentive to what systems of difference-making are at play in a given context, who is affected (both negatively and positively or both), and how these processes and relationships can be analyzed and in turn unpacked. In so doing, sport sociologists can relay data to policymakers and decision-makers to ensure sport is a more socially just space than it stands today[5]. This is why we

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4   I am a white, Northern Irish, straight, able-bodied woman from a middle-class family. Understanding these intersecting identities is to recognize that it is possible to be objective utilizing a critical theory to analyze and teach the importance of intersectionality with vantages of power/privilege.

5   For example, the International Swimming Federation's most recent ban of transgender women athletes from elite/international competition has created an uproar among sport scholars and sportspeople alike. Emerging research in this area continues to prove the ubiquitous and varied everyday discrimination and systemic barriers trans athletes are forced to confront in their respective sporting spaces [e.g., (60–62)]. This research reveals the complex ways in which systems of difference-making operates and affects individuals living at the intersections, thereby pointing to why thinking and doing research in a multi-dimensional way matters.

need to think and do intersectionally: the kind of work we choose to do on a day-to-day basis as teachers and scholars is imperative to enhancing what we know and do not know about sport from a sociological perspective.

## Conclusion

At the 2019 Pan American Games, U.S. hammer-thrower Gwen Berry raised her fist on the podium during the national anthem, akin to Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Mexico City Games. Justifying her fist-raising, Berry claimed that the national anthem never spoke to her or people who look like her (63), placing her in the cannon of athletes who have taken it upon themselves to politicize sport in a public manner through peaceful means. As a result, Berry was banned from competing for a year and fined by the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (U.S.O.P.C), effectively rendering her a "broke Black woman" (para. 10). Meanwhile, Smith and Carlos' names were inducted into the USOPC Hall of Fame in reward for their activist efforts fifty years prior.

The cause and consequences of Berry's activism underscores why intersectionality belongs in the field of sport sociology. Intersectionality teaches us who is pushed out and why and in what they are pushed out. It legitimizes the need for marginalized voices, but also emphasizes the necessity of a system-centered approached if change is to be attained (16). For example, questioning how oppression manifests and in what contexts. In so doing, sociologists of sport can intervene in scholarship and in the classroom. That is, intersectionality can be used a research lens and has a pedagogical practice. Sport has *never not been political*; the structures of power and systems of difference-making that constitute people's lives have been and are always already embedded within sport as it stands today (64). If we are to change how sport is conceptualized, operationalized, and taught, we must utilize intersectionality to reveal what and where problems persist and how to fix them, including whose voices and knowledges are subjugated and whose are privileged (59). As Crenshaw (11) asserts, "through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these

differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (p. 1299). Most of all, the use of intersectionality in the study of sport on the premise of social justice is integral if we are to enhance the critical scope and depth of the sport sociology field [e.g., (65)]. To do so is not without risk and will not be easy. But nothing worth doing is ever easy.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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# Black women diversity leaders' perceptions of organizational inclusivity in college sports

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Select collegiate athletic departments have adopted Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Officer (ADIO) positions. ADIOs are formally tasked with the job responsibilities of creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive athletic departments, and many individuals holding the positions are Black men and women. This hermeneutic phenomenological study focused on the leadership of Black women in ADIO positions and examined how their racial and gender identity informed their perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Findings reveal that the intersecting identities of Black women are drawn upon and centered to make sense of what organizational inclusivity is. More specifically, organizational inclusivity is creating contexts that do not mirror Black women's experiences as *outsiders within* mostly White athletic departments, lived experiences entangled in systems of oppression, specifically sexism and racism (read: intersectionality), and experiences that cultivate Black feminist thought in Black women, as this consciousness is only developed through adverse realities of exclusion. Hence, Black women ADIOs' perception of organizational inclusivity is informed by their own intersectional lived experiences of exclusion in sports and society writ large.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality, Black women, college sport, diversity leaders, intersectional invisibility, inclusivity

## Introduction

Recent media depictions of Black women participating in sports (1) and representational data of Black women leading sports organizations (2) illuminate how Black womanhood is entangled in the patriarchal and racist systems (3). Sports, like many other United States institutions (e.g., housing, education, etc.), is upheld by inequitable structures and ideologies (4, 5), which heightens the raced-gendered marginalizing realities of Black women and unfortunately provides sports fans a lens for making sense of the inequities Black women experience in sports (1, 6). Consequently, sports offers a lens for studying Black women's relationship with sexist and racist structures (7). For example, Candance Story, Athletic Director of Vanderbilt University, is celebrated for being the first Black and first woman Athletic Director in the school's history and the second Black woman in the history of the commodification of big-time collegiate athletics to lead a major (read: wealthy/athletic prestige) athletic department (8). However, such an accomplishment is a striking example of Black women

navigating systems of patriarchy and racism in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) hiring practices (4, 9). Similarly, Dawn Staley, Head Coach of the University of South Carolina Women's Basketball team, earned an impressive contract extension in 2021, which states she is set to earn 22 million dollars over a seven-year period (10). Coach Staley is rightfully being paid her worth (given all she has done to uplift women's basketball), but we cannot ignore how Black women are systemically barred from attaining the head coach position in women's basketball at the Division I level (11, 12), given that Black women account for only 18% of head coach positions, while their White female counterparts account for 45% (2). Therefore, the historic and groundbreaking careers of Candance Story and Dawn Staley are not indicative of Black women in college sports due to the institutional field being a racialized (4, 9) and deeply gendered organization (13–15).

Given that Black women do not hold many positions of power in NCAA college sports administration across the three divisional levels (2), their status in an emergent collegiate sports leadership position is noteworthy. Black women are currently holding many of the novel Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Officer (ADIO) positions in Division I athletics (4, 16). An ADIO, not to be mistaken for an Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Designee [see (17)], is an administrative position *formally* tasked with the job responsibilities of leading an athletic department's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) aims (16). The adoption of ADIOs is an extension of the growing urgency extant in college sports to ensure DEI is incorporated into their organizational contexts (4, 16, 18). While these intentions are commendable, Keaton (16) argues how these aims are borne out of a desire for *legitimacy* [see (19)], as athletic departments continue to uphold ideologies of abstract liberalism and refrain from addressing how deeply embedded racial injustice is to their structures and practices (4, 20).

Moreover, given the adverse realities of some Black women college sports leaders (11, 12, 21), this scholarship is concerned with how Black women lead the charge of creating more inclusive organizations, given the institutional field (e.g., NCAA collegiate athletics) they navigate and lead within is complicit in upholding sexist and racist practices and structures (4, 9, 13). Black feminist scholars and Black feminist epistemologies perceive Black women to be experts of their social world (22, 23). Collins (24) asserts that "Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression" (p. 747). Drawing upon this epistemological stance, I sought to understand how the raced-gendered identity of Black women ADIOs informs their perceptions of organizational inclusivity as diversity leaders of sports organizations. This study provides insights into how Black women ADIOs' perceptions of organizational inclusivity are informed by their intersectional lived experiences. It advances the field of Sports Management and Sports Sociology, as it is the first study grappling with how Black women's "standpoint on their own oppression"

is drawn upon to conceptualize organizational inclusivity as a diversity and inclusion officer in sports organizations. Consequently, their intersectional lived experiences (25, 26) as Black women become centered to make sense of what organizational inclusivity is, which are organizational contexts inclusive to Black women and contexts that do not mirror Black women's intersectional marginalized experiences in sports and society writ large. More specifically, organizational inclusivity is creating contexts that do not mirror Black women's experiences as *outsiders within* mostly White athletic departments, lived experiences entangled in systems of oppression, specifically sexism and racism (read: intersectionality), and experiences that cultivate Black feminist thought in Black women, as this consciousness is bolstered through adverse realities of exclusion. The following sections provide an overview of the literature on Black women sports administrators holding college sports leadership positions, discuss prominent Black feminist epistemologies, introduce the theoretical lens guiding this work (intersectionality), and offer critical attributes of the methodology (interpretative phenomenology) and the data analysis technique (interpretative phenomenological analysis) deployed.

# Background

## Black women and intercollegiate sports leadership positions

The NCAA Division I collegiate athletics is a racialized organization (4) and a deeply gendered organizational field (13, 14). The leadership experiences of Black women sports administrators are reflective of navigating racist and sexist structures and practices (11, 21, 27). These Black women college sports administrators (21, 27) and coaches [Borland and Bruening (12)] are cognizant of how their adverse raced-gendered treatment has less to do with their competencies and abilities in their leadership positions and more to do with their non-prototypical identities as White and male identities are prototypical identities in prominent collegiate sports leadership positions (2).

Black women assistant basketball coaches perceive their racial and gender identity as hindering their career ascension (11). Similarly, collegiate sports administrators in Price et al. (27) perceive their raced-gendered identities as leading to difficulties being understood by White male athletic directors (ADs), who usually influence and control the hiring process. Although Black women ADs in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) hold a dominant racial identity (i.e., Black) in these organizational contexts, their gender identity makes these women targets of not only sexism and gender stereotypes but also raced-gendered stereotypes specific to Black women, like *The Angry Black woman* (21). Hence, Black women leaders

in varying collegiate sports leadership positions (e.g., athletic director, coach, etc.) and institutional types describe their experiences as being heavily influenced by their social identities, and they are cognizant of how being a Black woman in sport organizations has led to marginalizing experiences in hiring practices, career ascension, navigating adverse organizational cultures, and experiencing pressure to conform or limit self (4, 12, 21).

## Theoretical framework: Black women intersectional lived experiences

A prominent Black feminist epistemology is that Black women have a distinctive consciousness, often referred to as Black feminist thought (BFT), which enables them to interpret and make sense of their social environment in a manner that is disparate from those of other varying identity groups (11, 24). Black feminist thought is concerned with how Black women develop alternative ideas of self, Black women collectively, and the inequitable structures of their social world (24). Black women who draw upon BFT can navigate not being constrained by their "both/and" status and come to use the knowledge of their own oppression to make sense of their *outsider within* status [(28), p. 771]. There are three key themes of BFT: (a) Black women's thought is in concert with historical and material conditions that inform their perceptions of their social world, (b) Black women's unique perceptions of their social world share a similar interpretation with other Black women, and (c) Black women's disparate identities on the axis of class, sexuality, region, and age inform how BFT is expressed (28).

Black feminist thought finds a connection to Black women's *outsider within* status. This Black feminist concept is commonly associated with Collins (29), a seminal piece of Black feminist scholarship. Ransby (30) asserts that an "*outsider within* has the benefit of observation up close, but she is still not an authentic member of the inner circle…" (p. 370). However, precursory to Collins (29), Black women have long been attuned to their positionality as an *outsider in* White spaces (31, 32). For example, consider the Black women domestic workers who worked and cared for White families and were conceptualized as "family" by many White people in the mid-20th century (31). Despite being perceived as "family," these Black women domestic workers knew they would never *truly* be accepted by the White families they worked for, so they remained *outsiders*. Thus, Black women can be *in* White spaces (e.g., working in White households, White dominated organizations), but they still operate on the margins of power and experience marginalization. The *outsider within* status of Black women strengthens their BFT because they learn/study the epistemologies of spaces that have excluded

them, while still holding onto how their consciousness is historically and contemporaneously in concert with their lived experiences (29).

## Intersectionality

Crenshaw (25) is the pioneering work that provided succinct language for Black women being simultaneously marginalized at the intersection of race, gender, and other social identities like class (33, 34). However, Black women scholars, activists, mothers, caregivers, etc., have always been attuned to these social dynamics that encompass what we contemporarily understand as *intersectionality* (23, 32, 35). Consequently, credit is due to Crenshaw (25) for giving academics the terminology to succinctly make sense of Black women's lived experiences operating in tandem in multiple systems of oppression. Nonetheless, intersectionality is rooted in Black feminist epistemologies, and the terminology is borne out of critical legal studies. Black women were unable to successfully win legal suits on grounds of gender or racial discrimination (25). Hence, Black women failed to be perceived as fully *woman* and fully *Black*. This race-gendered tension illuminated how in the case of Black women, gender and racial discrimination co-exist to embody their lived experiences and concomitant oppression.

Scholarships applying intersectionality in sports management have brought attention to how the sexism and racism rife in Division I collegiate athletics has halted the leadership ascension of Black women assistant coaches and ADs simply because they are Black women or Black lesbian women [Borland and Bruening (12)]. This scholarship demonstrates how systems of patriarchy, racism, and homophobia force Black women to conceal their sexual orientation in a manner that differs from White lesbians (12), and Black women ADs are unjustly navigating their athletic departments in a manner that does not align with the power of their position (21). Consequently, previous scholarship has used intersectionality as a form of *critical inquiry*, but as a scholarly community, we have yet to see intersectionality being used as both *critical inquiry* and *critical praxis* (26) in sports management.

Collins and Bilge (26) assert that "intersectionality is not simply a method for doing research (*critical inquiry*), but also a tool for empowering people (*critical praxis*)" (p. 43). They argue that the full utility of intersectionality has yet to be achieved by many academics, as our application of the framework is often applied only as a *critical inquiry* tool. Using intersectionality as a tool of *critical inquiry* means applying intersectionality as a theoretical framework. Hence, intersectionality guides the study, interview questions, and analysis. However, using intersectionality as a tool of *critical praxis* means that intersectionality is used to not only better

*understand* social problems (*critical inquiry*) but also solve social problems (*critical praxis*). As it relates to the sports management discipline, I agree with the proclamation of Collins and Bilge (26) that sports scholars can be more intentional in applying the epistemological underpinnings of intersectionality in a manner that captures *critical praxis* displayed in scholars and research participants. According to Collins and Bilge (26), "problem-solving lies at the heart" of using intersectionality as *critical praxis* (p. 50). This work seeks to engage in *critical inquiry* and *critical praxis* to ensure we as a discipline use the full utility of intersectionality.

## Intersectional invisibility

Aligning with the arguments of Crenshaw (25), the work of scholars in the field of management and social psychology captures how Black women navigate their social world entangled in systems of marginalization (36–38). However, they question if there are instances, contexts, and opportunities whereby Black women can experience distinctive advantages due to holding non-prototypical identities (36). In short, the aforementioned scholars bring attention to how Black women being non-prototypical in White and male-dominated spaces (like sports organizations) leads to experiences of invisibility. Purdie and Eibach (36) have coined these instances as *intersectional invisibility*. Intersectional invisibility states individuals who do not hold dominant American societal identities (White, man, heterosexual, etc.) are non-prototypical in particular contexts. Black women are non-prototypical in White and male-dominated spaces (e.g., collegiate athletic administration), and this status can position them as invisible or unfamiliar (37).

Smith et al. (38) found that Black executive women (e.g., University Deans, Chief Executive Officers, Fortune 500 Vice Presidents, etc.) perceived their intersectional invisibility status to weaken or "cancel" out the impact of gender and race marginalization in their professional experiences – referred to as *benign intersectional invisibility*. Benign intersectional invisibility challenges prescriptions of Black women conditionally being in a state of marginalization. Participants in Smith et al. (38) perceived being non-prototypical in their organizations to bolster how they made connections with clients of diverse backgrounds, encouraged them to bring their authentic selves to the workplace, and created opportunities for them to display cultural competence (38). Although participants experienced benign intersectional invisibility, adverse organizational experiences of race-gendered marginalization or *hostile intersectional invisibility* (e.g., stereotypes, exclusion, silencing), was prevalent in their experiences as well (38). These participants discussed their marginalization and how they were perceived as unqualified in the executive positions they attained because of their non-prototypical identities in their workplaces.

Consequently, the theoretical prescriptions of intersectional invisibility (36, 38) and intersectionality (25) inform this scholarship because we are unaware of how the ADIO position may enable these Black women ADIOs to have disparate organizational experiences in comparison to Black women coaches (11) and athletic directors (21). Given there has yet to be an empirical study on how the intersecting identities of Black women ADIOs inform their perceptions of organizational inclusivity in sports organizations, this study acknowledges that Black women administrators report adverse organizational experiences in college athletics (12, 27), while also considering how the novelty of the position (16) possibly creates sentiments of benign and hostile intersectional invisibility (38).

# Research methodology

## Interpretative phenomenology

This hermeneutic or interpretative phenomenological study examined how the intersecting identities, specifically race and gender, inform Black women ADIOs' perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Phenomenological research seeks to make sense of lived experiences by studying phenomena intimately with attention being given to the *meaning* of lived experiences (39–41). Hence, phenomenologies are less concerned about solving social problems and study the essence of lived experience with the intent of becoming deeply familiar with an individual's reality (42, 43). Interpretative phenomenology emphasizes that scholars interpret human experience rather than simply describing participants' experiences (44, 45). This means that an interpretative phenomenological study should not silence the voice of scholars or their lived experiences, thus *bracketing* is not necessary, but it would be necessary for a descriptive or Husserl phenomenological examination (45, 46).

There are key attributes of interpretative phenomenological research: (a) The interpretation of lived experiences has semantic and layered understandings, (b) our existence as humans is in concert with the peculiarities of society, and (c) interpretation is a foundational aspect of the human experience (39). Scholars engaging in interpretative phenomenological research are making sense of how participants make sense of their lived experiences (44). Such an essential premise finds a connection to Heidegger's concept of *co-constitutionality*, which asserts "…that the meanings the researcher arrives at in interpretive research are a blend of the meanings articulated by both participant and researcher within the focus

of the study" [(47) p. 730]. This co-creation of meaning-making enables researchers to bring self into their work and perceives participants as experts of their lived experiences. However, it is important to note that *co-constitutionality* does not require that a scholar's meaning-making is *in congruence with participants,* but the meaning made of the experience should be evident in the lived experiences shared by participants (47).

## Sample

As of August 2020, NCAA institutions are required to designate the role of Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Designee, commonly referred to as ADID, to an administrator affiliated with NCAA athletic departments (16). ADIDs hold a primary position and are assigned varying ADID-related tasks. Hence, the advancement of DEI can be understood as an "extra" responsibility, given that an ADID is not a position but a designation. This research studied Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Officers commonly referred to as ADIOs (16). An ADIO is an administrative position that is formally and primarily responsible for advancing DEI in sports organizations, and this position more closely resembles Chief Diversity Officers in corporate and business domains (16).

The population of ADIOs is sparse but growing as an influx of position adoptions occurred following the murder of George Floyd and during an increased tenure of athlete activism (4). Given the timeliness of this study and the research methodology, five Black women participated in this study. Phenomenological research encourages smaller samples and purposive sampling techniques (44, 47). Hence, participants were purposively contacted *via* email and met the following criteria: (a) identified as a Black woman, (b) held the ADIO position for at least 3 months, (c) their position title included some semblance of language around diversity, inclusion, and equity, and (d) they currently work for a Division I institution. Given the ADIO position is in an emergent state (16), my intent was not to interview as many Black women ADIOs as possible, as doing so could have created issues of anonymity and possibly hindered my ability to create trust amongst participants, as some did have concerns regarding how their identity would be protected. Lastly, I engaged in this research as a critical and Black feminist scholar, and if increasing my sample would jeopardize or adversely contribute to the experiences of my participants, then *more participants* does not align with my purpose or scholarly identity.

To protect participant confidentiality, the exact position title, geographical location, educational background, and tenure in the ADIO position are not presented. The participants are as follows: Serenity, Monique, Nia, Kayla, and Jalyiah. These names are pseudonyms.

## Data collection

Serenity, Monique, Nia, Kayla, and Jalyiah participated in two semi-structured in-depth interviews and completed two reflective journal prompts. The second interview was scheduled at least a week after the initial interview. After the first interview, participants stated that they have never been asked these "types of questions before" or "never really thought about how their identity was relevant to the ADIO position." Once each interview was completed, participants continued to discuss the complexity and nuances of being tasked to create more inclusive athletic departments, even though they continue to experience marginalization themselves. I share these insights to illuminate how valuable each interview was not only for the purpose of this study but also for the participants, as these interviews were described as being "cathartic."

Individual interviews were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, recorded *via* Zoom, a video conference platform, and lasted between 60 and 90 min. I utilized the reflective journal prompts as a tool to allow participants more time to reflect upon their lived experiences, as a tool to ask participants follow-up questions, and as an opportunity for participants to clarify and expand upon their interview commentary.

## Data analysis

I conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (44). IPA is an analysis method that centers interpretation, hermeneutics, and idiography (48) and aligns with the philosophical prescriptions of Heidegger's interpretative phenomenology (44). IPA analyses seek to illuminate the *meaning* of lived experiences and center on how the meaning made is co-created with participants (39, 44). The interpretation attribute of IPA moves beyond stating what a participant experiences and calls for researchers to interpret what these lived experiences *mean* (44). The hermeneutics attribute of IPA is the practice of *double hermeneutics,* the convoluted process of researchers making sense of what participants themselves are attempting to make sense of (48). Idiography addresses how researchers must be attuned to the particular of their research participants (44, 48). This investigation is rooted in such a principle that I was concerned about the peculiar reality of Black women creating inclusive sports organizations, known for racial and gender marginalization (4). In terms of the analysis, idiography is relevant to how researchers question the data and the circumstances of participants' lived experiences. Lastly, there is not a prescribed structure for IPA, but interpretation, hermeneutics, and idiography must be central to the process (44).

After each individual interview, I immediately engaged in memoing, specifically on the following: (a) my initial thoughts, (b) rememberable comments, (c) statements that challenge preconceived notions I held, (d) blatant commentary about

being a Black woman ADIO, and e) my reflections on how being in this space with participants made me feel. Engaging in this process led to me organically participating in interpretation and idiography. While engaging in this immediate post-interview memoing, I would ask myself "why questions," like (a) Why was Monique able to laugh while sharing hostile stories of raced-gendered exclusion, (b) Why does Nia continue to stay in her organization if she feels silenced, and (c) Why is Serenity comparing her leadership to Stacy Abrams? As I posed these questions to myself, I was grappling with the meaning of these lived experiences while also being attuned to "the particular," like laughter, the language use of "silenced," and the peculiarity of an ADIO comparing themselves to a contemporary Black woman political figure (e.g., Stacy Abrams). Consequently, my immediate (and continued) memoing centered on meaning-making, interpretation, hermeneutics, and idiography, which are critical aspects of interpretative phenomenology and IPA.

I then transitioned to coding each participant's lived experience individually before examining how participants held congruent and divergent experiences (44). Consequently, I established participants' unique individual themes before transitioning to establishing themes for another participant. Doing so allowed me to focus on one person while suspending the lived experiences of other participants. However, my first round of initial coding did not begin until I read and listened to interview transcripts at least two times, as I sought to enter the coding process being very familiar with the data. I began the initial coding process by applying concept codes (e.g., "intersectionality," "whiteness," "bricolage") (49), descriptive comments (44), and linguistic comments (e.g., attentive to stutters, pauses, laughing, and deep breathes) (44). After establishing these initial codes, I engaged in abstraction, the process of organizing similar codes to create second-level codes (44). Second-level codes consisted of "Knows Marginalization," "Intersectional Benefits," and "Identity Entanglement." Once these second-level codes were established, I examined if the excerpts attached to these codes held a similar interpretation and *meaning*. Consequently, a shared code did not equate to a shared interpretation, which led to me engaging in the iterative process of creating new codes/engaging in more analysis, which eventually led to the theme development centered on *meaning*. After completing this process for each participant, I examined how participant themes diverged and converged and examined if shared themes held a similar interpretation, which led to the creation of three superordinate themes.

## Findings: Intersecting identities and perceptions of organizational inclusivity

As it relates to the research question (How do the intersecting identities of Black women ADIOs inform their perceptions 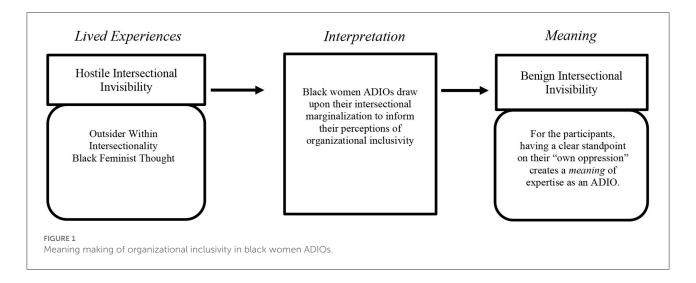of organizational inclusivity in their respective sports organizations?), Black women ADIOs draw upon their experiences of organizational exclusivity [Borland and Bruening (12, 50)] and societal marginalization (23, 24, 35) to inform their perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Because Black women experience the simultaneity of sexism and racism (25), prominent marginalizing systems in collegiate athletics (4, 9), participants state being cognizant of what exclusion *looks* and *feels* like. Black women ADIOs use these experiences of raced-gendered marginalization to inform their perceptions of organizational inclusivity, illuminating how they center their "own oppression" [(24) p. 747] to inform their perceptions of organizational inclusivity as an ADIO.

As evident in Figure 1, Black women ADIOs specifically discuss how their experiences as an *outsider within* mostly White athletic departments, their lived experiences in marginalizing systems, and their distinctive lens as a Black woman (Black feminist thought) inform their perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Consequently, the aforementioned realities are marginalizing experiences due to Black women navigating systems of patriarchy and racism (25, 28) and experiences that capture *hostile intersectional invisibility* (38). Moreover, participants having a clear standpoint on their "own oppression" [see Collins (24) p. 747] creates a *meaning* of expertise or matters of *benign intersectional invisibility* (38) to inform their perception of organizational inclusivity as Black women ADIOs. For the participants in this study, organizational inclusivity is creating contexts that are inclusive to Black women.

## Outsider within: Experiences on the margins of power to make sense of organizational inclusivity

Participants discussed how their professional experiences in collegiate athletics have relegated them to navigate being on the margins of power (30) due to their raced-gendered identities being non-prototypical identities of collegiate sports leadership (2). This experience as an *outsider in* predominately White athletic departments makes these leaders familiar with what exclusion *feels* and *looks* like. In turn, they sought to create inclusive organizations that do not mirror their *outsider within* experiences (29, 30), which is the concomitant reality of being "the only one," "silenced," and "disrespected." Being "the only one" or one of few Black women among mostly White administrators is an isolating experience and Black women ADIOs recall what it *feels* like to be an *outsider within* and center this feeling to conceptualize organizational inclusivity. Monique shares:

> I have those [only one] experiences to reflect on and when I'm in meetings with other people (non-Black women), you know, there's times they (non-Black women), haven't been the only one in the room that looks like them.

**FIGURE 1**
Meaning making of organizational inclusivity in black women ADIOs.

And what has happened to me in the past, allows me to, no it forces me to think about everyone else in a way that I wish people would have thought about me.

Monique's *outsider within* lived experience "forces" her to think of others. Her use of "forces" emphasizes how she cannot refrain from incorporating her experiences as a Black woman into her perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Additionally, she perceives Black women as having a distinctive insight, because "they," meaning individuals who are not Black women, rarely experience such an isolating experience. Although being the only Black woman in collegiate sports spaces creates an *outsider within* reality (29), Black women ADIOs carry these lived experiences into their leadership to make sense of inclusivity for others. The isolation attached to being an *outsider within* has created sentiments of feeling "undervalued" and "disrespected," as they navigate being on the margins of power. Jalyiah leans into these contemporary and previous adverse feelings to center on how she considers the marginalization of others. Jalyiah shares:

I know the feeling of being undervalued, where it's really not being heard, where it's feeling disrespected, overlooked. Um, just, you know, the- the-the pick the, pick the descriptions like we've had that experience. We've (Black women) had the inequity, the gaps, the discrimination, the oppression, like we felt all those things. So that- that experience as a Black woman can almost translate into the-the experiences of all these other underrepresented groups.

Jalyiah begins by stating all the adverse concomitant feelings and experiences of being an outsider within – "disrespected," "overlooked," "discriminat[ed]," and "oppress[ed]." However, she concludes her thought by stating how these experiences are relevant to other "underrepresented groups." Hence, her

positionality as an *outsider within* (29, 30), while not an ideal experience, is an experience that enables Jalyiah to consider how Black women are not the only individuals with lived experiences on the margins of power. For Jalyiah, the concomitant feelings of being an *outsider within* enable her to perceive organizational inclusivity as pertinent to "underrepresented groups" not solely her or Black women. Thus, Black womanhood, specifically the *outsider within* experience, is used as a barometer for making sense of exclusivity and a tool drawn upon to create empathy in Black woman ADIO leadership as their perceptions of organization inclusivity center on the marginality of other "underrepresented groups" in collegiate athletics, because she is familiar with what it means to exist on the margins. Jalyiah continues to elaborate:

Um, and I know what it's like to just not belong. And not feel like you're heard and not feel like you're valued and just like not fit in. And what makes me respond [read: seek inclusivity] is when, it, it, it's like almost like a trigger, it's like, I know that the way someone says something [hurtful] will lead to, or if someone's acting in a [hurtful] manner will proceed to someone feeling that way (e.g., "not belong").

She continues to use her adverse lived experiences (read: hostile intersectional invisibility) on the margins of power and the concomitant feelings of her own exclusion (e.g., "heard but not valued") to influence how she "responds" as an ADIO. As an ADIO, her "respond[ing]" to exclusivity or marginalizing conditions or incidents is reflective of her perception of organizational inclusivity, as her need ("trigger") to respond signals that addressing organizational inclusivity is an intentional effort. Additionally, Jalyiah equating her "respond[ing]" to exclusivity as a "trigger" demonstrates how her perception of organizational inclusivity is based upon her own lived experiences. She reacts like a "trigger"

(read: swiftly, promptly) because she is familiar with how individuals in positions of power attempt to keep her on the margins or outside. This expertise becomes imperative for thinking about how others "fit in" or are valued in collegiate athletics.

Black women ADIOs using their lived experience as an outsider in the "industry" (i.e., collegiate athletics) as a barometer for addressing the marginalization of others is evident in how Monique poses questions to herself:

> Yeah, I think, being a part of two identities (race and gender) that have been historically underrepresented, marginalized, and oppressed in our society and in this industry as well, definitely is part of, like how I come into this space. I think it, it influences me and I'm always reflective of, um, "How would you feel if this happened to you?" Or, "How did you feel when it did happen to you?"

For Monique, Black women's "oppression" in collegiate sports [Borland and Bruening (12)] influences how she comes "into this space." In the context of the dialogue, "space" is interpreted as ADIO leadership. Consequently, she centers this "oppression" and uses Black womanhood as a barometer for making sense of exclusivity, by asking, "How did you feel when it (i.e., marginalization) did happen to you?" Rather than detaching themselves from the lived experience of hostile intersectional invisibility (38), they lean into these experiences to center themselves on their perceptions of organizational inclusivity, in turn, creating a meaning-making of benign intersectional invisibility (38). Thus, they use their lived experience as an *outsider within* (29) to hold the *meaning* of expertise in their perceptions of organizational inclusivity.

## Intersectionality: Using lived raced-gendered experiences to make sense of organizational inclusivity

Although being a Black woman in the US social and sports systems can be an adverse experience due to issues of sexism and racism (6, 21), Black women ADIOs use these adverse intersectional realities to inform what it means to create inclusivity for others. Previous research discussed how Black women are hindered from opportunities in collegiate sports leadership due to their non-prototypical identities [Borland and Bruening (12)]. However, Black women ADIOs perceive their non-prototypical status (i.e., Black and woman) as informative for how they make sense of organizational inclusivity. Thus, their "intersectionalities (Serenity)," specifically the intersection of race and gender, are drawn upon as expertise to inform perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Jalyiah,

on numerous occasions, discussed how her intersectional experiences empowered her to fulfill the job responsibilities of an ADIO and she perceived the intersectional realities of Black womanhood as giving her an upper hand in creating inclusivity for others. She shares:

> And I just want to ensure that I can do everything I can to make sure that I am bettering the experience of those under my leadership, but then also for those who come after me. Um, I think from a professional perspective, we as Black women, have intersectional identities [entangled in many systems]. And think about some of those quotes about Black women "being the most disrespected person in America" [is relevant to my leadership].

The quote Jalyiah is alluding to are the words of Malcolm X, in which he states, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman." In the above quote, Malcolm X brought attention to the varying systems that disenfranchise Black women in the US and he acknowledged that Black women and Black men have similar, yet distinctive, marginalization. Jalyiah, drawing upon this quote after sharing how she aims to do "everything" she can to ensure she "betters the experience of [others]," expresses how, for her, creating inclusive organizations (i.e., her perception of organizational inclusivity) and using her experience as "the most disrespected person in America" to do so, are entangled in one another. Moreover, Jalyiah perceives her professional perspective on "bettering the experience of those under [her leadership]" as connected to Black women "having intersectional identities [entangled in many systems]." Like others in this study, Jalyiah's lived experience of marginalization holds the *meaning* of expertise, and such expertise is deployed as critical praxis (26) in the ADIO position and informs their perceptions of organizational inclusivity.

The participants provided specific examples of how their own adverse raced-gendered experiences (i.e., hostile intersectional invisibility) informed their perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Kayla shared how burdensome it is to comply or be pressured into complying with White patriarchal standards in the workplace as a Black woman (50). She discusses how her experiences of hostile intersectional invisibility (38) enable her "to be more cognizant of other people's identities." Kayla asserts:

> There are these two identities (race and gender) that I cannot change and people already may have an opinion about me because of these identities and realizing like that's a lot to carry, especially if you're like, I'm just trying to be good at whatever it is. And now I feel like I have to think about, "Okay, well I'm a woman in this space, so how am I dressing properly? I'm Black in this space? So is my hair appropriate?

Like, can I say something like all of these things add up?" So, I feel like as I started to realize that the world isn't gonna always see *you*, even if you wanna be seen, I think that allowed me to be more cognizant of other people's identities.

For Kayla, the sexism (e.g., being concerned about how she is dressed) and racism [e.g., concerned about her hair being perceived as "appropriate" (read: professional)] is the simultaneity of marginalization that intersectionality brings attention to (25, 26). When sharing these experiences, from the onset she states, "There are these two identities that I cannot change," which highlights that Kayla centers and draws upon the interconnected marginalization of both identities (i.e., race and gender), rather than one over the other (25). By doing so, she illustrates how both identities and their attached marginalization inform her perceptions of inclusivity, which for Kayla manifests as "be[ing] more cognizant of other people's identities." Since the world does not see "[her]" and the intersection of the biases she navigates on the axis of race and gender (e.g., intersectionality), her perception of inclusivity takes a systemic perspective, as she continues to share how "intersectionality" enables the "understanding" (read: empathy, criticality, consciousness) necessary to conceptualize organizational inclusivity as considering how identities intersect to create marginalization entangled in more than one system (25, 26). She continues to display critical praxis (26), as she shares how her lived experiences as a Black woman enables her to question how the identity of others also intersects with multiple systems:

So I think those intersectionalities make it a big point because you're like, "Okay, if you can accept one part of me, how about the other part of me?" Um, so I think that those layers allow for you not to only think about gender and race, but then to think about, "Okay, what about sexuality? What about disability?" And really tie those into like, this is not just one part of someone like, yes, it is a piece of who they are, but like, you can't just ignore that part because it's, it's a larger part of who they are as a whole.

Kayla uses her understanding of Black women's relationship with patriarchy and racism to acknowledge and make sense of how individuals in her organization are also marginalized by more than one system (24, 25). Consequently, Kayla's perception of organizational inclusivity is to consider the "whole" person, that is, she considers the multiple systems that create exclusivity for them. Thus, she applies what she knows about intersectionality in a manner that demonstrates *critical praxis* (26). Keaton (16) discusses how the ADIO position is intended to create more diverse, inclusive, and equitable sports organizations. For Nia, such a responsibility "feels like what [her] lived experience is." Nia asserts:

My identity as a Black woman informs my work because doing this work feels like what my lived experience is. Right? Like I have to help everybody else. I have to do the heavy lifting. I have to make myself smaller, right? To make this work bigger. Right? Um, so, it just, it, it kind of continues to reinforce who I am as a Black woman in this world and how I show up. Right? The two are hand in, the two are hand in glove.

Nia equates her responsibilities as an ADIO to "feel" like her lived experiences as a Black woman. But, upon making this comparison, she only shares the adverse realities of Black womanhood (e.g., hostile intersectional invisibility), like "mak[ing] herself smaller" (e.g., attempting to take up less space or be less visible) and "do[ing] the heavy lifting" [e.g., Strong Black woman stereotype/trope, see (51)]. ADIOs are espoused to be leaders who create more inclusive environments; hence, ADIOs *should* have a clear perspective on organizational inclusivity (16). Nia, drawing upon the adverse realities of Black womanhood (e.g., "doing the heavy lifting") to "inform her work" (e.g., create more inclusive environments), is a picturesque example of Figure 1. Black women ADIOs draw upon their experience of racial and gendered marginalization to inform how they cultivate a shared perception of organizational inclusivity in their organization. This *means* that their own marginalization becomes perceived as an expertise in the ADIO position. Lastly, she concludes with an analogy, "…the two are hand in glove." That is, the same way a glove fits a hand, the ADIO position fits Black women because the position and its associated responsibilities (e.g., cultivating a shared perception of organizational inclusivity) mean that Black women must be reflective of self and their marginalization, which makes their familiarity with marginalization become a tool for conceptualizing organizational inclusivity.

Previous scholarship studied how Black women administrators navigate racist and sexist organizational cultures because their identities are non-prototypical identities for collegiate sports leadership positions (12, 21, 27). Monique uses these lived experiences of "being stereotyped" in her leadership to ensure others can refrain from being on the "receiving end of [a] poor [organizational] culture." She articulates:

Um, so it's personal, it's personal because, um, I've been on the receiving end of being stereotyped, being marginalized, being silenced. Um, on the, you know, receiving end of poor culture-… and negative culture. And that's why I do it, um, 'cause I don't want the people who come behind me in any of these positions, or any of these spaces to have to endure, or experience some of the things that I have.

Monique states "it's personal" two times, which seems to emphasize just how personally connected she feels to ensuring

others can evade the marginalization she has experienced. Because she knows what a "poor" and "negative culture" looks and feels like, she centers these lived experiences to ensure they do not happen to others. Additionally, what she has "endure[d]" is the entangled nature of working in sexist and racist sports organizations (12). She shares, "And that's why I do it," capturing how engaging in the work of ADIO leadership (read: cultivating a shared perception of organizational inclusivity in her organization) is rooted in her own intersectional marginalization as a Black woman in collegiate athletics (21) and society writ large (24, 35).

## Black feminist thought: Using black women's consciousness to make sense of organizational inclusivity

As participants discussed their ADIO leadership position, they alluded to Black women being uniquely equipped for the position, given that Black women have a "different lens," are "inherently [different]," and "have a unique perspective." I interpreted these proclamations as participants perceiving their intersectional identity as unlocking a particular consciousness, a Black feminist consciousness [or a Black Feminist Thought (BFT)] (24, 29) that informs their perceptions of organizational inclusivity.

Jalyiah speaks about this consciousness as if it is innate to Black women, as she asserts "…we (Black women) know what we're doing when we are advocating for that norm (read: exclusive practices/cultures) to be changed." Nia brought attention to how the ADIO position is "hand in glove" with her lived experiences as a Black woman. Similarly, Jalyiah supports this notion by proclaiming that Black women in diversity leadership positions *just know* what they are doing because the job responsibility of creating inclusive organizations is a task that enables her to bring *herself* (lived experiences) into her job responsibilities of cultivating a shared perception of organizational inclusivity. Jalyiah states:

> And therefore, we (Black women) know what we're doing when we are advocating for that norm (read: exclusive practice) to be changed. Um, we have a different lens of not fitting in, not having a voice, not being respected, having to fight up against again, all the systems that we're mentioning. We have just a very, very like unique intersectional lens with how we like wake up every morning and live our lives as women of color, Back women. Um, but then that directly translates into my ability to have a unique perspective and voice in our roles.

The consciousness that is developed from experiencing, navigating, and "fight[ing]" marginalizing systems is relevant to Jalyiah's ability to have a "unique perspective" in an ADIO position. Like other participants, she discusses how her lived experiences as a Black woman cannot be divorced from the realities of what an ADIO is *espoused* to do, which is to cultivate a shared organizational understanding of inclusivity (16). However, to do so, she centers her lived experiences to conceptualize what inclusivity is, something that Black women just "know" because of their familiarity with exclusivity (24, 25, 35). Kayla also operates from the standpoint of Black women *just knowing* how to create more inclusive organizations and she discusses how such a perspective is possibly "biased." However, she questions if her biases are valid because her intersectional race-gendered experiences do give her a "unique way to connect with different people." Kayla perceives connection as an attribute of organizational inclusivity, and she holds such a perspective because of her intersectional raced-gendered experiences that offer her a unique consciousness (read: BFT). Kayla shares:

> I think that you have the – and this could be biased. But like, I think we (Black women) have, um, [a] unique way to connect with different people, um, because you, because of the intersectionality, right? Like, I feel like we can connect with the female student athletes, I also think we can connect with the [racially minorit[ized] population male or female.

Monique discusses how her experiences of being stereotyped as a Black woman give her the consciousness necessary (read: BFT) to be alert to how organizational spaces disregard those who have marginalizing experiences. Monique shares:

> We (Black women), we… Many of us are stereotyped in the same way because we're talking about systems that operate in making assumptions about people. Systems that have made up their mind about Black women, regardless of where we come from. So, uh, many of those stereotypes follow us. So, when you think about the uniqueness of being in that room [read: in meetings with a majority White senior-level leadership], is that there are some shared and common experiences that, whether we've had them kind of personally, we know are happening in other spaces, and we're conscious of that.

Monique uses the consciousness that is derived from her own marginalizing experiences to acknowledge that her lived experiences are not happening in a vacuum. Her own oppression gives her the awareness and wherewithal to be conscious of how some organizational dynamics, create disadvantaged experiences for other marginalized communities as well. Consequently, her perception of

organizational inclusivity considers how marginalizing experiences can occur due to the intersection of power, identity, and space. Nonetheless, this perspective is only developed from the consciousness that is unlocked from navigating "systems that have made up their mind about Black women." Monique continues to build on this notion of her BFT, informing her perceptions of organizational inclusivity. She discusses:

> And I think we (Black women) bring the perspective, um, because we inherently, like from a very basic level are different… than the people in the room. We have had to live in a world that we don't have the same privilege that a White male would have, and that has given us different experiences. And so, we're in a society that, um, views us differently.

Because Black women live in a world that does not afford them innate privileges based on their raced-gendered identities, they garnish "different experiences," which bolsters their BFT (29, 35). Like Jalyiah, Monique also perceives Black women as *just knowing* what organizational inclusivity is because Black women are "inherently, like from a very basic level are different" and have vast experiences of exclusivity in organizations. Consequently, navigating collegiate athletics and their own respective athletic departments puts the BFT of Black women ADIOs into critical praxis (26), demonstrating how their adverse lived experiences are centered to conceptualize inclusivity, while also capturing how their lived experience and interpretation of these experiences come to hold the *meaning* of expertise for Black women ADIOs.

## Discussion

The Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Officer (ADIO) position is unlike any other position in collegiate athletic administration. It is the only position in which one's marginalization is drawn upon to meet the demands of the job responsibilities. ADIOs must hold a clear perception of organizational inclusivity (16), and Black women holding the position meet this demand by centering self and their own oppression of race-gendered marginalization they experience in collegiate athletics [Borland and Bruening (12)] and society writ large (35). Consequently, through the perceptions of Black women ADIOs, organizational inclusivity is defined as (a) creating contexts that do not mirror Black women's lived experiences, specifically as an *outsider within* mostly White athletic departments, (b) lived experiences entangled in systems of oppression, specifically sexism and racism, and (c) experiences that cultivate BFT in Black women, as this consciousness is bolstered through adverse realities of exclusion. The adverse experiences of Black women in sports being used as expertise to inform

their perceptions of organizational inclusivity means that (a) these leaders consider the whole person and the varying systems that implicate their organizational experiences (read: intersectionality), (b) their leadership is attentive to who resides outside the margins of power (read: outsider within), (c) Black women ADIOs are conscious of how power and identity intersect to privy certain groups, and (d) they are attentive to how oppression can be shared but disparate with other marginalized groups.

These findings depict Black women ADIOs as leaders who engage with intersectionality at a level that demonstrates *critical praxis* (26). Collins and Bilge argue that problem-solving is a key aspect of using intersectionality as a tool of critical praxis. Black women ADIOs are attempting to solve the problem of organizational exclusivity in collegiate athletics (4, 9) by drawing upon their own marginalization. Consequently, Black women ADIOs in this study perceive their marginalization as a problem (or an issue) in sports organizations while also interpreting their marginalization as the solution. For example, by having a clear standpoint of their "own oppression" [(29) p. 747], these leaders draw upon their (unfortunate) expertise in experiencing exclusive and adverse organizational contexts to inform what they perceive organizational inclusivity to be. Therefore, the Black women ADIOs in this study are leading the charge of creating more inclusive sports organizations by centering on what inclusivity looks like for Black women.

Previous sports management scholarship has used intersectionality as a tool of critical inquiry and their participants are conscious of how their professional experiences are entangled in multiple systems of marginalization (12, 21). In this study, Black women ADIOs move beyond being aware of their social plight and enact this consciousness to inform their job responsibilities, which demonstrates critical praxis (26). These inaugural organizational leaders use their hostile intersectional invisible experiences (38) as expertise (see Figure 1). Therefore, the adverse lived experiences of Black women ADIOs operate as both hostile intersectional invisibility and benign intersectional invisibility (38). Unbeknown to participants, while sharing their hostile intersectional invisibility experiences, they also offer insight into their perceptions of organizational inclusivity. Hence, within the same syllogism, Black women ADIOs can flip their adverse experiences into being systemically and structurally focused diversity leaders: a picturesque display of benign intersectional invisibility (38).

Although Black women ADIOs can transform their marginality into valued and recognized expertise, future scholarship must explore how this expertise contributes to transforming their sports organization. Because this contradictory location as experts is drawing upon critical knowledge from the margins, future research should study how this knowledge is granted decision-making power to create

substantive organizational change. Otherwise, their expertise is conditional.

This scholarship adds to and complicates the literature on Black women collegiate sports administrators. In one sense, Black women ADIOs are marginalized by the same systems of power that hinder the career ascension of Black women coaches and ADs (12, 21, 27). However, Black women coaches and ADs have disparate formalized job responsibilities in comparison to ADIOs (4, 16). Currently, the utility or praxis of intersectionality has not been documented in the same manner for coaches and ADs as it has for diversity leaders in this study. Serenity, Nia, Kayla, Jalyiah, and Monique perceived their understanding of intersectionality to elevate their ability to create inclusive organizations, which is their primary and formal job responsibility (16). Black women coaches and ADs have yet to be documented using their "own oppression" to complete their formal job responsibilities.

Given that Black women in sports are conscious of their marginalization, moving forward, scholars must be attuned to how they make sense of this oppression and if they possibly *use* their marginalization, like the Black women ADIOs in this study. We, as a scholarly community, have done a commendable job highlighting how intersectionality is a valuable tool of critical inquiry that foregrounds the entangled systems Black women in sports navigate. Future work should not merely report these barriers that we know to exist but also examine what these barriers *mean*, how these barriers correlate to their mental health, or why Black women in sports remain in the profession despite these systems of marginalization. Moving forward, sports phenomena-specific applications of intersectionality can more explicitly discuss how the theoretical framework is a powerful tool for understanding (critical inquiry) and addressing (critical praxis) issues of organizational inclusivity (26).

Lastly, although not explicitly shared, one can infer from the excerpts how navigating such hostility must have an adverse effect on participants' mental health and ability to remain committed to the work of creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive athletic departments. As the ADIO position continues to become more widely adopted, we need not only investigations of how Black women *do* this work but also examinations of how they take care of themselves while engaging in this work.

## Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because Data will not be uploaded, shared, or accessible to the public. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to ajhanai.keaton@louisville.edu.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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# The co-conditioning of dis/ability and gender: An intersectionality study of Powerchair Hockey

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This paper aims at initiating scholars to consider dis/ability as a category of analysis when doing intersectionality in sociology of sport. First, it introduces a conceptual framework that allows researchers to engage with the issue of the body and its physical and cognitive functions, as well as to address how the ability–disability system intersects with various other salient systems of oppression and privilege. I call this concept the *intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability*, whereby experiences of dis/ability are fundamentally conditioned by (and also condition in return) other systems of difference and inequality. The framework provides scholars with theoretical tools that will help them to investigate body-related issues while avoiding the pitfall of essentializing dis/abilities. Second, this work offers an application of the abovementioned conceptual framework, focusing on the co-conditioning of dis/ability and gender. Based on a multi-sited ethnography of Powerchair Hockey in Switzerland, I investigate different aspects of this sport practiced by people living with so-called "severe" physical dis/abilities. The results highlight the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes that both male and female players face as they (re)negotiate their positions within the matrix of domination. This application demonstrates the explanatory power of considering the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality, theory of sociology, dis/ability, gender, sport, Powerchair Hockey, sexism, ableism

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, intersectionality has gradually emerged as a highly relevant paradigm for critical feminist studies. Initially focusing on the intertwined and mutually constitutive aspects of gender and race (1), scholars gradually took into account other salient systems of difference and inequality, such as class, sexuality, nationality, which altogether constitute what Collins (2) calls a "matrix of domination." Yet, to date, scholars who apply intersectionality still rarely address cognitive and physical

dis/abilities[1] and the related system of oppression [i.e., the "ability-disability system" (4)] in their analyses. Therefore, it is still common for scholars to work within an ableist paradigm of which they are often unaware and which they are likely to reproduce.

This issue is particularly salient in the context of sport sociology. Indeed, despite DePauw's (5) invitation 25 years ago to feminist scholars to address the lack of attention to the intersectionality between gender and dis/ability in sociology of sport, there is still little research that apprehends systems of difference and inequality in sport in regard to their intersection with the ability-disability system. Yet, physical and cognitive disabilities, abilities, and even hyper-abilities to enact a given behavior play a central role in the recognition of an individual's compliance with norms. Physical and cognitive dis/abilities to engage in socially expected attitudes and activities based on one's gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are an important dimension of the construction of differences and inequalities. Thus, the body and its cognitive and physical functions are central factors to be considered in sociology of sport. I name this phenomenon the *intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability*, whereby experiences of dis/ability are fundamentally conditioned by (and also condition in return) other systems of difference and inequality. I therefore consider a systematic examination of the ability-disability system as a category of analysis while conducting intersectionality studies of sport to offer strong explanatory power. Such an approach will not only be useful for understanding the experiences of people with dis/abilities in sport but also for investigating sport in all its aspects.

In light of these preliminary comments, this paper pursues two objectives. First, it introduces a conceptual framework that allows researchers to engage with the issue of the body and its physical and cognitive functions and to understand how the ability-disability system intersects with various other salient systems of oppression and privilege, and more specifically with gender. Second, based on my doctoral dissertation on the sports careers of Powerchair Hockey (PCH) players, this paper offers an application of this conceptual framework. This application demonstrates the explanatory power of considering the ability-disability system while doing intersectionality in the sociology of sport.

In this article, in order to provide an in-depth analysis, I primarily focus on the intersectionality between dis/ability

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[1] In this paper, I use the terms "people with dis/abilities" and "people with impairments" in reference to the Human Development Model and Disability Creation Process (HDM-DCP) (3) and to imply that when we look at "people with impairments", we should not only focus on their "disabilities" but also their many "abilities". In their daily interactions, interviewees sometimes use identity-first language and sometimes person-first language without any consistency. For clarity, unless citing a direct quotation, I use person-first language.

and gender. Indeed, PCH is a particularly interesting field to study the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability and gender because of the following two characteristics. First, in PCH, only people with so-called "severe" physical dis/abilities are eligible for participating in competitions, and most players are living with progressive genetic diseases. At the beginning of their sports career, some of them still have some mobility and strength in their upper body. Then, gradually, their physical impairments worsen. However, the game is regulated in a way that allows one to adapt their way of playing as their disease progresses; by changing the used material and their role on the field. Second, PCH is one of the few team sports in which women and men play on the same team. Physical dis/abilities, as well as the technologization of the body through the use of a powerchair, are considered by most of the actors of PCH as canceling the presumed physical advantages of men over women. Nevertheless, the experiences of Swiss PCH players should be understood as also being shaped by other salient systems of oppression, and the privileges they hold from belonging to "unmarked" social categories (6) as white, self-identified cis-heterosexuals living in a rich Western European country.

# Literature review: Studies on experiences of men and women with dis/abilities in sport

Studies of the interrelations between dis/ability and gender gradually emerged in the late 1980s (4, 7–9). Yet, it is only more recently that intersectionality specialists have begun to take dis/ability into account in their analyses[2]. Moreover, there is still little research on how dis/ability intersects with gender in the context of sport.

Feminist dis/ability scholarship[3] show that women with dis/abilities are often "degendered" and "desexualized" as a result of (hetero)sexist and ableist norms. Sexism and ableism mutually contribute to stereotypical representations of women with dis/abilities as unfit sexual or romantic partners, inadequate mothers, passive and compliant, helpless victims, etc.—facilitating forms of exploitation (7, 14, 15). Only a few sociologists have studied the experiences of women with dis/abilities in sport (16–22). Most of this scholarship emphasizes that practicing sport allows women with dis/abilities to experience their bodies as sensitive and performant. Doing sport enables women to regain control of their bodies after an accident, which can lead to some forms of empowerment. Some scholars also take a more critical perspective on the

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[2] It should be noted that these authors have different takes on intersectionality theories.

[3] For more exhaustive syntheses of this literature see Hall (10), Mohamed and Shefer (11), Simplican (12), as well as Naples et al. (13).

experiences of women with dis/abilities in sport. Hargreaves [(23), p. 186–187] explains that unlike men with dis/abilities, "disabled women are affected by 'commodified anti-athletic stereotypes of femininity that do not make the sporting body into a physical capital to the same extent." Female athletes with dis/abilities who embody the supercrip[4] figure are less rewarded than male athletes with dis/abilities (22). Authors also shed light on the sexism that women with dis/abilities face within sport; explaining that, in the face of endemic sexism, some women with dis/abilities gather to practice solely among women and collectively resist ordinary sexism they experience (18, 20, 21, 25).

Although fewer in number, scholars[5] have also begun to examine how living with dis/abilities affects men's gender' enacting. These authors show that men with dis/abilities lose some (but not all) of their "male privileges" through the process of "stigmatization" (27) related to society's perception of dis/abilities (28–30). They document how the acquirement of physical impairments constitutes a "biographical disruption" (31) for men (32, 33). Kvigne et al. (34) explain that men with dis/abling illnesses face significant structural barriers to enacting some of the characteristics or behaviors associated with "hegemonic masculinity" (35); physical strength, power, self-control, aggressiveness, competitiveness, risk-taking, denial of weaknesses, rejection of help, providing for financial needs (33, 36, 37). Therefore, men with dis/abilities are likely to be considered weak, dependent, passive, and pitiful, as well as asexual and ungendered (29, 38).

Research on the experiences of men with dis/abilities in sport shows that for men who have acquired physical dis/abilities in adulthood, committing to parasports, them to restore the social status associated with the embodiment of normative masculinity through the enacting of strength, risk-taking, and self-confidence (39–43). Other authors investigate the "role of sport in negotiating the dilemma of disabled masculinity" for men living with dis/abilities since an early age (44, 45). Paccaud and Marcellini (45) show that for a man living with "severe" physical dis/abilities since birth, commitment to powerchair

sports allows him to be recognized by others as a man, without having to enact physical strength.

The body of research briefly presented above provides an important foundation from which to further investigate the intersectionality between dis/ability and gender in sport. Nevertheless, the following two gaps should be observed in future research. First, only a minority of the literature I present here refers directly to the concept of intersectionality; most of it focuses on sports experiences of men or women with dis/abilities, form either a dis/ability or a gender perspective. Thus, these authors usually theorize dis/ability and gender in isolation from each other, most often considering either dis/ability or gender as a "primary system of oppression" (46). In doing so, they engage in what Collins and Chepp (47) called "monocategorical thinking". As a result, the mutual conditioning of dis/ability and gender is layered on after analyzing the dynamics of the gender order and the ability-disability order, respectively. However, as Hamilton [(48), p. 318] points out, "mutual conditioning does not capture what intersectionalities scholars describe as interlocking systems." Second, by primarily focusing on the empowerment processes of people with dis/abilities through sport, some research has not fully captured the systems of difference and inequality that govern these social practices—the ability-disability system in particular. The purpose of this paper is to offer tools for scholars to overcome these gaps in future research.

# Theoretical framework: The intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability

This section presents a conceptual framework that allows for integrating dis/ability as a category of analysis for intersectionality studies in sociology of sport.

Since the "biologization" of society that took place during the Age of Enlightenment, actors from the medical social world have defined body normalcy and have aimed to cure and redress bodies labeled as being pathological or abnormal (49). According to this medical perspective, "disability" is conceived as an individual-based problem that is a direct result of bodily impairments and the "deviance that [people with dis/abilities] maintain with respect to the social norm" [(50), p. 95]. The effort undertaken to reduce disability has focused on transforming individuals by treating them and bringing them back into the ability-disability norm.

Since the 1970s, the "social model of disability" has engaged in radical criticism of the medical model (3). The main conceptual innovation offered by the "social model of disability" is the reversing of the chain of causality behind dis/ability. The origin of dis/ability is no longer considered to be related to individuals but exclusively to the capitalist system that fails to meet their needs (51). Individuals are not dis/abled because of

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4   The concept of "supercrip" refers to people living with dis/abilities who "go beyond" and "overcome" their dis/abilities to achieve professional, athletic, and social success. While, from an ableist perspective, these accomplishments are considered to be grandiose, critical dis/ability studies and crip studies remind us that these achievements would be banalities of everyday life if they were not made complicated by an environment unsuitable for people with dis/abilities. Indeed, the narrative of the supercrip figure always strives to overcome and erase dis/ability, while invisibilizing the material and ideological structures that impede various achievements (24).

5   For more exhaustive syntheses of this literature see Shuttleworth et al. (26).

their impairments but because of the material and social barriers of the society in which they live (52). This allows for a de-essentialization of dis/ability, which is then considered "a matter of societal organization and social construction rather than of biology and the individual" [(53), p. 113].

The first limitation of the social model—long highlighted in theoretical debates—is that it eludes the issue of the body and its functions, which leads to the establishment of dualism between dis/ability (as a social disadvantage) and bodily impairments (54–56). This is all the more problematic for research in the sociology of sport, which investigates social phenomena in which the body plays a central role. Among the advocates of this critic, Kafer [(57), p. 7] refers to a political/relational model that offers a more embodied perspective. She explains:

> "[T]he social model [...] erases the lived realities of impairment; [...] it overlooks the often-disabling effects of our bodies. People with chronic illness, pain, and fatigue have been among the most critical of this aspect of the social model, rightly noting that social and structural changes will do little to make one's joints stop aching or to alleviate back pain. Nor will changes in architecture and attitude heal diabetes or cancer or fatigue."

The HDM-DCP is useful for conceptualizing the bodily experiences of people with dis/abilities in interaction with the environment (3). According to this model, people living with impairments, through their interactions with personal, community, and societal environment, can be in a social participation situation (i.e., the full realization of able-bodied life habits) in some environments or a dis/abling situation (i.e., the limitation of the fulfillment of abled-bodied life habits) in some others. Although the HDM-DPC can be criticized on other grounds[6], the interactional way in which dis/ability is conceptualized is in line with intersectionality theories, which consider gender and race as dynamic and relational processes and not individual properties (6, 59).

A second critique of the social model that should be addressed to make it compliant with an intersectional approach is that it does not allow for an understanding of the normative system by which individuals are differentiated and hierarchized on the basis of their abilities and disabilities. Moreover, it problematizes dis/ability as a primary system of oppression. The contributions of critical dis/ability studies and crip theories[7] are useful in resolving this two-sided pitfall. Indeed, several authors have questioned the "state of nature" of bodies, showing that bodies and their functions are always defined

by socially constructed discourses and norms (49). Garland-Thomson [(4), p. 6] refers to an "ability-disability system" that "produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies." This system normalizes and benefits certain bodies and functions, which it sets up as standards—the ability-disability norms—and devaluates the bodies and functions that deviate from these standards. Non-normative bodies are then defined in terms of deficits, impairments, and disabilities (53). This system contributes to the production and legitimization of "an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment" [(4), p. 5] to the advantage of those who can use their bodies in accordance with ability-disability norms. Following Garland-Thomson, some authors use the term "able-bodied," which refers to the culturally shared definition of what it means to have normal physical and cognitive abilities (61). Other scholars draw parallels between the ability-disability system and other systems of difference and inequality. Over the past decade, the concept of ableism (62) has gradually gained popularity. Campbell [(62), p. 5] defines ableism as a "network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human."

These amendments to the "social model of disability" allow for understanding the intertwining of different social forces and the intersectionality of relations of domination, which facilitates moving beyond an "additive model of oppression" to engage with an "interlocking model of oppression" [(2), p. 543].

To study the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability, the theoretical tools presented above must be compliant with gender theories usually used to apprehend the interrelations between dis/ability and gender; the same reasoning holds for other systems of difference and inequality.

If disability can only be conceived in relation to ability, the same reasoning should be applied to gender. Connell's work seems particularly well-suited to address this issue. Indeed, Connell demonstrates the inherently relational nature of masculinities and femininities, which require studying one in relation to the other to understand each of them (63). Furthermore, Connell (64) conceptualizes gender as a social "configuration of practices" produced and reproduced in different social contexts. Contemporary Western societies are structured by the generalized domination of men over women, through the power relations between each gender as well as within each gender (35). The domination of men over women is accomplished through a strategy that Connell refers to as "hegemonic masculinity." According to Connell, both men and women do not form homogeneous social groups. Gender practices are enacted by individuals belonging to various social groups in terms of class, ethnicity, sexuality, and dis/ability, among others. Thus, Connell explains that, among men, certain social groups are in a position of subordination to hegemonic practices (e.g., men whose sexual practices

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6    See Paccaud [(58), p. 46–50].

7    For an overview of critical dis/ability studies and crip theories, see Meekosha and Shuttleworth (60).

deviate from heterosexuality). Moreover, other masculinities are "marginalized," such as working-class masculinities, non-white masculinities, or "dis/abled masculinities" (26). She further distinguishes "complicit masculinities" from hegemonic masculinity, with the former being embodied by men who only partially behave in the manner prescribed by the hegemonic model but maintain it (passively), thus benefiting from patriarchy (35).

However, to ensure compliance with intersectionality, some adjustments to Connell's theoretical work are required (48). Indeed, Connell theorizes gender as an independent system of domination (i.e., the gender order). In contrast, as Hamilton et al. [(48), p. 319] note, intersectionality theories consider "axes in a matrix of domination as inextricably bound and mutually dependent form the start." According to Collins (2), hegemonic masculinity goes beyond gender: "The organization of power in a given society is better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other" [(65), p. 2]. Thus, although Connell's and Collins' works are convergent in many ways, an intersectionality approach is strained by Connell's idea that "the concentration of power in the hands of men leaves limited scope for [femininities] to construct institutionalized power relationships over another kind of femininity" [(66), p. 357]. For Collins (59), different femininities, like masculinities, are also constructed in relation to each other and hierarchized among themselves. Hamilton et al. [(48), p. 321] add that "all femininities may be subordinate to hegemonic masculinities, but some femininities play powerful roles in reproducing other forms of inequality." According to these authors, both men and women can be oppressors and oppressed based on their positions vis-à-vis hegemonic expectations, which are shaped by multiple and interlocking systems of oppression. Thus, hegemonic femininity corresponds to a position of power (over other women and some men) in the matrix and women who embody it can derive significant benefits. Although approximating hegemonic femininity "requires women to defer to some men, motivations for doing so often involve pursuit of considerable individual and group benefits" (p. 326).

Having outlined the theoretical foundations for addressing the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability and gender, the next sections of this article examine the case of PCH in order to demonstrate how this concept operates in practice. Following the exposition of the methodology, I investigate five aspects of PCH: (1) the principles of sports classification; (2) the distribution and hierarchization of players' roles on the field; (3) players' athletic and aesthetic performances; (4) the unequal distribution of capital between players; and (5) the activism of players regarding ableism and sexism.

## Materials and methods

This paper is based on my doctoral thesis in which I aimed to understand how the commitment to a sports career in PCH forms and transforms the life trajectories of people with "severe" physical dis/abilities (58). Between 2015 and 2020, I conducted a multi-sited ethnography (67) of PCH in French- and German-speaking Switzerland, as an abled-bodied researcher in sports sciences interested in adapted physical activities. I conducted participant observations (550 h in total) at national and international competitions. I also observed practices in three different clubs. At the beginning of the survey, I was a complete outsider in the field. To gain acceptance among the PCH community, I assumed different roles and positions based on the demands of PCH actors (68). Thus, at times, I attended these activities as a discreet observer, at other times I helped set up the sports material, and on other occasions, I assumed the role of a caregiver for some players. I recorded all my observations in a field journal and took many photos and videos of the observed practices. In addition, I conducted a questionnaire survey to collect socio-demographic data on all players in Switzerland. A total of 99 players out of a total of 115 answered the questionnaire. I completed these data by collecting numerous documents (successive regulations of the practice, archives of some clubs and the Swiss Powerchair Hockey Committee, players' classification files, etc.). Finally, I carried out a series of 11 case studies with players (six men and five women), to understand their life trajectories.

The methodology for studying the life course of PCH players involved three data collection tools. First, I conducted a "life-course interview" (69). The initial assignment of the interviews consisted of the following question: "Could you explain how you became involved in Powerchair Hockey?". When necessary, follow-up questions were then asked to investigate the other life trajectories of the interviewees (family, school, work, housing, insurance, medical, etc.). A few weeks later, I conducted a seven-day immersion in the life of each participant, where I moved through and interacted with their material and social environment (70) to capture their commitment to sport, as well as their various other commitments and daily habits. On the last day of immersion, I concluded with a "photo elicitation interview" (71), during which the interviewees were asked about twenty pictures they chose as best representing their different life phases (72). The interviews lasted from 1 h 50 min to 4 h 50 min.

I based my analysis on an inductive approach and performed a thematic analysis (73) of the data set. I paid particular attention to the "systems of symbolic opposition" (74) that emerged in the interviewee's discourses to uncover the meanings they give to their various experiences, status, and positions over time. Then, I modeled the "objectivable dimensions" of the various life trajectories of each player [(58), p. 115–119], and conducted a comparative analysis of their life courses.

Throughout the research protocol, I applied principles of relational ethics (75) in an effort to recognize and value mutual respect, dignity, and social relationships with participants. I have built research relationships with participants in a collaboration maintained from the beginning of data collection until publication. Participants were given the opportunity to examine and comment on the results of my analyses.

# Results

## Principles of classification in Powerchair Hockey

Since the beginning of modern sports, the classification of athletes has been an important concern in sport. From an institutional perspective, this dispositive (76) aims to establish fairness within competitions as well as elements of uncertainty in the result. To govern (and create) differences between athletes, categories of age, weight, and sex have been introduced based on the observation and measurement of biological differences in the body (77). Within able-bodied sports, these forms of classification are now mostly established and recognized as "natural".

Throughout its history, PCH has always been played in competition within a unique category. The defining of the contours of this category does not follow the same principles as those of able-bodied sports, and the definition of this category has also shifted over time (58, 78).

Since 2016, the following regulation has applied. To be eligible, a player is required to: (1) Meet one of the following impairment types (impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of motion, or impaired coordination); (2) have a maximum of 4,5 points by adding the results of both arm and trunk MRC[8] strength tests. Thus, the eligibility system selects the type of impairment and measures the function (strength) that is deemed to be the most decisive for athletic performances. In other words, it is not about assessing the biological differences between bodies, but rather assessing the impact of impairments for the considered sports tasks.

Although all eligible players play in the same and unique category, a classification system has been implemented to ensure fairness between players as well as between teams. A commission is in charge of assessing the degree of impact of the impairments in practice. Based on this assessment, each player is given a certain number of points. Players who have a great deal of strength and mobility in their arms and trunk and fine motor skills in the hands, who can powerfully shoot the ball, bend forward to reach the ball, and operate the joystick of their powerchair with precision, are scored with 4.5 points. On the other hand, players who cannot move their arms, can hardly turn their head, cannot shoot the ball other than with a cross fixed to the front of the powerchair (called "T-stick") and who have a limited range of vision in a static position are scored 0.5 points. At competitions, the combined points of all five team members on the field cannot exceed a total of 12 points, which requires teams to be composed of players with a variety of functional profiles. In addition, at least two T-stick players per team must be on the field at all times. This dispositive allows the constitution of teams that are "equivalent" from a functional perspective. It also ensures a place in the game for those most impacted by physical impairments in practice. Thus, depending on the degree of physical dis/abilities, as their disease progresses and physical impairments worsen, players can adapt the way of playing while remaining indispensable to their team.

Among those involved in PCH (players, referees, coaches, spectators, caregivers), there is a consensus on the principle of excluding people whose dis/abilities are "not severe enough"[9]. This consensus builds on two agonistic principles.

First, there are identity- and community-based dynamics. Indeed, the doctor who developed the first version of this eligibility regulation explained that:

> "The Duchenne, who are the majority of players, often already have a very short life expectancy, so it is very important to give them a place, to protect them from being excluded from their only sport."[10]

David[11], a player living with progressive muscular dystrophy, stated:

> "I find it okay that people who don't use a powerchair are excluded. It's our sport, actually. At the limit, I would be okay with including people who have a progressive condition and who don't use a powerchair yet but will in the future."

Moreover, this consensus builds on protectionist considerations, as Anna explained:

> "This is important because otherwise, those who have the most severe physical disabilities are likely to be left out of the game."

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8   The MRC scale, which was developed by the Medical Research Council, is a gradation scale for muscle strength (79). The score of 0 corresponds to having no strength at all and the score of 5 corresponds to the strength expected from an able-bodied person.

9   Those who are not eligible are encouraged to take on other roles such as coach, referee, caregiver, or supporter.

10   Quotations have been translated either from French, German, Swiss-German dialects, or Dutch by myself.

11   The names of the research participants quoted in this article have been changed.

Thus, it is from a protectionist, medical, and identity-based logic, centered mainly around an etiological category—Duchenne muscular dystrophy—that PCH actors make sense of this eligibility system: to protect the players considered to be "the most disabled".

Throughout the development of these regulations, it appears that a gender-based classification of players was never considered. When I raised this question to founding members of the International Committee for Powerchair Hockey, they were surprised that I would even question this possibility. Furthermore, in all of the International Committee for Powerchair Hockey Meetings Minutes, this issue is never mentioned, and when I raised this topic with the person in charge of implementing the current classification system, he said:

> "Selective classification is important to allow everyone to participate reducing inequity to its minimum. For instance, if you do not separate men soccer players from women players, men would most likely always win. What sport needs is to have unpredictable competition, while allowing everyone to become world-class players. In Powerchair Hockey, impairment is the unit of classification."

Among the players I met, the mixing of "sex categories" does not seem to be a matter of debate, but rather to be taken for granted[12]. This is indeed what Florian explained, whose opinion is shared by many players, both men and women:

> "I haven't really thought about it. It's not like with able-bodied people, for whom, generally, men have more strength than women. Well, here, because of disability, there are often women who have more strength than men. Therefore, gender mixing has never been a problem. I never wondered about it, because I quickly understood why it was like that. Already by the fact that we have disabilities, well, the reason why it's separated in other sports is not relevant".

PCH players subscribe to the belief that, among able-bodied people, men have higher physical abilities than women and men therefore have an advantage over women in the sport. However, they consider that, in PCH, the fact that all the players have significant physical dis/abilities invalidates the supposed physical advantages of men

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12    Yet, in 2017, among the 99 players who took part in my questionnaire survey (of a total of 115 existing Swiss players), there was a large majority of men: 82 male players to 17 female players. This wide disparity between "sex categories" has also been observed by Richard [(80), p. 281] in Power-Soccer, the main other team sport played with powerchairs. Richard explains that "for athletes, this is explained by the fact that potential female players may be turned off by the idea of playing a 'male' sport, Soccer."

over women. Therefore, although they believe that "sex categories" are legitimate for able-bodied sports, gender-based classifications are not in PCH. This result confirms the findings of Richard et al. (21), who explain that, in Power-Soccer, physical impairments and the technologizing of bodies blurs the assumed physiological differences between women and men, thus legitimizing sports confrontations between the two.

The PCH classifications system operates as a dispositive of governmentality that categorizes and produces differences among players in a different and less binary way than able-bodied sports institutions. This alternative way of producing differentiation triggers some actors of PCH to challenge some of their cultural beliefs on dis/ability and gender. The following field journal fragment, which recounts exchanges I had with a classifier, provides a good illustration of this phenomenon:

> While I am watching a game from the bleachers next to a classifier, she comments on the way a player she has just classified is playing. "See, it doesn't look like it, but we assigned Melina to class 4. If you look at her, she seems fragile, thin, girly, and... with her breathing apparatus on... If you compare her to Joshua, you would think that he would have a higher class than her. You know, he looks tough, a strong boy! But he was assigned class 3, so lower than Melina. First, I couldn't believe it. I never would have expected that."

This fragment demonstrates the extent to which the classification system challenges the cultural beliefs of the classifier, who is herself able-bodied. The way she usually makes sense of dis/ability and gender properties of a person conflicts with what she observes. The ableist and sexist stereotypes, related to the appearance of bodies (i.e., women being naturally weaker, more fragile than men) are shattered, which leads her to re-evaluate her way of hierarchizing the players. The classification system operates as a certification process, not of the appearance of the body, but rather of the physical dis/abilities in situation, while also opening up rooms for challenging the ideology of a binary gender and the traditional organizational arrangement between masculinity and femininity in the social world of sport.

In the social world of able-bodied sport, the naturalized separation of women and men into two groups participates in the construction of men and women as two distinct and mutually homogeneous categories and contributes to the subordination of women as a group [(20), p. 110]. In PCH, through the innovating way in which differentiation on the basis of dis/abilities is performed, it is the absence of gender bi-categorization that PCH actors consider natural, which provides a clear example of the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability.

## Principles for the assignment and hierarchization of roles within a team

In PCH, within a team, each person has a specific role and mission. Players are divided into two main groups: those whose physical dis/abilities are such that they can handle the cross with an upper limb (called the "cross players") and those whose physical dis/abilities are such that they cannot handle the cross with an upper limb and who play with a T-stick (called the "T-stick players"). Depending on this, players do not accomplish the same work on the field. The division of labor of players within the teams is further refined according to strength, physical dis/ability to pilot the powerchair as well as physical dis/ability to turn the head.

Depending on their role, players are not expected to develop and perform the same physical, technical, and strategical skills. According to Swiss national teams coaches' evaluation grid of players' skills, cross players should be able to "complete actions almost without error and with efficiency", "hold and pass the ball without error", as well as "have an optimal control of the ball". T-stick players should be able to "block on the right opponent", "execute correct, efficient blocking and carry it through to the end of the action", as well as "mark, constrain and disturb almost any opponent".

Throughout my observations, I did not notice any gender-based distribution of players' roles and missions on the field. Moreover, various coaches and players claimed that there is no gender bias in the distribution of labor on the field. A coach of the national team explained:

> "Of course, women and men can have the same roles on the field. As a coach, I just look at the physical abilities, what they can do physically."

Florian, a player on the national team, added:

> "It doesn't appear to me that there is a difference. There are women and men who play in all positions. As striker or defender. No, I really don't think gender plays any role, it's more about the physicality."

In PCH, everybody seems to agree that all the roles are essential to reach the main collective objective (i.e., winning). Nevertheless, power relations and the "hierarchical imaginary of the bodies" (77) that this division of labor contributes to creating, transforming, and/or reinforcing deserve to be further investigated. Indeed, analysis of discourses of people involved in PCH about the roles of cross players vs. the role of T-stick players highlights a hierarchy between the two; the ability-disability system and gender appearing to mutually build and reinforce this hierarchy. As an official explained, "a cross player is precious for a team. We are always looking for cross players". Throughout their sports career and as their disease evolves, the majority of

players transition from playing with a cross to playing with a T-stick. Thus, PCH clubs are constantly looking for new cross players. Conversely, they do not seem to actively recruit T-stick players. As a result, players who have a higher volume of physical abilities are particularly valued because of their rarity. Moreover, the work done by T-stick players is often invisiblized and is not recognized to the same extent as the work accomplished by cross players. For example, until very recently, there were no prizes or awards for the best T-stick players in competitions, whereas, as in able-bodied team sports, the best scorers were almost systematically rewarded. Furthermore, gender mutually shapes the social value of these two roles and the position that players hold in the matrix of domination is related to it. Indeed, the analysis sheds light on a normative system that values cross players to the detriment of T-stick players; the first category being considered related to masculinity, and the second to femininity. In that sense, ableism and sexism intertwine and mutually reinforce the hierarchization of bodies. This can be seen in the following field journal fragment:

> Between two games, a coach and the mothers of some players comment on the fact that Thomas is playing with a T-stick for the first time in competition. The coach explains that this transition from playing with a cross to playing with a T-stick is a path that is often quite difficult for players: "especially for men". A mother asks him why. He replies: "Well, I don't want to generalize, but guys want to be strikers, to be in the spotlight, so maybe it's a little less fun for them with a T-stick. And girls... for girls it's different, maybe it's more in their nature to stay a little bit more behind, to be at the disposal of the team." His answer seems to convince the group. One of the mothers adds: "Yes, now that I think about it, Céline, who is a fighter, well, she has well accepted the T-stick".

This result partly confirms the findings of Deal (81), Wickman (82, 83), and Berger (41) on other dis/ability sports. These scholars pointed out the existence of a hierarchy among athletes with dis/abilities: those with acquired physical impairments and with relatively minor dis/abilities stand at the top of the hierarchy, whereas those with congenital impairments and/or "severe" dis/abilities stand at the bottom of it. As in PCH, the athletes these authors met both activated and reproduced the conceptions of body normalcy that contribute to their oppression. However, applying an intersectional analysis demonstrates that the hierarchization of roles in PCH is not only shaped by the ability-disability system but is rather interlockingly determined by multiple systems of differences and inequality. Although my focus here is on dis/ability and gender, analyses show that players' class and migration background also play a role in the division of labor and the value attributed to the different roles [(58), p. 284–301].

## Undifferentiable athletic performances, yet different aesthetic performances between men and women

After more than 5 years of *in situ* observation, and after analyzing numerous videos of PCH games, I am still not even close to identifying any significant differences between the way men and women perform athletically in PCH. Indeed, it is very difficult, if not impossible to differentiate between the way men and women with similar degree and type of dis/abilities learn and perform the physical, technical, and strategical skills necessary to play PCH. Moreover, all the players with several years of practice demonstrate a strong will to take risks and overcome their limits, displaying perseverance, courage, and resistance to pain. To summarize, it can be said that both male and female players embody, albeit to different extents, the figure of the supercrip athlete.

Male players I interviewed noted, sometimes with surprise, that there is no difference between the way women and men play PCH. For example, Nicolas explained:

> "Training sessions are the same for everybody. We train hard, we repeat the exercises, and we improve. In competition, men don't take more risks nor are better at holding duels or anything like that. It surprised me at first, to see women playing exactly the same way as men."

Yet, some female players I interviewed explained that to make their way within the team, they adopt certain behaviors they associate with masculinity while distancing themselves from certain behaviors they associate with femininity. Maria explained:

> "Sometimes, I guess I just go a tad harder. For example, when it's a duel, especially when it's a guy against me, I push a little harder. I impose myself. Because I'm a woman and there aren't many of us, I have to show off a little. I can't play like a girl, and well, I have more strength than most of them, so I can do it."

In parallel, the majority of female players wish to appear as aesthetically feminine while playing PCH. As Maria, Monika and Céline told me, dressing in sports gear is experienced as a barrier to the way they want to "do gender" (84). At times, they clash with their coaches in an attempt to wear different outfits, which they consider to be more feminine, or to wear make-up and have a refined hairstyle, as the following field diary fragment illustrates:

> Céline is the only female player present that day. She is also the only one not wearing a sports outfit. She wears makeup and designer clothes. On several occasions during the training session, players, the coach, and the mother of

a player make jokes and negative comments about Céline's appearance, which is deemed inappropriate: "This is not a fashion show, this is sports". Later, as Céline already left, they refer to her as a "diva", a "miss" and a "princess" with a pejorative undertone.

In a social context mostly inhabited by men, the aesthetic performances of female players can be interpreted as a strategy to assert themselves as women. When the ideology of binary gender cannot be achieved and confirmed on the basis of differences in physical functions and athletic performances, the difference is created in another way—through aesthetic performance. However, the way they do gender is subject to disapproval, especially by some male coaches. It is indeed perceived by men (as well as some women) as incompatible with athletic performance.

The results confirm that the figure of the supercrip athlete crystallizes ableist values (24): overcoming one's limits, determination, independence, and achieving greatness. I also demonstrate that the local incarnation of this figure is mutually shaped by gender. Indeed, values associated with the supercrip figure intersect with configurations of gender practices associated with "hegemonic masculinity." In this regard, for male PCH players, incarnating the supercrip figure contributes to being recognized as appropriately masculine. Nevertheless, in the context of PCH, the configuration of practices that embodies the local response to the perpetuation of patriarchy does not imply the physical superiority of men over women. If male PCH players try to approximate hegemonic masculinity, their efforts are not directed at achieving normative conformity in terms of physical abilities. In that regard, one can see forms of reconfiguration of power relations related to dis/abilities that create opportunities for challenging gender norms. For female players, embodying the figure of the supercrip athlete implies, to some extent, endorsing masculinity, or at least rejecting certain practices of hegemonic femininity. They must therefore make an extra effort to be perceived as appropriately feminine, as the values associated with hegemonic femininity in (hetero)sexist contexts are more related to ideas such as passivity and collaboration (4). They try, to the extent of their opportunities within the androcentric context of PCH, to assert certain femininity to be recognized as "proper" women. Although their margins of maneuver are limited, to some extent, female PCH players, by practicing a difficult sport involving agility, courage, resistance, control, risk-taking, self-improvement, and technical and strategic prowess, nevertheless challenge the social representations of people with dis/abilities as passive, deficient, fragile, and incompetent. They also challenge gender norms by constructing themselves as active subjects. However, when some of them do gender in a more normative way—which can be understood as an attempt to counteract processes of degendering and desexualization experienced by women with dis/abilities

(4, 7, 53)—they are delegitimized within the group. Indeed, in the context of PCH, the approximating of hegemonic femininity comes at a cost, as it is deemed by a majority of PCH players to be incompatible with athletic performance.

To summarize, men who most accurately approximate the supercrip figure can rely on both gender and the ability-disability system to enhance their position in the matrix of domination. Those who do so participate in the oppression of both people with more severe dis/abilities and women, especially women with "severe" dis/abilities. Women who most closely approximate the supercrip figure face contradictory injunctions in negotiating their location in the matrix of domination. They have to find a critical compromise between the performance of athletic dis/ability and the performance of hegemonic femininity to reach a favorable location in the matrix of domination. If they perform either too well on one side or too well on the other, they may not gain as much benefit. Those who manage to find this balance participate in the oppression of people with more "severe" dis/abilities—among them especially women who resist hegemonic femininity. Thus, they participate in shoring up the existing order, which, although is to the advantage of their male counterparts, nevertheless offers them a favorable location in the matrix of domination.

## Gender biases regarding symbolic and social capital related to athletic performances

Throughout my research, I observed a significant number of players, both male and female, performing with prowess in terms of athletic skills. Discourses with players and coaches suggested that they consider "normal" the fact that, at a similar degree and type of physical dis/abilities, women demonstrate the same level of athletic skills as men. As Noah, a Swiss national team player, explained:

> "It's clear that there are quite a few women who play at the same level as the men, even better for some. I'm in class 2.5 and so is Anna. If we have a duel between us, I don't know who would win."

This suggests that the interactional configuration of PCH creates opportunities for changes in the way the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability and gender traditionally operates. At the interpersonal level, there is a form of acceptance of women's athletic skills and a reconsideration of the typical hierarchy between men and women in the world of sport.

The performance of high-level athletic skills participates in the embodiment of the figure of the supercrip athlete and allows for the accumulation of social and symbolic capital (85). Players who perform with a lower level of athletic skills are rewarded with less symbolic and social capital, which

reinforces the ableist inequity between players. Men who have the highest level of athletic skills are often referred to by other players as examples to follow. Therefore, these players have an active role in the transmission of athletic skills to newcomers, as part of a "peer-to-peer emulation" process (86). Florian explained:

> "When I started, the one who had the most technical skills, my model for me, was Christoph. He was my model, my idol. I set myself the goal to surpass him, and I did. Then, when Tim started, I was his model, and he eventually overtook me. The best is always above and young players are inspired by them."

By contrast, I did not witness any process of peer-to-peer active transmission of athletic skills from female PCH players to novice players. Furthermore, throughout the interviews, a female player was never mentioned as a "role model" or an "idol" by any player. All players described to me role models as meeting the following two criteria. First, they have all been members of a national team during their careers. Secondly, they all have earned awards at high-level competitions. These awards, which are given by members of the National or International Powerchair Hockey Committee and attest to the players' athletic skills, are part of the institutional definition of good sportsmanship.

When men are awarded these distinctions, this generates unanimous admiration and respect from all those involved in PCH and increases their social and symbolic capital. When women who are members of national teams receive prestigious distinctions, it does not confer them the same capital as that of their male counterparts. On the contrary, their athletic skills are sometimes even delegitimized by some PCH players, as I observed at the European Championship in 2016—a competition at the end of which a female player was awarded the distinction of "best player". The following excerpt of my field diary illustrates this point:

> After the closing ceremony and the awarding of medals, several players, both male and female, comment on the fact that the "best player" award of the tournament was given to a Finnish female player. All of them expressed their disagreement with the awarding of this player. "It makes no sense, there are really better players than her. It's nonsense. You see, compared to Maas (a player who received this award several times and who was disqualified for unsportsmanship during the championship), there is no comparison, even with many others. She doesn't have the level." Everyone agrees.

Thus, although men's athletic skills, when institutionally recognized, are never questioned by PCH players, women's

athletic skills may be collectively delegitimized. When women achieve the normative expectations in terms of athletic skills, their athletic performances are not recognized to the same degree as those of men. As a result, the top of the hierarchy of PCH is for them much more difficult to access. Female players face barriers to embodying the role of peer-model. They are assigned the position of learning from men and rarely take on the role of passing on sport-related skills. In the social world of PCH, peer-to-peer emulation is gendered, and women are excluded from it, although the sport is mixed in terms of "sex category". Additionally, sports participation offers less potential for empowerment for women than for men. This can be interpreted as a reminiscence of the androcentric norms in the social world of able-bodied sport (87, 88). "Norms that privilege characteristics associated with masculinity" [(89), p. 26] coupled with the cultural sexism that a large proportion of players have embodied, contribute to the devaluing of women's athletic performance. Although at the interpersonal level, the mixing of sex categories seems to create opportunities for changes in the interrelation of dis/ability and gender, at the community level, this is not the case. Indeed, in the absence of clear physical differences between female and male players, PCH actors find other ways to assert and embody the binary in ways that naturalize it. Richard et al. [(21), p. 12] explain that, in Power-Soccer, "if the players say that 'physically,' women and men are on an equal footing, in their speeches the same athletes, both women and men, establish behavioral and emotional differences between them." In PCH, players rely on similar arguments to justify the hierarchy between male and female players. Thus, at the community level, the ideology of the gender binary persists, even in the absence of clear physical differences between female and male players.

## Powerchair Hockey players' activism against ableism and sexism

In PCH, I observed a collective action to fight against ableism suffered by the players in their daily life. Indeed, in a quasi-univocal sense, players conceive their commitment to this sport, which has been developed by and for them, as a means of fighting for access to participation in sports, and thus of having a so-called "normal" social participation. Anja, whose discourse is representative of this form of activism, explained:

> "It is important for us to have this sport, our sport, because we created it, so we can also have access to sport. It's a question of equality. It's not because we are disabled that we shouldn't be able to play sports."

Nevertheless, by embodying the figure of the supercrip athlete, PCH players—those who are most committed to

competition in particular—simultaneously engage in producing difference and hierarchy within the social group of people with dis/abilities: those who manage to overcome their dis/abilities on one side and those who do not on the other. Nicolas' discourse is particularly illustrative of this process:

> "It's important to show that even if you're disabled, you can achieve great goals. Not just staying at home and doing nothing. To show the world that you can accomplish great things."

Yet, as already mentioned, players location in the matrix of domination is co-conditioned by whether or not they embody able-bodied gender norms.

Unlike resistance against ableism, female PCH players' resistance against sexism does not rise to a collective scale. This contrasts with the findings of scholars who studied other parasports mixed in terms of sex categories, such as Power-Soccer (21) and Wheelchair Basketball (20). These authors demonstrated that, in the face of sexism in parasport, some female athletes regrouped to form teams composed of a majority of women. This allows them to avoid having to fight on a permanent basis to "impose" themselves as women in a group of men. Yet, in PCH, female players, almost unanimously, rather want to stay "one of the few women" in a male-dominated team. Martina and Céline explained:

> "I definitely don't want to be part of a team of women! If we were more, then there would be totally different group relationships. It would be more like a cat fight."
> "I wouldn't play in a women's team, not at all. I prefer competing with guys."

In PCH, female players distance themselves from certain forms of sociability that they associate negatively with femininity, such as being jealous or gossiping. Confronted with femininity stereotypes that are negatively connoted and in which they do not recognize themselves, they do not identify themselves with sportswomen as a class. On the one hand, this represents a barrier to the building of a collective awareness of sexism. On the other hand, the attitudes of female PCH players concerning gender and feminism contribute to their integration into a male-dominated group. Moreover, female PCH players reported that "even if we wanted to get together to play powerchair hockey, it wouldn't be possible" (Anja). The main argument behind this is that, given their dis/abilities and the lake of human-based and material-based support, it would be very difficult, if not impossible for them to commute dozens or even hundreds of kilometers each week to practice among women. This result raises the following question. Throughout the discussions I had with female players, all of them but one expressed the desire to approximate hegemonic femininity. Yet, considering the sexism they face in PCH and the limited margins

of maneuver they find to incarnate hegemonic femininity: why do they maintain their commitment to PCH?

My analysis revealed different reasons that account for why female PCH players maintain their commitment. First, some of the interviewees reported having had pleasant experiences of sport with their brothers and fathers before their PCH career. This suggests that women who engage in PCH may have internalized some "'inverted' gendered dispositions" (90) before committing to this sport. Indeed, Mennesson (90) explains that among the social factors that favor women's commitment to a career in a "male sport," gender socialization plays a decisive role. Therefore, it is likely that among women with "severe" physical dis/abilities, only those who are particularly well-disposed to navigate this androcentric environment would engage in the first place.

Second, I hypothesize that if female PCH players maintain their commitment despite the sexism they face, it means that they are nevertheless receiving some benefits from practicing PCH. Female players reported having a lot of fun while participating in PCH; whether through the experience of driving fast with their sports powerchair, the experience of victory, the experience of traveling for competitions, or even the experience of belonging to a community. Thus, although athletic performances of women do not provide the same amount of capital as those of men, female players, by embodying sportswomanship, nevertheless acquire a certain symbolic and social capital, which allows them to negotiate a more favorable location in the matrix of domination. The capital they accumulate during their sports career may be sufficient for them to agree to maintain their commitment despite the constraints they face to do gender the way they would like to.

Third, all women who play PCH, in parallel to their sports career, strategically engage in other activities where they find more fertile ground for approximating hegemonic femininity, such as theater (Monika), writing (Anja), blogging (Céline) and beauty care (Maria). The following section of my field diary shows some of the gender-related and dis/ability-related implications of the interviewees' diversification of commitments in different social worlds.

> I ask Monika why she continues playing PCH, despite the sexism she just described. She answers that it is important for her "balance" to practice sport: "so that I can get physical". She explains that she joined a theater company 2 years ago. "Three ladies from the specialized institution where I live told me to come. So, three, it's already half of the women in the institution. I liked it. Now we are six of us. It's nice. For once, there are as many women as men. The dynamic is different from PCH: more mature and also other discussions, not always guy stuff. We are the ones who decide. Currently, I play the role of a fashionista."

Like other female players, Monika has only limited possibilities to do gender as she would like to, both in the context of PCH and the specialized institution she lives in, which are two androcentric environments. Committing to a career in theater, in parallel to her sports career, reconfigures the possibilities she has for doing gender. The social world of theater seems more favorable to the gathering of women with dis/abilities. By joining together, these women manage to create margins of maneuver for enacting femininity. For Monika, as for other players, the multiplication of social worlds of inscription is the catalyst for gender self-determination. Thus, the position that players occupy in the matrix of domination, with respect to dis/ability and gender, mutually shapes the ways in which they can resist ableism and sexism, as well as the tactics they can deploy in an attempt to secure a more favorable location in the matrix.

## Conclusion

This paper provides a conceptual framework for integrating dis/ability as a category of analysis for intersectionality studies in the sociology of sport: the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability. This conceptual framework allows one to address body-related issues and to consider cognitive and physical functions while deconstructing the believed naturality of the differences between bodies. Thus, this conceptual framework brings perspectives to the sociology of sport to consider the body and its functions at the intersection of multiple systems of difference and inequality as ability-disability and gender, but also race, social class, or sexuality.

This article also provides an application of this conceptual framework *via* the case study of PCH in Switzerland. The findings partially confirm previous results uncovered by Sparkes et al. (39, 42, 43), Apelmo (20), and Richard et al. (21). In PCH, an innovative system of eligibility and classification based on the measurement of the impact of physical impairments in situation and the exclusion of those whose dis/abilities are "not severe enough" seem to legitimize the mixing of "sex categories".

I demonstrate that in the context of PCH, the local variation of hegemonic masculinity does not rely on the believed physical domination of men over women. Thus, at the interpersonal level, this context allows for some subversion of the mutually constitutive relationship between dis/ability and the ideology of binary gender. Nevertheless, at the community level, this subversion only very partially challenges the power relations classically observed in the social world of able-bodied sport. The roles and positions held by players with the most "severe" dis/abilities are under-recognized and associated with femininity. Moreover, women's athletic performances are not recognized to the same extent as men's. Women are mostly excluded from the top of the sports hierarchy and certain valued roles such as the role of peer-model. Thus, ableism and sexism are interlocking, and they mutually reinforce the hierarchy

between players. Therefore, in PCH, for men, embodying the figure of the supercrip athlete contributes to the process of normalization with regard to ability-disability and gender norms. Furthermore, women are confronted with contradictory injunctions. On the one side, they are required to erase signs of femininity to integrate within an androcentric environment and to be considered successful in sport. On the other side, female players are required to approximate hegemonic femininity to counteract the process of degendering and desexualization faced by women with dis/abilities.

The analysis of the intersectional co-conditioning of dis/ability in PCH shows how marginalized masculinities and marginalized femininities negotiate their locations in the matrix of domination. The results uncover the tactics that players, both male and female, use to draw benefits from the intersectional hierarchy, and they also highlight how those who can apply these tactics participate in the oppression of others and in shoring up the existing order. In light of the results presented in this article, one might extend the argument of Hamilton et al. (48), who explain that white—but also cis, straight, global north, and able-bodied—women who perform hegemonic femininity, despite it being advantageous to their male counterparts, nevertheless offers them a favorable location in the matrix of domination. Indeed, the analysis of intersectionality between dis/ability and gender in PCH suggests that all persons in a marginalized position may look to leverage the intersectional hierarchy in ways that grant them an advantage over certain others.

To further explore intersectionality in PCH in future research, it would be worthwhile to show how dis/ability and gender intersect with other salient systems of difference and inequality, such as race, class, or sexuality, among others. Indeed, these elements also frame in a significant way this sport and the experiences that one can have of it.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that the heuristic potential of the suggested conceptual framework is not limited to the study of sports experiences of people with dis/abilities. On the contrary, I believe that it also holds an explanatory power to better understand sports practices of people socially defined as able-bodied as well as people with hyper-abilities. For instance, I perceive a strong heuristic potential in the application of this conceptual framework to the study of femininity tests and the principles of justifications of "sex categories" in abled-bodied sports. Thus, this paper is an invitation to fully engage in an intersectionality approach that considers dis/ability as central categories of analysis. This invitation is not only directed at researchers interested in studying experiences of people with dis/abilities in sport, but to all researchers doing sociological studies on sport.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary files, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor to this work and has approved it for publication.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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# (Trans)forming fitness: Intersectionality as a framework for resistance and collective action

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Fitness is a lifelong pursuit, yet many LGBTQ2S+[1] individuals are averse to group fitness or experiences in big box gyms. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual fitness programs offered the potential to facilitate opportunities for the greater inclusion of such individuals and the chance to connect, collaborate and advocate for a change in who and what defines fitness. Justice Roe, owner of Fit4AllBodies, utilizes the term *fitness industrial complex* to provide a framework to discuss the problems of exclusion. His explanation supports research documenting that bodies that are not "the norm", defined by ableism, classism, (hetero)patriarchy and racism, fueled by white supremacy, are oftentimes viewed as "less than" in the fitness and recreation world (1–3). Applying an intersectional framework, this article explores the possibilities for transformative collective action in fitness communities that removes barriers and challenges the injustices that contribute to racialized LGBTQ2S+ individuals feeling unwelcome. With the need to shift to virtual training spaces as a result of a global pandemic, and the rise in the public discourse surrounding racial injustices both on and offline, a sense of belonging and community is important, especially among groups that often face exclusionary practices, such as racialized LGBTQ2S+ community members. These individuals are at greater risk of losing opportunities to access fitness programs that can provide immense health and psychological benefits. What could an intersectional perspective on resistance in sport look like? Using the example of LGBTQ2S+ access to online fitness spaces during the prolonged global COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, we suggest that explicit coaching education and intentional communities, centered around social justice, are needed to address the historical roots of systemic oppression, accessibility, and social constructs tied to fitness.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality, queer (LGBTQ), resistance, fitness, inclusivity, joy, coaching education

> *"Dismantling oppression and our role in it demands that we explore where we have been complicit in the system of body terrorism while employing the same compassion we needed to explore our complicity in our internalized body shame."*
>
> Sonja Renee Taylor

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## Introduction

Body fitness is an integral part of health culture in the contemporary world. While the World Health Organization (4) cites immense health and psychological benefits from physical activity, they also state that globally, one in four adults, and over 80% of adolescents do not engage in adequate amounts of physical activity. For those that do, we see individuals of different age, gender, class, race and ethnicity accessing "health clubs, YMCAs, and recreation centers (5), also sometime referred to as gyms[2], to maintain their health and fitness, and possibly achieve 'normative' Eurocentric fitness standards (6–8). Fitness can be defined in a number of ways, but in this instance, we cite popular workout techniques, such as aerobics and bodybuilding, which, in the 1980s and 1990s, saw a boom in fitness culture and the growth of commercial physical activity, measured by reps, sets, and pounds lost (9). Shaping and sculpting the body was encouraged by multiple sources, thus selling the idea that by engaging in fitness, one can become a "better" person, "taking care of God's gift … develop[ing] a healthy, religious, and morally righteous lifestyle", an attractive thought to many individuals (10, p. 96). In this essay, physical activity taking place in recreational facilities, which we refer to as gyms and fitness spaces, are important for a variety of reasons. Gyms offer an opportunity to develop strength and endurance in one's body, feel a sense of empowerment and discipline in achieving an ideal body-type, progress gains in physical and mental strength, show a reduction of health risks, and an improvement in appearance (5, 11). As a result of aerobic and strength training done in fitness facilities, there are many psychological improvements, such as brain stimulation, assisting with cognitive abilities, and helping with dementia (12–14). In addition to reducing the risk of developing depression, studies have linked exercise to decreasing the levels of anxiety and depression in those with moderate forms of the illness (15). Resistance training can also support social and emotional gains including raising confidence, positive self-esteem, brightening mood, fighting depression, and improving sleep (16, 17). Engaging in physical activity can be seen as essential to one's overall health, as long as the social environment is enriching, and not exclusionary (18, 19).

Many people's association with fitness in later life can be tied to their experiences of sport and physical education in their early years, and more specifically, data supported by research on queer youth and physical education, reveals that gym sports and locker-room spaces can be alienating (3, 20, 21). Gyms and fitness spaces can be spaces of exclusion, with structural barriers and informal, or unspoken, cultural norms such as gender binary

and heteronormative views, discouraging, and/or preventing certain groups, such as folks in larger bodies, those with (dis) abilities, women, racialized, and LGBTQ2S+ individuals, from accessing fitness and health centers (22–24). Though gyms and recreation facilities can be a critical node of intersectional exclusion in which LGBTQ2S+ minorities are under-represented and under-served, we look to present three case studies of fitness and recreation spaces engaging in intersectional praxis (25). Intersectionality as critical praxis allows us to examine the ways in which these businesses apply intersectional frameworks to their way of serving fitness enthusiasts. By bringing critical inquiry and critical praxis together, Collins & Bilge (25) cite the combined effect as something greater than separate parts, thus potentially creating new knowledge and practices around "fit". This intersectional praxis creates dialogue and action, allowing all bodies room to benefit from gym and fitness spaces.

With the closure of many fitness and health centers due to the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous fitness programs shifted to online platforms. Virtual programs provide the potential to increase accessibility for many LGBTQ2S+ individuals, in contrast to "big box" gyms, also known as large corporate chain gyms in North America, such as Goodlife, LA Fitness, Planet Fitness, and Soulcycle, private gyms or even boutique style gyms. In this context, the pandemic represented an opportunity to make fitness spaces more inclusive and accessible to the LGBTQ2S+ community by eliminating barriers, so that they can reap the physical and psychological benefits of physical activity (19, 23, 24). Our writing investigates how transformational collective action in fitness spaces can enable social justice. By beginning our inquiry with the value of intersectionality as a framework to aid in identifying and removing barriers and challenges associated with racialized LGBTQ2S+ community's access and participation in gyms, we have built an account of how virtual platforms can assist in transforming gyms into spaces of resistance, accessibility and movement for joy.

## Writing on privilege and oppression

This essay builds on the authors' positionality as racialized and/ or LGBTQ2S+ individuals who experience privilege and oppression in particular ways, including in sport and physical activity. Deniece, the first author, born in Ontario, Canada, identifies herself as a queer, Black individual with cultural roots coming from Guyanese and Jamaican parents. Her cultural background as a racialized human being provides her a unique perspective to navigate the world. She is able-bodied, and was privileged to access an athletic scholarship in the United States to pursue post-secondary education. Simultaneously, as a teacher, coach and trainer in higher educational institutions, and health and wellness spaces, she believes that self-actualization must correspond to social change and therefore, she tries to provide individuals with space to feel included and heard.

Saidur, the second author, identifies himself as a cisgender racialized male, with cultural roots in Bangladesh. Currently, he resides in Ontario, Canada, and pursues his doctoral studies in

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[2]The Cambridge dictionary defines gym as a place or club where you can go to exercise using machines, weights, and other equipment, or an open space where a large room with equipment for exercising the body and increasing strength, or space for playing sports:

the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at University of Toronto. His research work focuses on decolonizing sport and physical activity with an aim to address injustice and oppression stemming from colonial and imperial values occurring in contemporary sporting spaces. Through his research, he intends to build an equitable and informed society where ethics and social justice will guide us into a harmonious future, dismantle forces of injustice and oppression, and ensure that every individual can exercise their right to self-determination.

The third author, Roc Rochon is a contributing author and cultural worker who is a Black, queer, trans nonbinary person. Roc is the founder of Rooted Resistance, a grassroots practice committed to reimagining bodywork for queer, transgender, and nonbinary people in the U.S. South. Movement outdoors is their form of refusal to commercialized notions of the body and an imperative place for a growing relationship with our bodies, each other, and the land. Roc is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department on Sport Management at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida (traditional and ancestral territory of the Apalachee Nation, the Muscogee Creek Nation, the Miccosukee Tribe of Florida, and the Seminole Tribe of Florida) with a focus on physical cultural studies and bodywork. Roc's studies are concerned with unsettling "sport" as a politicized cultural form through understanding how histories of land, power, subjugation, and colonialism interact with bodies (human and non-human). Roc's interest is in narrative stories and the ways that Black queer, trans, and nonbinary folk construct sporting counter-spaces that tend to collective Black life.

We combine these three perspectives to build an "outsider within" (26) account of the potential for gyms to become spaces of joy, liberation and self-actualization. Central to Black feminist activism is that liberation is not only for Black women, but for all; humanism shines a light on the fact that until all folks are free, none of us are free (26, 27). By creating space for all bodies, fitness culture has the potential to uplift those that are often subject to exclusionary practices.

## Fitness culture

What might have begun as an industry meant to promote healthy living, mainstream fitness sites have become a toxic environment filled with racism, misogyny, misogynoir, anti-trans bigotry and similar intolerances to gender non-binary individuals, making fitness spaces unsafe or unwelcoming for people in all their sexual and gender diversity (5, 28–31). Advertising and media have also transformed fitness into a site for the commodification of the body, which reproduces the hegemonic middle-class whiteness that is normalized by neoliberal commercial culture (32, 33). Narratives of idealized bodies as having a certain size to be fit, produced by globalized media, impact views about fitness and health that "other" those who are not considered to be the norm (8, 9, 34). Fitness culture is ever-evolving, but has had some consistent norms.

Overall, the fitness culture can be conceptualized in several ways. First, Glassner (35) describes fitness culture as a neoliberal market-led, demand-driven phenomenon of body transformation, in

which a preoccupation with perfectly fit bodies exists, and is only afforded to the bodies that conform to hegemonic cultural expectations of perfection. In an effort to achieve the fit body, exercisers aim to become a copy of the bodies they see, rather than the images/media being a representation of the real (35, 36). Secondly, Maguire (5, 37) comments that the culture of fitness goods and services has shifted from social reform, to self-reform. Fitness cultures are explained as a supply-driven phenomenon of commercialization and commodification, in which "being fit" is about social capital for success in neoliberal society, and possessing the resources to undertake the "project of the self" in a competent fashion. This means minimizing health risks to increase productivity and maximizing the market value of your body (5). Fitness, then, is a measure of aptitude for life in consumer culture and a service economy (5). A third account, offered by Sassatelli (38), is of fitness cultures as a place of consumption, fueled by both the consumers and producers, where individual lives, identities and bodies become both the product and producer, that documents the lived experiences of gym goers' fun and frustration, shown through ethnographic methods (38). Fourth, and critical to our purposes, Justice Roe Williams, owner of Fitness 4AllBodies, discusses the term **fitness industrial complex** to describe fitness culture: the transformation of fitness into an industry that denigrates bodies that do not always conform to dominant narrative surrounding what defines "fit"; a culture based on capitalism, whiteness, and masculine heteronormative body standards. Roe's notion of the fitness industrial complex offers a useful framework to discuss the problems of exclusion. As Roe, from Fitness for All Bodies (2), explains, there is a need for fitness professionals to consider how "our bodies are connected to systems of oppression, how those systems are reinforced by the fitness industry, how to develop a social justice lens and importantly, how to apply this knowledge to their work with all populations" (2). The demand and supply logic of fitness is instrumental for the development of the Fitness Industrial Complex, while at the same time, the dialectics of the fitness culture offers a way of looking at the privilege and oppression that individuals encounter because of how the gym is shaped by dominant systems of difference-making, such as gender, class, race and sexuality.

The Fitness Industrial Complex defines and maintains power over our bodies through the lens of privilege. Dominant representations of fitness and gym culture teach users what it means to be fit and well in their bodies. We suggest, however, that this often ignores the complex aspects of race, gender, class, identity, ability and body shape, pointing to the value of bringing an intersectional perspective to an analysis of gym use and fitness culture.

## Intersectionality

Founding members of the Combahee River Collective (CRC) were Black feminist/womanist lesbian social activists. In a statement from the CRC (39), they centered their lived racialized and gendered experiences in a way that was intersectional. In

their statement they discuss the inseparability of their stories stating that, "our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (p. 4). To honor their full lived experience, the Combahee women understood that a separatist politics regarding race, gender, sexuality, and class was antithetical to their (or anyone else's) liberation. Thus, the idea of intersectionality is not new; however, the term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 provides a framework that can be used to support or create best practices within health and fitness. While there is no consensus on the definition or description of an intersectional methodology, Watson (40), explains it as "acknowledging and accounting for the consequences of difference (p. 315)", making space to acknowledge systems that are in place to continuously benefit some, at the expense of others. In their research in leisure (and sport) studies, Watson (40) uses intersectionality as a methodological tool to contextualize the differences among individuals, instead of categorizing the various contexts of their life, which cannot be extrapolated from who they are. McDonald (41) suggests the use of intersectionality to understand the "complicated character of whiteness" (p. 152) and how its application can "reveal the tensions between experience, consciousness and sport" (p. 154). It is clear that among researchers there are various uses, and needs, for the application of an intersectional framework.

In relationship to the fitness industrial complex, intersectionality can have a positive role in moving forward resistance and collective action in sport by lifting up the voices typically found in the margins, and by supporting inclusive practices.

> "Intersectionality is defined as the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. They do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven and linked together. It is meant to articulate the overlapping systems of oppression that are faced by those who are in marginalized positions – either by social determinants of health, geography or facets of their identities" (42)

From a Canadian sport perspective, safety, one of the eight principles explored in the 2020 Canadian Sport for Life Summit, was explained as a way to support success in sport from a participant/people-centered approach. They examined safety using an intersectional lens, without explicitly stating the term.

> "Safe would be lived by applying for funding to create a safer physical space (ex. change rooms). Through opportunities to share our stories, and to examine the different needs of the people in the spaces and places so that we can better plan to support the many diverse people who will be part of our programs or who deserve to be included but haven't been planned for properly yet" (42).

There are many opinions on the importance and/or difficulty of intersectionality as a theory (43), as a methodological tool, and as a framework. Yet, the multiplicity of binaries (black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) that operate within fitness spaces continues to be relevant to the gym experiences of many individuals. Continued research focusing on the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual identity as it relates to sport demonstrates that an intersectional approach is necessary. In December 2020, the Canadian Television Network (CTV) reported that every study over the past 15 years has shown that LGBTQ2S+ youth play sports at a lower rate than "straight" kids. Thus, these youth, and certainly adults, are doubly impacted by discrimination, while losing out on the mental health benefits of physical activity and sport (21, 44). Additionally, within the LGBTQ2S+ community, the context of varying identities matter. Black/racialized LGBTQS+ community members experience barriers within fitness and wellness that are amplified by their location in interlocking systems of difference-making and oppression (3, 45, 46). How, in this context, can intersectionality as a theory be leveraged to create change?

## Transformative collective action in fitness communities: case studies

In what follows, we explore the notion that the social movement(s) and collaborations enacted *via* virtual spaces to resist the status quo could offer opportunities to create intersectionally inclusive fitness practices and communities. *If they could succeed in providing inclusive and affirming content and environments, how might that allow for like-minded individuals to challenge dominant narratives, and most importantly, create a sense of community and belonging?* It is from this sense of community that individuals and organizations can increase their capacity to extend their reach. To explore this possibility, we look to the experiences of Black and/or queer fitness professionals who responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing virtual fitness programmes, education and training that encourage change through liberatory praxis.

The COVID-19 pandemic was characterized by widespread lockdowns that saw in-person fitness spaces close, forcing fitness providers to develop new delivery models that engaged fitness space users *via* online platforms. The three programmes elaborated on below, deconstructed the notion of "fitness" and used grassroots community-based curricula that shifted hegemonic ideology around bodywork practices. These Black and/or queer and trans practitioners are creating pathways and re/membrances of being in relationship with their bodies and with their clients as a liberatory experience.

We describe these three models as follows: (1) A *size-inclusive approach*, in which Fraiser, of Lift of Strength and Wellness, focuses on education for coaches with an emphasis on acknowledging all aspects of an individual, both visible and invisible, that need to be accounted for in their fitness journey; (2) *An Agency Based Approach*, in which Parker, of Decolonizing Fitness stresses lived experience as valued and

central to one's movement journey, while also providing affirming resources and care for queer and/or racialized individuals; lastly, (3) *A Social Justice Based Approach*, where the focus is on addressing the systemic and historical structures that have informed the development of a fitness culture that values "Othering" as a means to continue upholding notions of whiteness as the norm. Forged during the COVID-19 pandemic as a means of virtually engaging diverse communities in online fitness spaces, we suggest that these models offer opportunities for learning that will continue to be relevant to both online and in-person fitness delivery going forward.

## Lift off strength and wellness: a size-inclusive approach

Damali Fraiser, certified Kettlebell Instructor and Nutrition Coach, runs Lift Off Strength and Wellness, virtually, and onsite in Ontario, Canada. Her focus on size-inclusive coaching for kettlebells led to the creation and launch of Coaches Corner. In the Lift Off Strength and Wellness website, it is mentioned that "Coaches corner is an 8-week kettlebell teaching course where we, together, learn how to coach Kettlebell Athletes and adapt for any body shape, size or ability. We teach person-based coaching and creating safe spaces for very personal fitness journeys" (47). The first course was run in January 2021, in response to exclusionary fitness practices and expectations on bodies to fit a certain mold (read: thin, able bodied, and white). On this initiative, Damali stated, "I created this course to break down the barriers to kettlebell training, making it accessible to all bodies regardless of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, body size, ability or sexual orientation" (47). Further to this, Frasier has developed a KettleBell in Black instagram community focused on love, connection, and self-care for black women. Thus, this virtual initiative, through its acceptability and accessibility to all groups of people, aims to eradicate barriers for marginalized people by providing them a safe space for physical activity, fitness and wellness.

## Decolonizing fitness: an agency based approach

Ilya Parker shares knowledge on various platforms, and has continued expanding his own business, Decolonizing Fitness, where he states on his website that "Decolonizing Fitness is not a gym, but an incredible educational resource for coaches, trainers, studio owners, and anyone who is interested in unlearning toxic fitness culture" (48). Ilya defined toxic fitness culture as "Social characteristics, language and habits that promote/reinforce ableism, fatphobia, racism, classism, elitism, body shaming/policing, LGBTQIA+ hatred under the guise of fitness and wellness" (49). According to Parker (49), in the fitness culture, the dominant group, comprising able-bodied, toned, traditionally attractive, young, cisgender, heterosexual people act as the gatekeepers to define "ideal" ways of engagement and embodiment of fitness;

whereas other groups of people with marginalized identities are excluded to assert agency over their bodies, access the fitness culture based on their actual needs and feel alienated in different fitness and wellness spaces. Applying a decolonial lens, Decolonizing Fitness aims to build accessible and supportive physical and virtual spaces for various groups of bodies, encourage movements that produce good feeling and agency about one's own body, respect the anti-racial movements led by Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), and acknowledge one's own lived experience surrounding their bodies, even if it does not fit the "ideal" standard set by the dominant group.

## Fitness4AllBodies: A social justice based approach

Justice Roe Williams is a trans body positive activist who runs Fitness 4 All Bodies (F4AB). His course, titled "Deconstructing the Fitness Industrial Complex: Identifying Power Dynamics & Moving Toward Connection" is built to discuss and understand "ways we can reshape our practice and reframe the relationship that we have with fitness, movement, and bodies" (2). The six-week long course aims to unpack the Fitness Industrial Complex, identify the roots of toxic masculinity in fitness culture, comprehend sex and gender as social constructs and ensure accessibility for all bodies, identities, shapes and abilities by reframing language, and moving beyond inclusion (2). Fitness 4 All Bodies trains coaches, gym/studio owners, and people associated with the fitness industry, to educate them about the link between our bodies and systems of oppression, and the reinforcement of different body and racial stereotypes in the fitness industry. The goal is to enlighten and equip the participants with the notion of social justice, which they can apply in their jobs and places to challenge and dismantle "patriarchal, white supremacist bodily ideals" (50, p. 5). Thus, focusing on belongingness, past history, leadership development, education and healing, Fitness 4 All Bodies works toward transforming the fitness space to address structural injustice and facilitate vulnerable groups to engage in meaningful conversation, build community connection and liberate their bodies through inclusive physical activity.

## Conclusion

Blackness, maleness, sexual identity and other aspects of the self have been, and continue to be, explored in isolation. Intersectionality encourages a justice-oriented approach for society to recognize all parts of an individual; to see people as whole and complete beings. This belief aligns with the thinking of Audre Lorde (51), who wrote: "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (p. 138). We can view our lived experiences as knowledge (52–54). By being modern day griots, we – Queer, BIPOC must tell our unique stories, as well as share our collective experiences, while we constantly engage with, and survive structural and

institutional repression. Further research needs to be done regarding the limited recreation and sport in a safe, inclusive environment *for* racialized LGBTQ2S+ individuals, and *with* racialized LGBTQ+ instructors and mentors. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the fitness industry shift from traditional gym spaces to online programming. As the case studies above illustrate, this also represented an opportunity to develop new communities of practice and uplift the voices that counter the dominant narrative of white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy messaging in the fitness world. While these communities existed in different iterations before COVID-19, the implications of these case studies and the continuation of these online communities each continues today, hosting workshops, training, and creative content for continued learning. Additionally, the founders of two of the case studies—Fitness 4 All Bodies and Lift Off Strength and Wellness both facilitate courses (online) where practitioners can obtain continued education units (CEUs) or a certification on particular content, and both host virtual events. The insights from online engagement with such courses allow an opportunity for LGBTQ2S+ fitness trainers, coaches, and owners to actively be a part of experiencing what modeling the way toward what anti-racist and inclusive fitness training can resemble. Further, insights from what has grown online can now offer insights to the ways in which fitness instructors deliver inclusive programming in-person at gym spaces and during specific certification and workshop programs. Though no space can be replicated without the coaches and trainers doing the continued individual and collective work of unlearning dominant narratives about bodies, these case studies challenge the fitness industrial complex. Coaches and fitness spaces are challenged to live out intersectionality in their everyday practices.

Racialized and marginalized individuals are not the only people that have the ability to create spaces that are affirming and inclusive. Tate (55) comments on black communities suffering from research fatigue, therefore it is the collective responsibility of the sector and the industry to enable change. It begins by engaging in difficult conversations where those who partake, knowing and unknowingly, in toxic fitness culture develop an awareness of intersectionality and how it impacts physical, social and emotional health. Developing a common language allows for individuals to take stock of where they hold privilege and where they contribute to the oppression of others.

*If you're a woman, if you're a person of color, if you're gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, if you're a person of size, a person of intelligence, a person of integrity, then you're considered a minority in this world. And it's going to be really hard to find messages of self-love and support anywhere. It's all about how you have to look a certain way or else you're worthless. For us to have self-esteem is truly an act of revolution and our revolution is long overdue.*

- Margaret Cho (56)

Intersectionality, used as a framework, in conjunction with liberatory thinking provides an opportunity for the recognition of the multiplicities that exist within our world (43, 57). Understanding and applying intersectionality is not a solution, by any means, to breaking down the systemic barriers that exist. However, it is a step in recognizing inequitable patterns and systems and building alternative structures of practice that humanize the individuals that walk through fitness doors in all of their diversity.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

DB and SR drafted the manuscript and received supportive contributions from RR. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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