IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG BLACK MALE FOOTBALL STUDENT-ATHLETES AND THEIR ABILITY TO RECOVER FROM UNMET ATHLETIC ASPIRATIONS

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study aimed to analyze the psychological and social aspects of Black male football student-athletes' identity development and how that affects their ability to transition to life after sports and unmet athletic aspirations. The overall purpose of this study is to examine varying identity development roles and their influences on the transition out of sports among NCAA Power Five Division I African American male football players. This study highlighted the lived experience of five NCAA Division I Black male football student-athletes, allowing their experiences and the resulting phenomena to lead the way. Participants in this study were chosen through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods. This study provides a qualitative analysis of these five participants by way of a semi-structured interview process to investigate their personal experiences in their upbringing, journey through college, before their eventual transition out of sport. Once the data was collected, it was then coded and analyzed to allow for a number of themes to arise. Upon completion of the coding process, five themes emerged in alignment with the research questions and were explored in detail within this study: 1) Where it all started, 2) Athlete-student to National Football League (NFL), 3) 'I am Black.' However…, 4) Relationships Matter, and 5) Is It Over Yet? Findings within this study are consistent with previous research done on Black student-athletes experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), racial identity formation, athletic identity formation, and the important role coaches play in the student-athletes lives. Finally, recommendations based on the research performed in this study are offered and presented in such a way as to provide meaningful and thoughtful ways to help support Black male football student-athletes in the most positive ways with hopes to aid in their success.

DEDICATION

Wow! Wow! Wow! Where do I even start? This document is dedicated to my whole family! The past seven and a half years (15 straight semesters plus each summer) have not been easy, and yet each of you have extended grace.

To my lovely, gorgeous, funny, inspiring, caring, loving, wonderful, patient, understanding, best friend and wife, Ebony. You are the best single event that has happened to me on this earth. You have inspired me to become, think, act, and achieve more. You keep me grounded with humility yet you encourage me with words of affirmations you see that I sometimes do not. The way you handled the criticisms and critiques of the "why is he still in school?" questions and everything in between was flawless. You shielded me and allowed me to continue to work toward a brighter future for our family. The countless times where you would take on the responsibility of a single parent to allow me time to "stay in my groove" do not go unnoticed. I am always reminded that swiping will commence the day this pays off (haha). The innumerable late night sessions of working side-by-side while you were in grad school, with a newborn, are priceless. I would not choose to do life with any other person on this earth other than you. I am who I am, because you are who you are! I thank God for allowing you to be in my life, for the mother you are, for the wife you are, and for the future we are creating. My prayer is that I make you proud to be my wife each and everyday. I am proud to be your husband and best friend. I LOVE YOU!

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giving up felt as though it was the best answer. However, the default voice was always yours saying to finish and evaluate after it is over. I love you!

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> Last but not least, I wanna thank me. I wanna thank me for believing in me. I wanna thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for having no days off. I wanna thank me for, for never quitting … I wanna thank me for just being me at all times … (Snoop Dogg, 2019).

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Funding Sources

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If you can't see or imagine outside of your current circumstances, then you will never see all that

there is to be offered (Evans, 2011).

"Who am I?" Such a very simple question, and yet so complex. It is hard for one to begin to understand and unpack this question without having been forced to explore deep within oneself to find the true definition of such a simple question. By not knowing the answer to this question, you will keep on finding and creating new identities for yourself that are not organic, but they sound cool, and as a result, you continue to grow further away from your true self and identity. Allowing society to continue to define who we are by what we do and by what we have will continue to keep us mentally arrested. When given the proper time and space to explore, you can begin to develop true self-identities. Erikson (1968) states that, "This period can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him" (p. 156). This period allows a young person to continually choose and accept varying identities that have been explicitly or implicitly placed upon us by our social influences. Yet, despite this important transitional period, why is it that student-athletes have such a hard time transitioning mentally out of sports after they have not fulfilled what they perceive to be a successful athletic career?

"I'm going to the league!" was the quote of my life while I was a

youngster in high school. While playing sports and growing up in Detroit, Michigan, we learned and got most of our identity from watching the stars on television as well as listening to those in our families and social setting continue to praise and adore us for our athletic prowess. Unwittingly, as a child, you are unaware of the effects that this adoration and constant praise has on the way that you shape your beliefs and identity about yourself. For years and years, this was layered upon me, starting in my local community, and continuing within my college and city. I felt as though I could not be stopped and that I had an entire community back at home who was counting on me to fulfill the legacy that they had placed on me that I now thought was gospel. Now my entire focus and my entire being shifts from being a kid and young adult to having to make it "to the league," or I would be looked at as a failure. The pressure to succeed within the realm of sports that I placed on myself due to the years of influence was paramount and at times much too heavy for a teenager to bear.

While in college, I attained a few awards and championships, both conference and nationally. The price I had to pay for those was that, every day, I laid my body on the line in hopes that it would be able to stand up to the continual beating I put it through, both physically and mentally. The hope that through the gauntlet of practices, conditioning, and weightlifting, I would be able to both get stronger mentally and physically.

Unfortunately, I also sustained two major injuries in college, both of which ended my season and required a six to nine-month rehabilitation process before I could go back to "normal." The first injury I sustained was in 2007 while playing cornerback in college. I dislocated my left hip while trying to set the edge of the defense. This sidelined me for the foreseeable future, and because my athletic identity was so salient at the time, rehabilitation was what I spent the majority of my time focusing upon while still in school. When I should've been doing homework or studying for an upcoming exam, I would make the conscious decision to go and rehab, because I had so many people to prove wrong and another handful of people to prove right. The second injury I sustained was a tibia/fibula fracture of my lower left leg. I was very fortunate in the situation that it was a clean break of both bones and not a shattering or partial break of either bone. From there, I went into a spiral of depression, because I had already gone through an extensive rehab and recovery of a major injury, and the sheer thought of going through another one had me devastated. Another year of my life that I had planned for and coming off of my best year collegiately, this took me down a dark path of things that I wish upon no person. This led to depression, drug abuse, anxiety, manipulating and disrespecting the ones who had truly gotten to know what little there was to know about my true self, and thoughts of harming myself in ways that would take all the pain away. This was the result and my method of coping because, at the time, I knew nothing else but sports—more specifically, football.

Holding onto thoughts that the love that I received from anyone was all

contingent upon how well I did in football. I felt as though everything that I had

attained, my sense of being, and the reason why I was liked by anyone was all

because I could run fast, jump high, and catch. My self-worth was about

85%-90% wrapped up in my athletic identity. Without having anything positive to

hold onto besides some of the ones closest to me in my life at that time, I couldn't

see past the moment. Having the inability to see down the road allowed for me to

wallow in the misery that had come upon me due to the fact that I had no sense of

self. So, everything, every decision, every move was all centered around trying to

figure out how I could get "back to glory" and have all of the thrills and chills

that came along with performing on Saturday nights under the lights on the

football field. This was so bad to the point even with sustaining two major

traumatic injuries to my physical body that I would lie throughout the rehab

process, giving the false illusion that I was doing better physically than I truly

was to try and speed up the process to get back out on the field. The fear of

missing out, of being passed up on the depth chart, of not "being valuable" had

me forsake my health and wellbeing for just another "taste of glory" to fill an

enormous hole in my life that football occupied.

Statement of the Problem

To some, sport is a way of finding out who they are. With the recent uptick in interest within identity issues of African Americans, Bimper and Harrison (2011) theorize that there is more to be discovered as it pertains to the defining of self-awareness, especially among college football athletes that identify as African American. With society continuing to push sports, the

development of the athletic identity begins to take shape. Sports are quite often looked at and viewed as a key feature and staple for the understanding and development of teamwork, discipline, time management, and leadership. A high level of training and competence within their sport is not synonymous with the same level of ability to be prepared for life after college, and it is quite often the opposite (Duffey, 2015). For so long student-athletes have been conditioned to believe that they are only worth the jersey that they wear on their backs and are only as good as the cheers that they hear during game day. There are many non-cognitive factors relating to the student and the university that have been recognized as obstacles to persistence in the African American and student-athlete population; spotlighting elements of these factors include commitment, integration, discrimination, and isolation (Hyatt, 2003).

Student-athletes have always been praised for being great at playing their respective sports, and in playing this sport, they receive warranted and unwarranted praise and admiration. With that comes a sense of entitlement that begins to shape their perception of reality. This creates the perception of invincibility and entitlement to the student-athlete while they are playing their sport. The issue comes when the student-athlete has completed all of their eligibility, has no shot at playing past college, and they must still leave college and become a "regular" citizen in society. This transition for some can be very dark and depressing, creating a person who now could potentially give up on life. Giving up can then lead to other detrimental activities that would hurt themselves because the one thing that they attached their identity to has now been snatched away. What I intend to study is how I can help create and foster an environment where student-athletes will be able to understand and know that they are more than just athletes by using the Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Self-perception Theory. What sport they play and how good they are at it does not create who they are or will be.

From the first opportunity to indulge in sports as an adolescent, the formation of the identity begins. Forming an identity consists of trying out multiple possibilities throughout life and gradually moving to long-lasting decisions (Arnett, 2000). As many young athletes begin to immerse themselves in sport at such a young age, the dreams and seeds of becoming a successful superstar athlete begin to get planted into an unmolested soil of belief. Within this garden are the fictitious and convincing truths that are perpetuated by their social surroundings as well as the information they are subconsciously fed through social outlets. These hopeful aspirations often take root from the overwhelming aspects of sports media and the uplifting praise and adulation from the local community (Bimper & Harrison, 2011). As a result of this engineering, the African American male student-athlete has attained a very salient identity they begin to solely rely upon. This athletic identity is further heightened by the overrepresentation of the Black male athlete within the game of football. The African American athletes' proportion of representation within the elite revenue-generating sports in comparison to the percentage of their representation in society, being roughly thirteen percent, is exceedingly high (Bimper & Harrison, 2011). According to the NCAA Demographics Database (n.d.), there were 16,152 total student-athletes that participated in the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). Furthermore, of the 16,152 total student-athletes population 48%, or 7,735, have identified as Black (Figure 1). This helps to explain why there is a strong attachment to the athletic identity formation for the African American male growing up. By understanding how this lopsidedness and misrepresentation forms the identity of this population, I believe it is incumbent upon the ones put in place to lead, guide, and mentor these young men to be able to help them to see another path or alternative given the likelihood that they will successfully fulfill the self-perceived goals and aspirations in the field of football.

Figure 1
Coach and Student-Athlete Demographic by Sport and Title
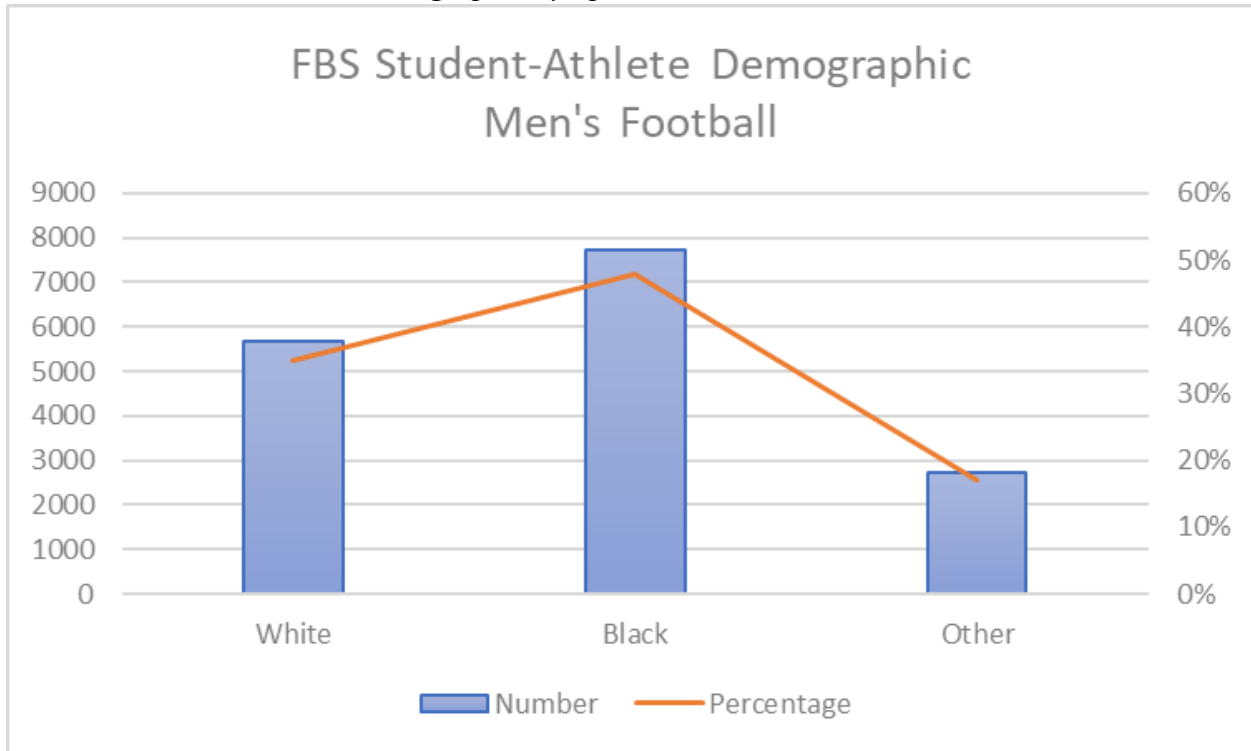
This figure shows the demographic breakdown amongst all FBS Men's Football programs in 2018 (NCAA.org - The Official Site of the NCAA, n.d.)

The overall purpose of this study is to examine varying identity development roles and their influences on the transition out of sports among NCAA Division I African American male football players. More specifically, examining the strength of the relationship between the levels of identification with the role of an athlete (Athletic Identity), how that affects Identity Foreclosure, and the social factors that may influence the development of identity. In exploring the multiple factors that go into making up a student-athlete's identity, I will have the participants engage in formal interviews that will also examine their experience in sport, their view on how they see themselves as it relates to sport, what they believed shaped their outlook on how they viewed sport, and how they planned to transition out of the sport.

This study will also help to shed light on the path that is most often traveled yet is still most often overlooked due to the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of student-athlete football players that are rarely reached. According to the NCAA (Demographics Database, n.d.), only 1.6% of the draft-eligible student-athletes (255 out of 16,346) were drafted to the National Football League (NFL).[1] That number is very minuscule and is often shelved due to the other extreme numbers pertaining to the NFL draft. Approximately 72.5% of draft-eligible players are from the five Division I conferences with autonomous governance (Power Five); Southeastern Conference (SEC), Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC [includes Notre Dame]), Big Ten, Pacific Coast 12 (PAC-12), and the Big 12 (NCAA, Demographics Database, n.d.).

Therefore, furthering the research in this particular area, I plan to stay focused on the athletes' view of themselves and the social constructs behind it to try and pinpoint certain antecedents that play a role in development. Also, this research will help delve into the thought process and the components, both socially and mentally, that can help to assist student-athletes transition out of sport into a world they have not been given the perceived necessary time to explore. This research will incorporate both external and internal components that help to influence their identity and cultivate their resilience. This study is done and designed to help those that transition out of sport to have a smoother path than most would believe to have. Theoretically, at no point with the vast amount of resources the Universities and Colleges have should a student-athlete transitioning out of sports struggle to find their way. Practically, breaking down the mental, social, emotional, and structural barriers will, of course, forever be the challenge. This study is proposed as exploratory in its nature to help pinpoint issues and

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[1] Note: Most current draft eligible numbers on 2019-20 student-athlete football players were not included due to the granting of an extra eligibility year as a result of Covid-19 protocols.

relationships that could be studied and examined in the future for research and programming purposes.

Origins of Identity

What is identity? Where does identity begin? What determinants are there that shape identity? To get a better understanding of anything, you must first track it to its origin to see its history. To understand why or how an oak tree grows so tall, you must first go back and look at the seed. To understand why or how the United States of America is engrained with such conflict and unequal opportunity for groups that are marginalized, you must first go back to the origins of America and learn how this country was founded and discovered. Case in point, to understand one's identity you must first go back to their genesis, upbringing, and life experiences to understand how one came to develop (mind and body) their identity. For every individual, this question can have a myriad of different responses and journeys based on said person's interpretation and experiences. According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, identity is "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual: Individuality" or "the relation established by psychological identification" ("Identity", 2020).

An individual's transition into the world as we know it is a hard path. Our first encounters within the known world are our mothers. They are our first teachers and play an important role in cognitive and language development. In the perfect situation, (and each individual's journey again is different,) you are born and then you spend time bonding with your mother. The child has no sense of what or who they are, they are just one with the mother in mind, body, and soul. There are no restrictions when it comes to the child being born, as the child is held and they melt into the mother's body (Fraiberg, 1968). This is the initial introduction into their ability to start identifying and creating a bond with their mother. Through this bond, gradually the child begins

to make distinctions of their own body. Recognizing that they have fingers, feet, and that the sensations that come along with using them as they touch different things. As the child grows, more and more milestones are met that further enforce the notion and idea that the baby is learning to become or act independently of what it needs at birth. Fraiberg (1968) says at seven months the child acted as though he was the creator of all things around him and they were brought to be due to him seeing, hearing, or touching the items. Now having grown older, at twenty months he realizes that these items and people are not and were not created by him, yet they have an existence of their own. The child is becoming more aware of themselves as a person. Beginning to form their own ideas and thoughts, though they may be shallow to us as adults, they are deep and transformational in the growth of the child as they continue to develop and age. As time passes, they become more self-aware, more conscious of being amongst other things, and begin the process of developing their identity (Fraiberg, 1968).

The addition of the word "I" becomes an essential part of the intellectual maturation for a child around the age of two years old:

> The concepts "I" and "you" represent the child's sense of his own separateness in the body sense and the psychological sense, but the process leading to the differentiation of a self and an object world actually begins in the early weeks of infancy. "I" and "you" in the second year represent the unification of tendencies that originate in the earliest bonds between a child and his family. Long before there is an "I" and a "you," there is a baby and his human partners—and a dialogue based on need and a person who satisfies need. From a cognitive point of view the acquisition of "I" is an intellectual feat for the young child. To take the leap from "Michael wants" to "I want," the child must see himself as both subject

and object; that is, he must grasp the fact that even as others are objects to him, he

is an object to others; that he is "I" when he speaks for himself and "you" when

addressed by others; that every other person is an "I" to himself and a "you" to

others. This capacity to take himself as an object, to see himself as an object

among objects, and to symbolize this state marks the beginnings of rationally and

a new order of intelligence. (Fraiberg, 1968, p. 80)

Within this road of searching and seeking an identity, please do not gloss over the fact that this

all happens within the first two years of the child's life. Most studies state that the most essential

milestones in a child's life occur by the age of 7. Although the first seven years are vitally

important to a child's development, they are not solely responsible for determining the outcome

of a child's identity. The Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle once mentioned that

if he was given a child from birth to the young age of seven, that he could then predict and show

you the man they would become (Allan, 1979). This statement illustrates that dating back even to

the BCE (Before Common Era) that childhood development was a vital aspect in determining the

outcome and identity of people. This same statement holds true as much of the work performed

by Ancient Greek philosophers is the foundation of studies that are still done to this day.

Identity Formation

Erikson (1968) goes on to describe how the play age and adolescence are perceived by

the child:

If an unlimited imagination as to what one might become is the heritage of the play age,

then the adolescent's willingness to put his trust in those peers and leading, or misleading,

elders who give imaginative, if not illusory, scope to his aspirations is only too obvious.

(p. 129)

The act of finding and formulating one's identity is a universal process that is traveled by all as a means to be able to define yourself not only to others but most importantly to yourself. According to Erikson (1968), identity formation has been termed as the development of one's individual disposition, which ultimately determines how a person is known throughout each individual stage (Figure 2). As a child, you are going through many different changes both socially, culturally, and physically, while each is helping to shape and form your identity. Marcia (2010) postulates the roots for growth lie in the physical changes, social interpretation around those changes, and the institutions in which the answer to the crisis are handled. This foundational basis helps to shape and mold how one begins to define their identity.

Figure 2
Erik Erikson's Developmental Stages

Stage	Age	Psychosocial Crisis Positive vs. Negative	Outcome/Virtue
1. Infancy	0 – 1	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope
2. Early Childhood	2 – 3	Autonomy vs. Shame	Will
3. Play Age	4 – 6	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose
4. School Age	7 – 12	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence
5. Adolescence	12 – 19	Identity vs. Confusion	Fidelity
6. Early Adulthood	19 – 35	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love
7. Adulthood	35 – 65	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care
8. Old Age	65 – Death	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom

This figure shows the stages of life, corresponding age, and the desired outcome from each psychological crisis in that stage of life (Erikson, 1993)

Athletic Identity

Athletic Identity, as defined by Brewer et al. (1993), is the level of commitment given to which the person identifies as an athlete and how they seek for others' validation of that role. This definition helps to set up the research as we focus on the different aspects of identity development to see how they affect the student-athlete's resiliency and transition out of sports. The goal is to see if there is a correlation between the athletic-identity salience and the ability to overcome adversity when a sport is no longer an option or outlet.

It has been surmised that clinching to and focusing solely on an athletic identity can have detrimental effects when it comes to adjusting to the basic transitions that come along with playing sports such as the conclusion of your involvement with sports, dealing with injuries, and being released from a team (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). As time goes on, more and more research is done on the population of student-athletes and the benefits and detriments that surround them concerning their participation in collegiate athletics. More so now than ever, with the new rules and regulations that were put into motion first by the state of California that will allow for the student-athlete to now be able to "benefit from their [name, image, and] likeness," Johnson (2019) states that California Governor Gavin Newsom has signed legislation that will allow for it to be legal within the state of California for players to be able to hire an agent and be paid for endorsement deals and the use of their images. Johnson (2019) continues on to say how this further puts the NCAA in a crisis, as they must begin to have continued talks as to whether or not college athletes should be paid. Additionally, Governor Newsome feels as though this will begin to balance out the power within the college ranks while putting the interest of the student-athletes on par with the institutions for which they play. This concept of "paying student-athletes" has long been talked about, but the

Governor of California has now started the paradigm shift in the way the NCAA will have to govern NCAA sports if they are wanting to stay relevant and keep the Colleges and Universities' business. This move was monumental, because this has long been talked about for years, but it seemed no one was bold or brave enough to move on it until now. Once Governor Gavin Newsom signed the California legislation, it indeed started a trend.

According to Dwyer (2019), days after the California legislation was signed, it started a national conversation and signaled that Congress would push for this as well. Moreover, with this astounding amount of political support for the paying of student-athletes, the NCAA has begun to have conversations and has taken a more placatory stance on the notion of never paying them due to amateurism. This act will now begin to reshape the landscape of recruiting as well as the business approach that students will now be forced to take into consideration upon leaving high school and entering college. Certain markets, similar to the cost of attendance checks that students receive (Ngo et al., 2022), will be able to render them more benefits based on their likeness.

So how this new development plays in context to athletic identity would be the next question. It is my true belief that this will have two major effects depending on how hard it is regulated, observed, capped, and taken advantage of by athletes and those close to them. On one hand, the athlete will be able to earn money on top of what they have or have not been given by the University. This is great, because they can now benefit from their exploitation in college athletics. The detriment, however, I fear will reach much further and have a greater negative impact upon athletes creating more unrealistic sports career expectations based on increased exposure and availability of money. This will, in my eyes, reinforce and drive home a bigger and much broader identity issue. Now athletes have more incentive to dive in headfirst, foreclosing

all other identities to try to focus on their athletic one, as it can now become a cash machine. As a result, you can start to see more and more high school players beginning to focus and hone in on their athletic identity to become a money-generating brand coming out of high school. Better yet, they may even potentially start to earn money while in high school. This continues as a trickle effect down to even the youth of tomorrow while they are in middle school to become "a brand," so that when they come of age and level of competition they can begin to reap the potential benefits they are hoping and planning for. This now means that those who do not make it to that level will start to begin to develop identity issues and have crises at much younger ages. This could also compound into multiple issues throughout their athletic career as they hit different milestones along their athletic journey.

African American male football players acknowledge that participating in collegiate sports provide many positive aspects and that it helped groom them for many of life's obstacles (Singer, 2008). Participation in college athletics can help develop plenty of different habits, traits, skills, and a mindset. Athletics can teach you self-discipline, teamwork, how to be a leader, how to be social within and amongst groups that you can relate to, and gives you the opportunity to learn about those that are foreign to you. This allows for you to be able to bond with other athletes that may have gone through similar life and athletic experiences. Athletics can help to keep you sharp as you would need to be quick to react on the field after noticing certain aspects.

This is the same in life, as you would be more prepared to notice the certain aspects that would require a response. It also allows for you to travel and see parts of the world that you would have never gone to had you not participated. This can help to spark a love or interest for travel as well as open the student-athletes' eyes to different experiences. However, there is a very tricky balance that is present involving the psychosocial benefits and detriments of participating

in college sports, especially within football and basketball, that can be easily shifted to be a negative one (Zimbalist, 1999). For example, some deem college athletics to be deleterious towards the student-athletes identity development. According to Singer (2008), student-athletes discussed what they called the "struggle" that comes along with attempting to balance both the student and the athletic role. Furthermore, as they were engaging in conversation they were often referred to as 'student-athletes;' however, they quickly corrected the use of the name and coined a term more fitting in their eyes such as 'athlete-student' or 'scholarship-athlete.' This new term implies that the focus is more accurately put on "perfecting and refining" their athletic prowess first and then tending to academics thereafter.

Identity Foreclosure

Similar to individuals at the professional level, big time NCAA Division I football student-athletes exist in a world filled with copious amounts of love, adoration, and non-stop scrutiny. With many factors playing a role in the development of student-athletes, one area in particular has garnered much interest. It has been contended that within athletics and the environment in which college athletics are held, that it is not conducive for the student-athlete to be able to explore or to actively engage in pursuing different career, social, or personal exploration due to the amount of time demanded of them from athletics (Singer, 2008). Whenever the term "athletic identity" is mentioned, it is quite often associated or explored with the notion of identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure, among three other states of identity, has been constructed by James Marcia, a Canadian clinical and developmental psychologist. Marcia (1966) has theorized that individuals have four identity stages, processes, or statuses that they go through; Identity Diffusion, Identity Moratorium, Identity Foreclosure, and Identity Achievement. These four stages are descriptive of the process that one goes through as they form

an identity. Each stage contains a level of particular commitment that is coupled with a certain level of exploration. Is the person committed to exploring other opportunities or identities? As well as, is the person dedicated to making a commitment towards another identity during the exploratory phase?

Duffey (2015) contends that student-athletes that have a foreclosed identity on athletics face a serious risk of losing their main source of social support once their athletic career ends. This social support is centered around and made up of a very robust and comprehensive ready-made network that includes friends, colleagues, coaches, mentors, athletic trainers, academic advisors, and a multitude of other athletic services that are at their fingertips ready to help. A support system based solely on the fact that you are an athlete and that you are a participant in athletics quite frankly restricts and arrests the individual from acquiring other roles and to obtain an identity outside of sport.

As Marcia (1966) describes it, identity foreclosure is when the person has a high level of commitment, which is accompanied by a low level of exploration or crisis. Those who are in this state of foreclosure have not gone through the process of vetting out other identities and working through their personal needs to find their truth. Conversely, they have embraced what their environment and social surroundings have told them. For example, a person that chooses to play a particular sport or voting for a particular political party that their parents support. This person has chosen this identity without exploring other ideas or sports options, or even questioning why they truly believe or play the sport. This state restricts the individual from truly becoming and seeking out what truly defines and makes them happy. When an individual enters this state, it is one that is difficult to move out of since they have not ventured out to explore. Some even contend that if it had not been for both the time constraints and the physical demands that come

along with playing major college sports, they could perform better than their non-athlete counterparts in the classroom (Singer, 2008). In this same vein, not only would the athlete have more time to be able to focus on their academics better, but they would also have more exploratory freedom to get more involved on campus to see the bigger picture. There is a vast amount of possibilities offered on college campuses from student organizations, to internships, job shadowing, fraternities, different social groups, etc. Those opportunities, most if not all times, are voided due to those time restrictions and the inherent pressures that are placed upon student-athletes. During an interview, Singer (2008) explains the '20-hour rule' (i.e. practice and other sport related activity may not exceed 20 hours per week or four hours in an individual day in season) that the NCAA mandates on athletic programs and how this rule is ignored by coaches:

> They got that 20-hour rule and I remember so and so coach was like we got to sign a thing saying that we did 20-hours; but everybody was laughing . . . even though we were breaking the rule we were not going to say anything because we would not get on the field. (p. 405)

Reinforcing this interpretation is a study done by Good et al. (1993), examining the relationship of identity foreclosure and athletic identity while finding that the strength and level of commitment to the athletic identity increased with the amount of involvement. This can ultimately have major ramifications on the academic, athletic, and career development of the student-athletes and be detrimental for their life in the long run. Situations of this nature can put the student-athlete behind in a major way and make the journey out of the realm of athletics more enigmatic, and at times more than they can or wish to handle. Potentially being too heavy to the point of giving up on life or any potential future.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study is to examine varying identity development roles and their influences on the transition out of sports among NCAA Division I African American male football players.

Research Questions

Within this study, the researcher will look to examine different possible relationships and connections between the athletic identity, identity foreclosure, and other possible identities (i.e. social, racial, academic) that are held by the student-athlete. The following questions will help to be a guide through this study:

1. How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?

2. How do football players self-identify in terms of their multiple roles as student, Black, male, and athlete?

3. How do football players' perceptions of the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, peer athletes, faculty, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity while in the university setting?

4. How do football players' perceptions of their relationships affect their role identity when transitioning out of sport?

The first question looks to dive into what factors or key elements are at play that help to make up the identity of the student-athletes. What is the correlation between certain factors that have contributed to their identity and how those certain factors play a role in the formation of their athletic identity, racial identity, and possibly their identity foreclosure. When looking at these different agents that play a role, to try and find the relationship that can be used as a determining factor and identifying components that could help to serve those who are employed

19

to help the student-athlete. This would hopefully mitigate future issues by having a template and processes in place due to the gained knowledge.

The second question looks to understand the different components of the individual and their multiple identities that make up their view of themselves. What are the various ways that the individual roles of being a student, athlete, Black, and male all coincide to make them who they are? What ways do they play in helping them grow, develop, enhance, or stay stagnant within their walk through college? How do they see themselves within each individual role?

The third question examines the way in which the student-athlete perceives those that are surrounding him. The coaches, support staff, athletic department, peer athletes, and even the professors. How does each separate entity play a role in the cohesive development and perception of how they see themselves? Are these relationships fostering an environment that is conducive to developing the holistic student-athlete, or are they enforcing some of the same concepts of the "dumb jock" or "athlete-student?"

The fourth question probes into the student-athlete's identity status. How does their level of identity (i.e. social, racial, athletic, academic) factor into their ability to transition out of sports. How close do they hold onto the role of athlete, and then once it is removed, how that affects their ability to transition out of sport. Furthermore, how do the relationships they have had with the support staff, department, and peers affect their ability to evolve? How does that factor into their ability to be resilient, navigating uncharted waters as they move out of sports?

Significance of the Study

This study hopes to provide a link for athletic academic advisors and all support staff trained to serve and assist student-athletes to be able to provide workshops, counseling services, and most importantly, time for the student-athletes to be able to explore life's many offerings.

Competitive athletes must face a multitude of adjustments during the transitory process of careers (Grove et al., 1997). When navigating through the college ranks, most do not have the daily tasks and responsibilities (i.e., children, jobs that can fire you, paying debts/bills, caring for oneself exclusively, etc.) that are accustomed to greet you once your college career has ended. In order to assist the student-athletes we must first hear from them firsthand to see what it is they feel is helping, hurting, restricting and what they believe could or would help during this transition.

If there are programs and people in place to facilitate and help with this mental transition, what can be done better to reach the student-athletes that are making this life-changing transition? In a study done by Lally & Kerr (2005), the participants who were interviewed indicated that upon entry into college, they had little to no career aspirations and invested strongly in the athletic role. By the time they entered their final years of college, the participants began to ditch the sport career dreams and were open to putting their student role in the forefront within their identity ranks. In the ideal world for all athletes, this is what you would hope could be done before it is too late along the road in the careers of student-athletes. Due to the heightened level of identification with the athletic side by way of the level of competition, it is the hope of this study to help with strategic ways to not eliminate it but to help bring a healthy balance into the equation.

It is a crucial component to discover and help to further along the research in finding how and what makes up the student-athlete. How do all of the multiple components (i.e., social, racial, family, academic) within and around the student-athlete shape oneself? Ultimately, the goal is to find a way to merge athletic participation at the highest level, the development of the

student identity simultaneously apart from the arena of athletics, with the understanding that it can and will still be a player in that process.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this research, you will find the use of many different terms that will need context and definition for the purposes of understanding. Furthermore, keywords, phrases, and terms can be found below to help give context to the methodology that will be utilized moving forward within this work. Please see below for these definitions:

- *Athletic identity* – The level to which an individual identifies their athletic role and how they depend on others to validate that role (Brewer et al., 1993).
- *Classification* – The student-athlete's athletic eligibility status.
- *Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)* - Division of NCAA collegiate football where teams can advance to a bowl game
- *Identity* – Broadly speaking, is the sense of who one is based on their experiences and one's imagination of who one could be (Marcia, 2009).
- *Identity Achievement* – The status at which an individual has gone through the process of identity exploration/crisis and has made their own decision on a particular identity and committed to it (Marcia, 1966).
- *Identity Foreclosure* – A status in the process of defining self at which the individual has accepted an identity without first exploring other options. They typically take on the role given by friends, family, and community (Marcia, 1966).
- *NCAA Division I* – Among the three National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) divisions, Division I institutions typically have the largest student body, athletic budget, and offer the most scholarships (NCAA, 2018).

- *Power 5 Conferences* – "NCAA Constitution 5.3.2.1.1 Authority to Adopt or Amend Legislation. The *Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference* and their member institutions shall have the authority to adopt or amend legislation that is identified as an area of autonomy. (Adopted: 8/7/14)" (NCAA, 2018).

- *Predominantly White Institution (PWI)* – Higher education institutions where White people are 50% or more of the study body population (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

- *Student-Athlete* – A student that participates in a sport, while in college, that has a governing body.

Assumptions

Upon the building of this research study, there are a few assumptions that can be made. The assumptions are as follows:

1. The participation of this study is voluntary, and all aspects associated with it.

2. Each participating volunteer has been a student-athlete at a Division I institution.

3. Each volunteer understood the questionnaire in its entirety.

4. Each volunteer answered each question objectively to the best of their ability.

5. Each volunteer answered each question honestly to the best of their ability.

Delimitations

Delimitations help limit the scope and set the boundaries of a study (Creswell, 2012). The difference here is that these are parameters or choices made purposefully by the researcher that need to be mentioned.

1. The study only examined NCAA Division I Black male student-athletes

2. The population sample was taken from a single Division I football program.

3. The sample population was also limited, which therefore ensures that not everyone nor the majority of voices were heard or captured.

This study was designed to only examine a few of the many ways that a student-athlete's identity can be affected.

Limitations

Even though steps were put in place to reduce potential limitations, this study is still peppered with limited areas. Limitations help to point out or represent potential weaknesses within a study that could have an impact on the outcome (Creswell, 2010). Limitations are influences that are outside of the researcher's control.

1. This study involves self-reporting. This potentially puts at risk the responses due to the student-athletes level of comfort with being truly transparent and honest. The feeling of potentially saying something that they deem could potentially be taboo or to put themselves in harm's way with themselves or others could cause for vague and ambiguous responses.

2. Participants can skew the data by wanting to answer the questions in a way that they think makes them look outstanding and in a better light, potentially.

3. Due to the timing, it was given during a global pandemic: COVID-19. This can create more or less awareness for the student-athlete answering the question due to the fact they have been isolated and have been forced to:

   a. Think outside the box

      i. See themselves past football

      ii. Look for outlets other than football due to the copious amounts of time not given to the sport due to the pandemic

b. Stew inside the box

      i. Continue to box themselves into only being an athlete because they have nothing else to take their mind off of sport

Organization of the Study

      This dissertation consists of 5 chapters. Within Chapter 1, it starts off with a personal account of how I viewed myself growing up playing football, and my personal identity characteristics. I introduce a short review of the literature that assisted in the initial development of this proposal by focusing on identity development and the student athlete. Additionally, the purpose of this study, as well as the research questions, were defined and laid out in this chapter. Chapter 2 provides an in depth look into the different statuses of identity formation: *diffusion*, *foreclosure*, *moratorium*, and *achievement*. I dive into the development of identity and how this is formed from an adolescent growing up and the factors that influence and shape one's identity. I then introduce by way of the literature the different factors, specifically social, racial, and athletic factors that impact the development of the Black student-athlete along the way. This chapter also lays out the theoretical frameworks from which I approached my study. Chapter 3 delves in depth as to how, who, and where I would conduct this study. Based on the literature it was determined that I would do a qualitative study consisting of a semi-formal interview process. An overview of my qualitative stance as well as the specific protocol I will use for the study are presented. Chapter 4 will account for the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Here you will find the responses of the semi-structured interview questions from the participants. This chapter will also allow for the participants to share some advice for the next generation of Black male football players to take heed to as they begin or continue in their journey through college. Chapter 5 will be the concluding chapter that will compare and contrast the research findings

from the literature review with the lived experiences of the participants from Chapter 4. This chapter will also address the limitations of this research study and wrap it all up with a concluding statement.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature that is surrounding the different aspects of identity development and to have that serve as a building block for the foundation to help answer the questions that were posed in Chapter 1. The research questions that were presented in Chapter 1 are centered on identity development (Black and male), athletic identity, and identity foreclosure. These are looked at to attempt to determine how those play a role in an effective and resilient transition out of sport.

The population for this study is student-athletes who have participated in a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I football program. More specifically it will look at the factors that affect the African American male intercollegiate football player. The population reviewed and looked at will be those who attended a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). The theoretical framework will be explored by reviewing journals, articles, and books on each of the aforementioned areas of identity.

This literature review will also focus on the complexities of the student-athlete having to juggle multiple roles (scholar, athlete, male, African American, etc.) while still trying to navigate through a space that, at its core, can suck you in and make you forget the "real world" exists. Balancing these roles helps to have a healthy and positive self-identity and athletic identity, so that you don't completely forfeit the previously mentioned and can become a well-rounded person with the hopes that the transition out of sport will be a smooth one.

Statement of the Issue

By looking at the different aspects of what makes up an African American male

student-athlete—in particular, a football player—this research will dive into those different aspects to see how they affect the transition or "retiring" from sports. Racial, athletic, and social identity all play a major role in the makeup of each individual. Each part, it can be assumed, will play a significant role in making the transition, but how much is too much of one area? It seems to be more prevalent now more than ever that athletes are the bar against which we compare everything. That comparison ranges from attractiveness, physical appearance, physical abilities, down to the way in which they engage in politics surrounding social issues. With this spotlight on them, especially within the urban communities, youth are being conditioned to believe that is the only way in which they can be both successful and relevant. Since sports are viewed as one of the few opportunities in which the urban community can rise out of poverty, failing to reach such lofty goals can leave an individual dejected. To compound this misery, if there is no backup plan in place it can have a tremendous impact on their psyche as society continues to push the narrative that Black men have a very limited skill set (Harrison, 2008; Beamon, 2008, 2014).

While playing sports in college, you are heavily invested in succeeding in that respective sport. You are also confined to time restraints as you must practice, work out, condition, as well as study for your academics. This leaves very little time to think outside of sport. However, when the thought of doing something without it being related to sports (e.g. not becoming a professional) tends to bring pain, discontentment, and can bring discomfort imagining how and what life's transition process will be. That transition out of sports, as referenced by Simon & Docherty (2014), can impact many areas of their lives, including their identity development.

Identity Development Through Life

What is identity? This involves defining "who" you are and "what" has shaped and molded you to be this way. Schwartz et al. (2012) posits that identity, in its simplest form,

28

requires one to provide an answer to the question, either explicitly or implicitly: "Who are you?".

Continuing, while this may sound simple, the truth of the matter is that it camouflages a

significant level of complexity. Identity development is a key and central process that every

human must go through to be able to find and understand oneself. According to

Merriam-Webster's dictionary (2020), *identity* is defined as "the distinguishing character or

personality of an individual" or "the relation established by psychological identification"

("Identity", 2020). As individuals grow and learn through their life experiences, this

identification process begins to take shape and soon becomes a very important part of their

everyday life. Erikson (1993) describes the process in which a person has to struggle between

two key characters. Each stage involves a level of crisis that must be taken head-on and not

avoided to progress and advance to the next stage.

Four Stages of Identity

This work was further refined and advanced upon by Marcia (1966) to present the level

of commitment and crisis a person has or has yet to experience. Marcia (1966) constructed the

identity statuses of psychological identity development. These statuses consisted of *Identity

Diffusion*, *Identity Moratorium*, *Identity Foreclosure*, *and Identity Achievement*. Each of these

identities has a combination of Crisis (exploration) and Commitment (ownership) levels and

characteristics (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Four identity stages
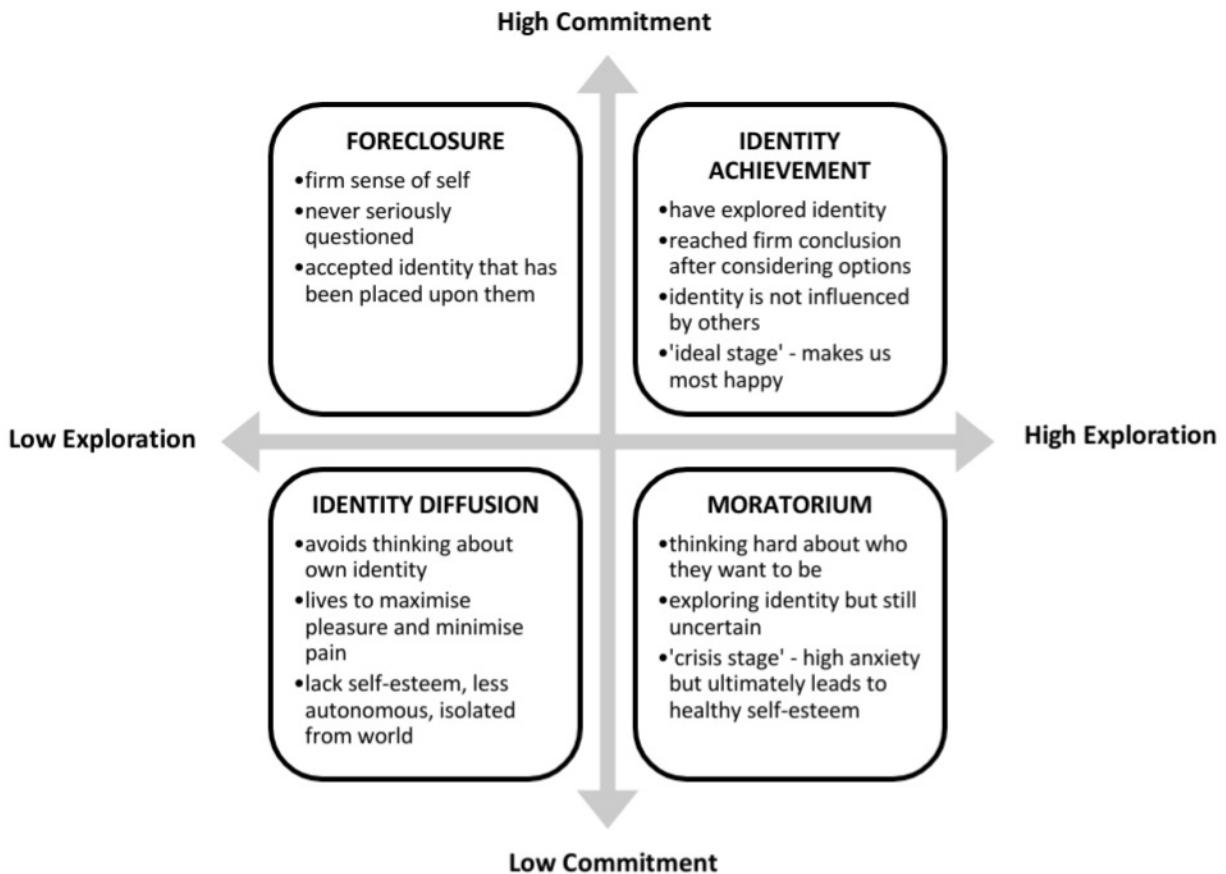
This figure displays the commitment and exploration levels of each identity stage (Marcia, 1966)

Identity diffusion is the void of exploration and low levels of commitment as it pertains to identity (Marcia, 1966). With very low to no exploring alternative identities and very low to no commitment levels, this identity status is simply living life and taking everything as it comes. An individual is reacting to life as it happens with no true destination in mind. There are no goals to reach and no dreams to attain. However, when there is a commitment that is made to something, it can easily be changed as they are not fully locked into anything and can be easily dissuaded. Furthermore, identity diffusion varies within each individual's experience (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). An example of this would be a student who is asked about attending college and if they

want to go. Their response would be "well if it happens, it happens, I am not really pressed about it at all." When asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The response given is "it does not matter" or "I do not know" very nonchalantly. There is no desire to chase or run after any goals, dreams, or aspirations. According to Donovan (1975), this identity status often had feelings of "inferiority", as though they did not belong, and low self-esteem. Consequently, displaying signs of withdrawal, silence, and sadness.

In a study done by Carlsson et al. (2016), they evaluated what it means to experience long-term identity diffusion. Their study involved 124 individuals, 63 of whom were women, with ages ranging between 25 and 29, evaluating the dark side of identity development. Of this group, seven of the participants were assigned to the identity diffusion level of development at each stage. Their study resulted in none of the participants meeting the criteria for an Identity problem at either age 25 or 29. At the age of 25, the identity issue participants rated "moderately distressing" most often was the long-term goals (n=4). Continuing to age 29, long-term goals and career choices were the most common (n=2). Finally, the study showed that most participants showed normal psychological levels at both ages with the latter being less severe than normative symptoms (Carlsson et al., 2016).

In another study done by Sharma & Mittal (2017) on identity diffusion, they analyzed the role of the parenting style and how that affects the decision-making process. The parenting styles were defined as being authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. This study used a purposeful sample of 500 adolescents in the 11th and 12th English co-educational schools. The ages ranged from 15 to 19 years old. Of the total number of adolescents sampled, 110 were students who identified as being in a diffused identity state. This was made up of 50 boys and 60 girls. This story concluded that there is a correlation between adolescents who view their parents as being

31

authoritarian and them scoring higher in the identity diffusion status. Also, it revealed that there is a positive correlation between a mother being permissive and the adolescent scoring high on the identity diffusion scale. However, there was significant evidence that showed when the parenting style was that of an authoritative manner, that this not only provided boundaries, rules, and limitations, it also was significant in leading to an identity status of achievement (Sharma & Mittal, 2017).

Identity foreclosure is the next identity status. This status is a combination of a low level of exploration that is met with a significantly high level of commitment (Marcia, 1966). At this level of identity, the adolescent is not particularly trying to explore to gain an understanding of oneself. They are simply adopting what has been given to them or what they have been used to doing in their life and take that on as their own personal identity. They are not questioning what is right or wrong, nor do they question the values and beliefs they have been taught through the years of growing up. What has been learned in their mind is the law. The structures that have a great impact on a person's identity could be a combination of family, community, social media, and culture. When given the identity and values from the aforementioned, the child is committed wholeheartedly to them. They will not question why, who, or what they have accepted to believe, additionally they also do not seek to find alternatives to what they've been taught. An example of this would be a student who has taken on the same political party as their family. Furthermore, a student has decided on what college to attend as well as the career for which they want to pursue based on where their parents went and the careers for which their parents have made a living. Ceding, that if it worked for them then surely it will work for me and make me happy. They have accepted to do, be, act, and walk lock-step with what has "traditionally" been done. In both cases, the student has failed to explore their path in life to see where it could lead them. They

32

have forsaken the journey to find out what truly makes them happy and fulfills them, but simply adhering to and adopting the path that has been given to them and continuing without wavering from those that have come before.

In a meta-study conducted by Ronkainen et al. (2016), 108 empirical studies were reviewed, with 63 being quantitative, 40 qualitative, and five listed as a mixed-methods approach. Amongst the many studies that were reviewed, two used Erikson's theory of psychological development. They looked at two gymnasts and highlighted how rigorous the commitment had to be for them to be an elite gymnast, which, as a result, ended up in identity foreclosure. Furthermore, stating that as a result of this, their view on retirement was often portrayed as 'nowhere land' and a 'struggle for identity' (Ronkainen et al., 2016).

An examination was conducted by Miller & Kerr (2003) of University student-athletes in Canada, governed by the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS). This selection was limited to seniors only. To gauge the significance of the athletics programs, the national championships of the revenue-generating sports will occasionally draw thousands of observers. Whereas in the United States, you can have tens of thousands at a regular season game multiple times throughout the regular season. The study revealed that early on in their college career, the participants showed over-identification with their athletic role. This can be attributed to being heavily involved in the sport as children and adolescents. This athletic identity also was a key driving factor in them choosing the University to attend. However, further along in this study, Miller & Kerr (2003) did show findings of the student-athletes beginning to shift their focus from athletic participation to more of a focus on their academics. This was more prevalent in the latter years of college versus the early initial years. The authors go on to state that some of the student-athletes were considering graduate school. This was also due to the fact that some

accepted that they were not "Olympic or Professional" calibur athletes after being introduced to college athletics (Miller & Kerr, 2003). Thus, accepting that this was the last stage for them to compete on, it can be assumed that those with the talent to be professional athletes would have higher assimilation to identity foreclosure.

Identity moratorium is the third identity status. This status presents a high level of exploration and a low level of commitment (Marcia, 1966). At this stage, the adolescent is in a "crisis" attempting to explore different identity options. They are in the process of testing different beliefs and values in life. While exploring, they still have not yet committed to anything. Through all of the exploration of beliefs, morals, and values in life they are not yet ready to make a final decision on what they wish to pursue and or follow to help create or help shape their identity. An example of this is that a student was raised in a family of engineers where his mom, dad, and older siblings all studied and became engineers. The student begins to argue and confront his family about being and studying engineering, as he likes to spend his time outside hiking, bike riding, and dancing. Although he was raised within and groomed to be an engineer, he wants to explore other majors in college to truly find out what he wants to study. He is not completely sold on the idea of becoming an engineer and is actively searching out other departments to see if their values, beliefs, and morals align with what his interests are to study.

According to Donovan (1975), in a study conducted on 22 undergraduates at a large Midwestern state university, they were looking to determine the identity statuses. Continuing, some key components and traits were attributed to each status as well. For example, it was noted that identity moratorium participants were seen as rebellious towards authority. Each subject was interviewed and tested individually and they were also required to write an autobiography, amongst other tasks. The findings from the study found that the largest group of participants (11)

34

fell within the identity moratorium status. It was found that their curiosity and inability to remain with one person, in a single place, or with a single task was quite often fleeting as though this would be arresting their freedom. Interpersonally, they seemed to be very argumentative and hostile towards others. Emotionally, this group found it necessary to establish themselves within the group setting with a level of control and governance as compared to showing a more submissive nature. Finally, they were always in a seemingly struggle for power.

Anthony & Swank (2018) administered a study that examined the identity development of 98 Black college student-athletes in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). Within this study, they were looking at the intersections of gender, race, and athletic identities. The findings from the study indicated a very interesting discovery when you look at gender as it pertains to the moratorium status. Continuing, it was found that within the females represented in the study, they were more likely to be categorized as either achieved or moratorium. It was said this is due to the lack of professional opportunities that are afforded to female athletes. There was also a report done by Harrison et al. (2009) that reiterated this fact stating women are less likely to have athletics be their sole focus due to college being the pinnacle of their sport. Whereas the male participants in the study had something to look forward to (i.e football) where the professional ranks were not only a possibility, but they also wielded a high revenue return if attained (Anthony & Swank, 2018).

Identity achievement is the fourth and final identity status. This status indicates a high level of exploration in concert with a high level of commitment (Marcia, 1966). It is believed that when an adolescent reaches this stage in their identity searching process, they have achieved their identity by way of experiencing a journey that has been filled with tons of exploration or "crisis" and they have a strong commitment to the beliefs, morals, and values they have landed

upon as a result of this journey. They have tried out numerous alternate identities with the hopes of arriving at this status in their life. Now that they have found their achievement in identity, they can map out and prioritize their life based on the beliefs, morals, and values they have attached themselves to. This decision is not nonchalantly accepted, but there is a sense of fulfillment, joy, and confidence in their decision-making, knowing within them that this is the right thing for them. An illustration of this is by an adolescent finally choosing a religion. After years of never attending or attaching to any denomination or religion, she has finally chosen to practice one. This was only after careful consideration, research, and experience with the different religions. She kept her beliefs, values, and morals in mind as she went and explored each religion. She then figured out which religion was closely aligned with her aforementioned traits. Ultimately, she made a decision that was best for her and one that she knew paired well with her belief system.

Those within this identity status exhibit a calm and mature demeanor as reported by Donovan (1975). Moreover, those within the identity achievement status appeared to be very well collected with their thoughts and their ideas as to why they were interested in or pursuing certain careers. There was a convicted certainty that followed their responses that were not simply due to the parental or community norm. Furthermore, their attitude and treatment of others within this study was that of a calm and nurturing manner. Unconcerned with trying to dominate, cause chaos, or engage in jockeying for leadership roles as other identities showed to have the propensity to do so. They were more concerned with how others were enjoying themselves to try to ensure they had a great experience. Happiness, contentment, confidence, and assurance seem to be common things amongst those within this identity stage.

Identity Theory

Identity theory looks to determine the difference in the reasoning behind the many

identities that one may possess; how they relate to outside individuals and also each other and

ultimately how these identities shape their thoughts, feelings, emotions; and how they are used

within society (Burke & Stets, 2009). Within identity theory, many components are at play

regarding one's development. One of those concepts is the verification of your identity. Identity

verification is when someone thinks that others see them in the same light and hold them in the

same regard as they do themselves (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Using this interpretation, I intend to

use this in my research to see how the former Black male student-athletes interpreted their

identity standard versus the way they interpreted the perceptual input given by others. To see

how that initially started once they entered college, and then once their dream of the NFL did not

come to pass, how did they transition? Similar to individuals at the professional level, big-time

NCAA Division I football program student-athletes exist in a world filled with copious amounts

of love, adoration, and non-stop scrutiny. Quite often for Black male student-athletes, these

views will have conflicting responses. Whereas the student-athlete will see themselves as being

more than just a student-athlete and want to get involved with groups, organizations, and have a

life outside of sports. However, their interpretation from the staff and their social surroundings

only see and validate their existence as athletes and continue to reinforce the importance of

excelling on the football field as though that is their only way to earn a decent living.

Additionally, the perception is to only be so good as to be for the entertainment and well-being of

not only the fans but also their coaches. This is referred to as identity non-verification. It has

been proposed that the environment in and around collegiate athletics, which are supposed to be

centered on the holistic development of the student-athlete, is not a space that is very hospitable

for them to truly explore or actively engage in alternative career, social, or personal exploration

due to the hefty time demands that are commanded by athletics (Singer, 2008). When you

combine this with injury, burnout, or early retirement, it can cause a string of negative emotions that can have a detrimental effect on the individual battling these emotions while trying to get back in alignment with the perceptual input. In response to this, the output by the individual can lead to a downward spiral of self-destruction or burnout.

Identity salience is the likelihood that someone would conjure up an identity based on the individual situation they are in (Stets & Serpe, 2013). With this definition in tow, this plays a role in my research by looking at Black male student-athletes; their athletic identity quite often is the one they place at the forefront of all other identities. Athletic identity is the degree to which a person accepts and identifies with the athlete within and seeks the validation of that identity from others (Brewer et al., 1993). The athletic identity can be most salient because it quite often has been the most used, enforced, and most comfortable identity for them as it has been with them from an early age. It is acknowledged by African American males that sport has had a positive impact and has contributed many benefits that can be utilized in life during and after sports (Singer, 2008). The elements of perseverance, teamwork, communication, and banding together for a collective goal are just a few of many that can be learned from playing intercollegiate athletics. From childhood, you play sports as a means of the perceived character and physical building aspects, while concurrently keeping them occupied and not using that time to get into bad situations. Growing up in the inner city of Detroit, MI this was one of the main reasons why you get into sports both during school as well as in the summertime. It keeps you occupied with something to always look forward to, with the parental hopes that you enjoy it enough to stick with it for your own personal enjoyment. It has been conjectured that holding strong to and forgoing all other identities outside of the athletic one can create issues when it comes to adjusting to the natural progression that is accompanied within sports, such as not playing any

longer, dealing with injuries, or being released from the team (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). This salient identity also serves as a barrier when the student-athletes try to interact and integrate themselves within the general population of students and society as they will have poorly developed social relationships with them.

Identity commitment has both quantitative and qualitative factors associated with it. The quantitative aspect, interactional commitment, is based on the number of people that the individual comes in contact with as a result of holding said identity and the encounters within and thereafter (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Being a student-athlete, you are afforded opportunities that do not come along with being a "normal" student. Some of the "perks" that come along with the title are the ability to have academic services, player development, dining facilities, training rooms, and buildings that are quite often solely restricted to student-athletes only. This comes with pros and cons. Within itself, it gives them the ability to have one-on-one attention in all aspects of player services to be able to better grow and learn. It also shields them from those students who do not respect them as human beings on campus and allows for them to be "normal" within those walls. It surrounds them with student-athletes who become the individuals they interact with and hold the same identity as them, increasing the likelihood for them to always be around them even when they are not in the buildings.

Affective commitment, reflective of a qualitative indicator of people's experiences in interaction with others, is made up of the assessments of how others see them with respect to their behavior within the identity, and the amount of affective discomfort they would experience if they were no longer engaged in interaction with others associated with an identity. (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 37). This is evident in the way in which the aforementioned indicates the level of difficulty that comes along with interacting, integrating, and adjusting to populations outside of

39

athletics due to the poorly developed social relationships. According to Stets & Serpe (2013), "those who perceive that others have a positive evaluation of them, and who experience affective distress if they no longer interacted with others associated with an identity have a higher affective commitment to that identity" (p. 37). Therefore, transitioning into the "real world" can be a tough task as they battle with that distress if it is within a field of athletics.

Rosenberg (1979) posits that identity centrality is vital when it comes to how prominent the identities are and the way in which an individual carries themselves as a result of that importance. Inventory of the different identities and prioritizing one over another creates a hierarchy of identities for the person. When the student-athlete is supported and receives awards and recognition (both internal and external) for a certain identity, they are more likely to prioritize this identity in the hierarchy. Within my research, I look to interview those student-athletes who attained awards and recognition for their athletic performance with the hopes to see how it ultimately affected their identity. Then, I also plan to look at how it affected their transition out of sport and the remnants, if any, that remain today as a result of their identity being centrally engulfed by athletics.

Each of the abovementioned tenants that are at work within identity theory plays a major role as they are intricately woven together. With a student-athlete who has a salient athletic identity, likely, his verification will also be that of the same. The verification then drives the individual to then become heavily attached and committed to it from a structural and interactional aspect. They will tend to surround themselves and intentionally interact with those who see them in the light of athletes, as they have internally labeled themselves. This also indicates that the prominence of the athletic identity has become or is at the apex of the totem pole as it relates to their individual identities. The organizing of these factors will fall into three

categories: group, role, and person. This is vital to be able to group them into these categories as it allows for us to be able to see them in the social structures of their individual roles and groups, as well as to see the correlation and individuality of being a person (Burke & Stets, 2009). There are times where these three areas will overlap and be unable to be detangled. Within groups, there are many roles actively engaged in several ways, provided the unique circumstances that present themselves that allow for it (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity is an important topic to discuss as it will be a critical element from which we will derive an explanation of identity and how that factors into transition and resilience post sports. As it relates to social identity theory, this is where a person is aware that they are a part or belonging to a social group (Abrams & Hogg, 1999). "A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view of themselves as members of the same social category" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). This research will be done using the research supported by Tajfel and Turner (1979) as a base foundation. Research conducted on the topic of social identity theory addresses intergroup relations, this being how people view themselves as participants of one group/category (in-group) compared to the opposite (out-group), and the outcomes of the said category (Turner et al., 1987). As this research pertains to the identity of an African American male, the social identity theory will be useful to explain and see the many nuances and difficulties faced by that group to integrate. Furthermore, one must first have a connection to whom they are as an individual first before entering other social identities.

When looking at your personal needs, there is an expectation that an individual's positive relationship with their ethnic group would have the same positive effect on one's sense of self-worth, especially if that identity is part of their core definition of themself (Yip, 2014).

Continuing, it is also shown that those who have their ethnicity at the center of their

identification have positive self-esteem. This is significant due to the fact that it shows the

importance of one's ethnicity to one's overall identity, which could lead to better awareness of

the psychological well-being of a person. With the attachment of one's psychological well-being

in play, it makes sense that the social identity of African American males plays an important role

in one's life. Without the feeling of belonging, what does a person truly have? In society, one

derives their sense of identity from within the social groups of which they inhabit (Stets &

Burke, 2000). When that is no longer the case for that individual, and they have disconnected

from that group (e.g. athletics/playing status), this can have a negative long-lasting effect on their

self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Identity can be conceptualized as "a self-constructed, coherent, and dynamic organization

of the self" (Kurtines et al., 2008, p. 128). Positive Youth Development is a key contributor to

the upbringing of adolescents as they matriculate through life. As a child, they do not know what

they do not know. They are a blank canvas waiting for life's influences to begin to paint and

sculpt their way of interacting and being. With this, a form of imitation then begins to kick in and

take place for the things they do not know. Children learn and imitate from watching and

listening to those around them, and that becomes their guiding map. There is no filter there for

them as they have not learned what is true, or by social standards, right or wrong. They only

know what is, and that is what they hear and see daily around them. When having kids or

watching a child come home from school or daycare, you will often find them acting out or

portraying a fictional character such as Iron Man, Superman, Spiderman, or their favorite cartoon

character for which they are permitted to watch on television. They will make the noises they

imagine, they will attempt the same body movements, in addition to those, they will also try the

42

superpowers that some of them possess. So having a child jump off of a couch, and while in mid-air say they are flying like superman, is not uncommon during the development stages. Likewise, having them imitate a character who may not be age-appropriate by shooting guns, fighting, killing, or playing the villain in the films will also be played out in the home.

The acts that the child imitates, due to their social surroundings, will always continue to become more progressive depending on the nature of the shows and events that are taken in. This is called observational learning. We, as humans, have grown in a way that has allowed for the ability to retain more from observational learning that allows for the development of knowledge and skills from the information taken in through different modeling agencies (Bandura, 1986; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978). An example of this would be for a child or sibling to see an older sibling or friend get chastised for climbing on a dresser; that child will likely not climb the dresser for fear of the observed learning experience. Another being that of an athlete who is not successful on the field but then begins to have success after watching the preparation taken by an athlete who is thriving on the field. Observational learning was developed by Albert Bandura and a few of his colleagues back in the '60s and '70s (Fryling et al., 2011). At the time, it was seen as a push back or opposing view that all behavior could be deduced to response and operant conditioning in and of itself (Fryling et al., 2011). And yet, each of the abovementioned theories and practices helps to shape the identity of the youth.

Bruner et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study that explored to see if there was a correlation between social identity and positive youth development within sports. This study examined 219 youth that were engaged in recreational sport, ranging from the ages 9-14 years old. Out of the 219 youth sampled, the majority of participants were female (59%) and they were pulled from a variety of sports. The findings from this study were based on the survey responses

administered from the Social Identity Questionnaire for Sport and focused on three distinct areas. First, was the ingroup ties (IGT) which measured the feelings of belonging and camaraderie with others in a group. The second was cognitive centrality which focuses on the importance of being a participant on the team. The third was the ingroup affect (IGA) or the feeling that the individual would have as being associated with the group. Finally, the study resulted in uncovering that those with a higher social identity, as it pertains to IGT with a positive IGA, reported higher levels of positive youth development. There was not much that could be found in the realm of cognitive centrality as it pertained to this study group, highlighting that it may be less important in personal development. However, it could become more of a factor if this group were in competitive elite sport. These findings highlight how extracurricular activity in sports can have a positive effect on the youth as they grow and develop.

A study conducted by Markstrom et al. (2005), took a look at the psychosocial conception of the ego strength that presents itself in adolescents who are involved in adult-sponsored structured youth activities. These activities ranged from extracurricular, volunteer, and religious forms of involvement, as well. Their study included a total of 517 adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17, ranging from grades 9-11. There were two rounds of testing conducted, with the second coming after an eight-month gap following the first. The initial analysis concerning the adult-sponsored structured youth activities showed that boys participated more in sports and girls participated more in creative arts, issue groups, and religious services. Furthermore, those with a higher socioeconomic status (SES) showed to be more involved in areas surrounding sports, student government, volunteerism, and religious attendance. Having access to more resources, as it pertains to SES, allows for you to obtain activities and opportunities that those who are on the opposite end of the SES spectrum might

never be privileged enough to experience. On the contrary, those on the lower end of the spectrum of SES may have to take on additional roles, such as employment, that prevent involvement in activities. Lastly, as it pertains to the ego strength associated with the involvement of certain activities, it was the student government, issues group, sports, and volunteerism that were linked with ego strengths of hope, will, purpose, competence, and wisdom. Continuing, student government and volunteerism were related to fidelity, whereas creative arts, sports, issue groups, and volunteerism correlated to the ego strength of care. This is important due to it showing that gender played a role in participation in sports. Not only that, but when you assess the SES of those students who identify as Black males, often they come from lower SES backgrounds, forcing them to not only work a job, but also work at their craft in sports. Thus, further driving home the narrative of sports having to be the savior to get them out of their situation and continuing to perpetuate the cycle of foreclosing their identity within the athletic realm.

In a study by Brown et al. (2003), it was found that individuals from different backgrounds and racial makeup that participate within an integrated and organized team sport, can quickly become unaware of the racial tension and divide that can exist amongst them. Furthermore, they argue this can be due to when they are competing on the playing field they are made to believe that race does not matter and that "team" is the only differentiating factor. Within a locker room and field of play, to achieve the common goal of winning, an atmosphere is set to that which we call a "brotherhood." This term refers to those who are within the boundaries of the four walls of the locker room, and the four white/black lines that border the respective playing field. It is assumed and hoped that whilst within those confines you are to treat everyone equally and protect one another against all foes as though you are truly from the

same bloodline, family tree, and are "brothers." For many young African American male athletes, they will hold their coach in high regard as such that they can be seen as father figures, and the team then subsequently becomes their family (Richardson, 2012). Furthermore, this creates a level of devotion to the individuals being led by that coach. Quite often, any social events or encounters are with those who are normally within their athletic circuit, thus further enforcing their athletic identity. This then becomes the norm and is the foundation on which you continue to live your life off of and build a foundation of support.

Racial Identity

There has been research done that has focused on how an individual figures out their racial and ethnic identity (Phinney, 1996; Cross, 1991). It is relevant in all aspects like this due to societal perceptions and reality versus personal beliefs and self-esteem. Here will be the defining of nigrescence and ways in which it can play out. Nigrescence has multiple aspects to it, says Cross (1991), and has been defined as "the process of becoming Black." Concerning this theory, there have been five particular phases to which the process of nigrescence takes place (Cross, 1971). These stages are: *pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization,* and *internalization/commitment*.

Stage one, *pre-encounter*, is where one is expected to see the world through the lens of being non-Black, anti-Black, or the opposite of Black according to Cross (1971). Furthermore, this lens in which they are viewing the world is governed by Euro-American factors. An example of this would be dressing or styling your hair as such that it would model or be accepted by Euro-Americans. Alex Haley, an American writer, Coast Guard veteran, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the 20th century wrote a number of books and articles. In particular, he wrote a novel entitled *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* in which you can see each of the

aforementioned stages played out through the life of Kunta Kinte, an African sold into slavery. Within this book, it chronicles the life of a young man, who at 17 years of age, was sold through the transatlantic slave trade, yet he held on to his roots from which he came (Haley & Dyson, 2016). Throughout, Kunta will go through the psychological journey of that which is called nigrescence whilst still navigating life as a slave. During the pre-encounter stage, Wilson & Gavarappan (2018) note that Kunta is filled with adulation from being named after his grandfather, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, who was known as a hero around the village. Becoming the namesake for his grandfather, the children around his age looked to him with great honor as he embodied the characteristics, drive, and respect that was once held by his grandfather. Furthermore, he had excelled at living off of the land he was provided upon completing the manhood training in Jujuo and had a very secure sense of self and pride of being from his village as well as being a devout Muslim.

The second stage, *encounter,* is characterized by an experience or event that happens to drastically change how one feels about himself as well as Blacks in America (Cross, 1971). However, this is not a deep intellectual encounter; it is merely a visual or verbal event that has taken place. Furthermore, at the second stage, it can be outlined as having two distinct characteristics with the first being the encounter, and the second being the process or act of viewing the world differently as a result of the encounter. An example of this would be the recent killings, assault, and brutality of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of police. In addition to that, the cell phone video footage of racial incidents, or discussions with a friend or loved one that is further advanced in their own Black identity can invigorate and alert the person to their blackness. Kunta Kinte's encounter came when he was kidnapped from his country and sent to America where he eventually became a slave (Wilson & Gavarappan, 2018). Upon

entering the new land, being America, he saw other Black people that looked like those he was

accustomed to from Africa, however he quickly realized the mentality was not the same (Haley

& Dyson, 2016; Wilson & Gavarappan, 2018). Kunta could not understand how they treated

their own kind with such disdain, and accepted the fact they were slaves and continued to work

as such. Kunta, secure within himself with pride not only from his tribe but his grandfather's

namesake as well, was forced to change his name to 'Toby' by the plantation owner (Haley &

Dyson, 2016). The name change was not adopted well by Kunta, as he held strong to his familial

lineage.

Stage three, termed as *immersion/emersion*, is the process in which the individual

immerses themselves into the realm of being Black and everything associated with their

Blackness (Cross, 1971). Likewise, each encounter, thought, action, and every value must be

aligned with being Black or having to do with their Blackness. Moreover, this experience is an

immersion into Blackness and a freeing experience from Whiteness. This stage is coined as

being "very powerful" in the way in which it is fueled by numerous variables. Powered by Black

rage, guilt, and the development of a deeper sense of Black pride, Cross (1971) states these are

the characteristics of the immersion/emersion stage. Within this stage, the individual grows to

love their physical features, gaining confidence in their history and overall culture. With the

overwhelming change in culture, scenery, and people who looked like him, who however didn't

think or see themselves like he did, Kunta Kinte begins to enter the immersion/emersion stage of

his journey through nigrescence. Kunta begins to dislike and hate the other Black people on the

plantation because they have accepted what was told to them by the White slave owner and

forsaken everything about their own Black culture (Haley & Dyson, 2016). All the while hating

he others, he internally is devoted to his roots while also not practicing Christianity with the

other slaves, as he was a Muslim.

The fourth stage, *internalization*, is that the person is now becoming more confident in their own racial identity that they feel comfortable and confident enough to reach out to build relationships with those around them from different racial backgrounds (Cross, 1971). They now have the ability to be able to see and resolve problems they face in the world with a more open mind. They are able to internalize their Blackness, while still being confident in their Blackness, all the while continuing to push forward. This is crucial in the journey as it shapes how they tend to engage with others in society and other racial groups. In a study conducted by Pinderhughes (1997), it was found that racial identity has a great deal of influence on the self-concept amongst the Black adolescent. On the other hand, for Whites, it was not observed as much, nor was it a major contributing factor within the defining of their self-concept. Kunta Kinte, after multiple failed attempts to flee from the plantation to freedom, found himself to be amputated (Wilson & Gavarappan, 2018). Thus, he gradually begins to accept his fate while beginning to build a relationship with other slaves there on the plantation, while still remaining loyal to his religion and roots of Africa. Kunta continually thinks and dreams of home and internalizes his Blackness.

Stage five, *internalization-commitment*, is the shift from concerning yourself with others' view of you to you setting the standard for your own Blackness (Cross, 1971). In addition, it is also a more controlled approach towards handling the fury held towards white people, to now focusing on the institutions; from insecure and inferiority to a sense of Black is beautiful; from a quick protest to a sustained thought-out, long-term plan and commitment to change. This individual is confident, takes pride in their Blackness, respects others, and is still working to change the communities that look like them for the better. With this being stated, it is pivotal for the development of Black athletes to have a strong understanding and grasp of their racial

49

identity heading into college. This will help during the major transition, as well as assist to set a strong foundation for the racial gymnastics they will have to participate in while maintaining a strong athletic identity, simultaneously. Kunta Kinte (Haley & Dyson, 2016), now having gone through the psychological journey of becoming a slave, has found ways to love himself more instead of hate. He has found ways to teach instead of fight, build instead of destroy, and accept more while not condemning all things unlike him.

Black Male Identity

Black males' identity in society today is not that of a very positive one. The public perception of Black males characterizing them as being a thug, deviant, sexual predator, deadbeat dad, among many other negative and harmful adjectives are destroying Black males (Howard, 2014). This narrative and unfortunate depiction of Black males in society does not leave much room for there to be an integration in many aspects of society. There is a long, dark, and deep historical abyss of negative portrayals that can be attributed to these current perceptions and fears placed upon the Black male. The present portrayal of Black males is engrained from the days of chattel slavery and racism that characterized the Black male as an inferior human species, as well as legal property for other humans to own, which restricted their growth (Polite & Davis, 1999). With these depictions being the overall view of Black males, it is quite hard for one to overcome and achieve success in spite of these negative portrayals.

The question now becomes, what are some of the historical factors that play into this becoming the identity for Black males. Taking a look at the historical perspective of how Black males have been viewed, treated, and thought of will lend a hand to see how the remnants of those societal factors still exist today. These remnants seem to influence and drive a narrative that still exists in today's society. Additionally, the caricatures that depicted Black men, during

the years of slavery, were nothing short of dumb, ignorant, submissive, and subhuman creatures (Howard, 2014). In different ways, these images and accounts still have contributed to the overall well-being of Black males in society. During the minstrel shows, in the past, it was incumbent upon Whites to show the Black males in the show as inferior to the White people they were forced to perform in front of. According to Howard (2014), these images have permeated throughout society in such a way that not only does society view Black males as such, but Black males are viewed by the Black population in a similar way. Having said that, the aforementioned reasoning would then apply to those in other races including Whites. These portrayals were used to keep the Black people oppressed and enslaved mentally, having them believe that this was all they were worth as well as the idea they could not make it on their own and needed the help of the White population.

Additional portrayals of Black males being physically strong and intellectually inept, is based on the idea that Black males' only contribution to society is the offering of their strength, and inversely, the lack of when it pertains to intelligence (Howard, 2014). Thus, one of the most prominent roles for Black males during the slavery times was to keep them in some way, shape, or form tied to manual labor. This idea plays a major role in the transatlantic slave trade and how they viewed and treated Black males (and females). According to a French West Indian proverb, it is said to be suspicious of an Indian is to beat him, which would destroy him; but to beat a Negro is nourishment for him (Rawley & Behrendt, 2005). This French West Indian proverb speaks to the mindset and the mentality of how one should treat any Black person. To think that physically beating and hurting someone is nourishing is nonsensical at its core and is contradictory to all aspects and virtues of human life. However, the recognition of the strength of the Black male was lauded; it was the intellectual aspect of the Black male that was dismissed. In

the same way Black males were used for their physical attributes, they were overlooked and dismissed for having any type of intellectual fortitude. Howard (2014) states that due to the overwhelming assumption that Black men were innately more muscular and stronger than Whites, on the other hand they were also stupid with the ability to work in rougher conditions for abnormally long, hard hours. There was an explicit understanding of essentially "White being right" and anything less than that was viewed as less than and wrong. Falling short of that bar meant that you were unable to effectively and efficiently take care of yourself and you were deemed an intellectual midget. As a result, the narrative surrounding Black males is their innate stupidity, inferiority, lacking the ability to provide, emotionally unavailable to support a family, and the miniscule contributions to society or family as a whole (Howard, 2014).

Another aspect that plays into the development of the identity of Black males is the criminalization of Blackness. Stemming from the times of chattel slavery, when Whites were viewed as right and Blacks were viewed as wrong, this is still in play today. Tucker (2007) proposes that popular culture helps to push the narrative of the Black man as violent, treacherous, and a magnet to criminal activity. Furthermore, even throughout the 20th century during political discussions and debates, Black men were always characterized as the perpetrator of violent crimes, molding fears about crime around race. Singer (2019) posits the creation of race and the hierarchies within it, which colonizers began, is rooted in White supremacy to give Whites the overwhelming advantage, which explains institutionalized racism and how it is the underbelly in US society. Due to Black males being viewed as mental and intellectual misfits, the notion that they are scammers or have to be sly about doing things insinuates that all things moral, legal, or anything that requires one to truly work hard to obtain, the Black male avoids by all means necessary.

In the last fifty to sixty years, the narrative has again shifted about the view of Black males. In addition to those depictions stated earlier, Howard (2014) also states that Black men were also viewed as womanizers, hustlers, and slick-talking thugs. Again, factors that drive these narratives home are the depiction of just that on the big screen. Movie writers, as well as film directors, put out content that puts the Black male inside the box that society has so often caged them in, making it that much harder to overcome. Movies such as *Superfly, The Mack, Boyz N' the Hood, Menace II Society, South Central* and so many more to this day are examples of this. Majors and Billson (1993) assert that "being male and [B]lack has meant being psychologically castrated and rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that Whites have historically dominated" (p. 1). There are also many other societal views placed upon Black males, as this is not and will not be a rundown of all of them, but to shed light on a few that have shaped the way Black males are viewed and perceived. Lastly, another view of Black males is that of being that of an entertainer and an athlete, which will be combed through more thoroughly in sections to follow. It goes without saying that on one hand, these images and portrayals of Black males are very damaging and appalling, while on the other hand, Black males have been known to embrace these narratives, and at times, glorify them to a degrading degree. In particular, in the mainstream music industry with rappers taking on the bad boy image, (although for some it was their reality), it perpetuates that action and behavior by those listening to it and looking up to them. Thus, making it harder and much more difficult to shift the narrative. As Howard (2014) eloquently states, that the task of changing how society views Black men is hard enough, but it is exacerbated when Black males themselves substantiate the stereotypes. Furthermore, and worse is these same stereotypes can be internalized and shape the view of how the individual sees themself. This, in return, can make the educational and societal

journey more difficult. Now this compounds the matter, because not only are Black males fighting against the narrative that is placed upon them by society, moreover, they are multiplying the effect by also casting that same view and characterization in their own minds towards themselves and others that look like them.

Also, one must consider the fact that when a Black male looks up, in many different fields of work it is often quite hard to see someone that looks like them to give them the hope that they could potentially do that same line of work someday. Consequently, it is quite obvious why there is such an appeal when it comes to athletics for young Black males. In particular, the main two being professional basketball and football in the respective fields of play. Athletics is one of the few fields where a young Black male can look towards to see a level of praise and admiration given. Howard (2014) went on to say that:

> In a society that largely portrays Black males as problematic, inept, and lacking intellectually (despite having a Black male president), the athletic domain is one of the few settings in the United States where Black males see their excellence acknowledged, their creativity cheered, their bravado and masculinity replicated on a major stage and promoted globally. In many cases they are outright revered as folk heroes... (p. 74).

The reality is, for a lot of young Black males, these athletes are revered and looked to like superheroes, creating an image and life that they seek to attain. With athletes having such a big impact on the way that Black males see themselves as well as how society tends to view them, it is imperative that they use their platforms in a matter that uplifts the youth. Warranted or unwarranted, athletes have become leaders within the Black community due to the excessive amounts of exposure, both via television and social media. In addition to that, they are a beacon of hope for what could possibly help to remove them from their own personal situation.

Athletic Identity

With age comes a higher level of investment that is dedicated to the areas of one's identity that they believe are the most important. Many factors play a role in the development of the youth's identity. For a large number of those who play sports, their athletic identity is formed at a very young age. These range from the community from which they live, the activities (sport and social) they participate in, down through the media of which they consume through various platforms. In between, however, you will find their coach of the sport in which they are participating. Coaches play a key adult role in the formation of their identity and their participation in sports. Coaches can influence the youth's beliefs, how they enjoy sports, and the desire to participate in sports (Black & Weiss, 1992; Sinclair & Vealey, 1989). Having a great leader who is coaching the youth in sports can ultimately assist to help build a better kid, as they will likely be heavily influenced by them (Peterson, 2004).

In examining the intricacies of developing an identity, especially one that is centered around or based upon athletics, it is important to understand that it relies heavily on the perception of others. These perceptions, whether covertly or overtly expressed, are felt by the individual and internalized in a manner in which begins to shape their self-esteem, either positively or negatively. This self-view or self-esteem issue now can be played out in action or behavior. In a study done by Parsons (2013), they analyzed how [student] athletes at an NCAA Division II school perceived they were being treated by professors on a college campus. The study surveyed 252 undergraduate athletes (178 males, 74 females) and was both quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed once the results came in. Their overall average GPA was 3.01 which was a tad lower than the general student population's GPA of 3.17 at the institution. Furthermore, they were given a survey consisting of closed- and open-ended questions to be compared against

a previous study done at an NCAA Division I school by Simons et al. (2007). Finally, the results from this study showed that athletes felt as though they were misjudged. Parsons (2013) states a vast majority of those surveyed (93%), said they were able to be identified as an athlete. As it pertains to receiving accommodations for missing class due to an athletic commitment, more than 57% stated that they received a hard time or were refused accommodations. Additionally, Parsons (2013) explained that 33% of students in this study answered that they received negative remarks from their professor with statements most commonly used being "athletes are only interested in sports" and "athletes expect special treatment they don't deserve" (p. 407). On the other hand, the majority of the responses (76%) seemed to come back with positive responses they heard from a professor about student-athletes being in their course. These statements include praising them for both working hard and having the ability to balance academics and athletics.

Comeaux (2011) also did a study looking at faculty attitudes toward NCAA Division I college student-athletes. Further, the tool used to evaluate the faculty within this study was a revised version of the Situational Attitude Scale (SAS). This study comprised 1,555 participants from both teaching and research backgrounds regardless of whether or not they have had a student-athlete in their course. As a result, one of the areas of negative feelings toward student-athletes was in the category of "driving an expensive car;" it was shown that the faculty members were both resentful and suspicious of this particular situation. They also held more anger towards the male student-athletes as compared to the female student-athletes. Moreover, another area held with negative feelings for faculty came in the situation where there was the "creation of an expanded advising and tutoring program" for student-athletes. The faculty felt as though this was inappropriate and unacceptable that student-athletes would have this at their

disposal. Finally, to highlight one more area of focus, the area encompassing "gets an A in your class" faculty indicated "that it would be unlikely, impossible, and unexpected for a male revenue and non-revenue student-athlete, or female student-athlete to receive an A in their class" (p. 80). These sentiments expressed coincide with the work done previously (Edwards, 1984; Harrison, 1998; Harrison et al., 2011) on athletes and stereotypes placed upon them, such as "dumb jock," being poor academic students, that "they don't care," and having a limited scope as it pertains to their academic achievement. As shown by this study, this weight is heavier on males, as they were often viewed in a more discriminating light by the faculty than their female counterparts.

African American student-athletes walk onto campus and are immediately faced with challenges that are unlike their peers. According to Carter-Francique et al. (2015), student-athletes, much like non-student athletes, face the same developmental challenges in addition to a number of other unique issues. These issues encompass balancing athletic and academic expectations, coping with isolation socially and getting active on campus, managing their athletic career, injuries, creating and maintaining relationships across many mediums (coach, community, romantic, etc.), and the adjustment to life after sports.

Black Athletic Identity

Developing an identity for most individuals involves many of the same ingredients. However, when referring to the Black athletic identity, many other factors come into play. Racism (Beamon, 2014), negative stereotypes (Edwards, 1984), and the devaluing of their academic valor subject them to only being appreciated for their athletic prowess (Beamon, 2008; Singer, 2008; Smith et al., 2014). Singer (2008) exposes this truth in a study of a Division I athletics program, finding that quite often the participation at that level harms the identity of the

Black athlete as well as their academics. In a qualitative study done by Beamon (2014), they examined the perception of racism by 20 African American men who were former Division I student-athletes (football and basketball) on their campuses. The findings from that study were that 18 out of 20 described racism as a part of their everyday journey through life, expecting it to come in some sort of fashion while attending college. Continuing, 11 out of 20 described how there was a clear racial divide amongst their teammates, stating there was no racial tension; however, there was little to no meaningful interactions outside of the sport. This was played out both on campus as well as inside the locker room. Furthermore, the participants described being inside their classrooms as a racially hostile environment, due partly to the stereotypes they perceived the professors to engage in. Additionally, they noted that oftentimes, student-athletes as a whole can feel isolated and disconnected from the overall college experience. However, there is an extra layer that African American student-athletes have to manage, which is the negative racial, gender, and athletic stereotypes. Parham (1993) denotes that for Black student-athletes, systemic racism in society and within social institutions like intercollegiate athletics has resulted in differential treatment from their athletic recruitment to their academic engagement. Due to these lived experiences, they must find a way to not only deal with the rigors that college and life alone bring, but also now add in the additional stressors of being racially and athletically profiled in a negative way.

In an interview conducted by Feagin & Ducey (2018), a distinguished Black professor who had taught for many years at a PWI eloquently described what it costs to deal with racism:

> If you can think of the mind as having one hundred ergs of energy, and the average man uses 50 percent of his energy dealing with the everyday problems of the world … Then he has 50 percent more to do creative kinds of things that he wants to do. Now that's a

White person. Now a black person also has one hundred ergs; he uses 50 percent the

same way a White man does, dealing with what the White man has [to deal with], so he

has 50 percent left. But he uses 25 percent fighting being black, [with] all the problems

being black and what it means (p. 212).

Then if you take that into account, now add in the multiple other layers that come along with

being a student-athlete. Now, that 25% referenced previously dwindles lower, possibly cut in half

or can even be less. This overtime can weigh any person down as they are always dealing with

the struggle of defending themselves. Feagin & Ducey (2018) describe this as a major life-energy

advantage that White Americans have over African Americans as they are not dealing with

anti-White discrimination from people of color.

Black athletes must navigate this terrain all the while being coined as "student-athletes"

when, in reality, they are more like "athlete-students." Furthermore, this correlates with the

finding that revenue-generating sports (football and basketball), exploit the Black athletes for

their talent and forgo their social and academic development. When assessing the racial

component as it pertains to student-athletes, there is a strong correlation between not graduating

and being Black. When looking at the research done by the NCAA (Graduation Rates, n.d.), in

the past four classes (2018-2021) Division I Graduation Success Rate, which is a graduation

metric developed by NCAA presidents that is mandated for student-athletes only, indicates that

Black Football student-athletes are the lowest. Graduating at a 77% rate while their White

counterparts are at 90%, respectively. Furthermore,one could look at the Federal Graduation Rate

(FGR), which is a metric used to compare student-athletes with the general study body. These

findings revealed, of the same four class cohort (2018-2021), Black male student-athletes were

graduating at 56%, whereas the same demographic isolated to football were graduating at 59%,

and the Black male student body was graduating at 43%. Throughout each categorization of the Black male, their numbers are the lowest in their respective fields.

Within athletics, it is no secret that amongst the major Division I institutions, because of the lucrative advantages and opportunities that come along with it, it is believed athletics takes precedence over academics (Beamon, 2008; Singer, 2008, 2019). In a study conducted by Beamon (2008), qualitative tactics were employed to interview 20 African American men who formerly played basketball and football at a Division I university. The demographics of this sample ranged from ages 22 to 47, with 17 of 20 holding degrees, and finally, 17 of the 20 were football players. Participants stated that their educational development was not a reflection of the university's efforts for academic success towards their student-athletes, but more so due to their own will and determination to finish.

Furthermore, stating that the coaches exacerbated the situation as they would want them to focus mostly and mainly on their athletic careers first, then their academics secondarily. The main reason behind the academic success revolved around eligibility. What is more revealing, is that most participants (14 of 20) felt as though they were "used and abused" and "used goods" along with other adjectives that would describe being taken advantage of for one's specific skill set, and then, once that skill set is no longer of value, they are disregarded by the universities (Beamon, 2008). Additionally, the surveyed student-athletes felt as though the universities benefited much more from them playing sports earning millions of dollars, while they were underprepared for careers post-college, as they were not allowed to explore their interests if it conflicted with athletic-related activities. Personal accounts and testimonies within studies such as this one further shine light on the struggles that African American male student-athletes face while attending college.

Transitioning Out of Sports

  While playing sports is enjoyable, it is the uncertainty of when, where, how, why, and what will make an athlete transition out of sports. Eat, sleep, practice, rest, repeat. A cycle is repeated throughout the lifetime of an athlete to help them best prepare for competition. This is the prescribed method for those who dedicated their lives to the pursuit of excellence in their respective sport. However, what is often overlooked are the multitude of other factors that can alter or derail an athlete's career. No matter how great or mediocre an athlete is, at some point, their career will come to an end. At this junction, they must willingly or begrudgingly begin the journey of transitioning out of sports. This transition can trigger a number of physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual changes almost instantly.

  This transition out of sport is one that every athlete faces, with 80% of said athletes finding a way to cope and deal with this within two years of transition (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). To find ways of coping, athletes must find ways to intrinsically and extrinsically seek the resources they need that are and should be afforded to them to keep their mental health stable. On the other hand, roughly 20% experience a crisis during their transition out of sport (Stambulova, 2017). With this, it is imperative for athletes, coaches, practitioners, and all support services who contact athletes to understand the importance of lending continued support. Understanding how to help them cope and assisting them through the transition can help mitigate some of the negative factors. Stambulova (2017) defines 'transition' as a turning point in the career of an athlete that offers a set of demands, usually viewed and seen as stressful, that mandates you to have a healthy coping procedure to continue your athletic career. Continuing, this perceived crisis is one way that athletes view it, as opposed to positive or beneficial, and is best handled with professional help. The most favorable of the two aforementioned is a

successful or positive transition, where the athlete has the resources in place but also is seeking out these resources to help cope positively. Opposite this is a crisis-transition where ineffective coping outcomes can abound due to the lack of resources, self sabotage, and the various other obstacles that are present. Hence, when a crisis occurs, this is a crucial moment where a calculated recovery act can be done by helping athletes in an attempt to avoid an unfavorable outcome.

Currently, there are two classifications, according to Stambulova (2017), in which athletes transition out of sport. The first being one that deciphers amongst athletic, non-athletic, and multiple career transitions. The second classification (Raab et. al., 2016; Schinke et. al., 2016) is based solely on the predictability of transition and differentiates amongst normative (very predictable, e.g., age), quasi-normative (somewhat predictable, e.g., cultural for international athletes), and non-normative (unpredictable, e.g., injury). Therefore, due to the last form of transition being uncertain and unplanned, it will lend a higher probability of crisis. To help understand why this drastic change in an athlete's life can lead to a mental health crisis, you must first understand what has become undone. A student-athlete's life is consumed with time demands and structure filled with training, academics, practice, and training table amongst the many other personal items specific to each individual. Additionally, one must consider the mindset of having goals pertaining to athletics and the competitive arena they enter daily to win at all costs. Moreover, you must account for the adulation, praise, and recognition given by fans, universities, and communities when they are successful in their respective sport. Athletes can experience difficulties when they have had someone else structure their day and accounting for every minute, to now having to be responsible for their entire existence (Stambulova, 2017). Goals, dreams, and aspirations previously set revolved around their sport which no longer exists.

This provides a lack of self worth which can be detrimental to the mental health of the athlete. Having to restart and attach yourself to new activities that are outside of the scope of your comfort zone can weigh on the individual, making it difficult to find the motivation necessary to pursue them. With the amount of structure contained in an athlete's day now removed, it can become very boring, as it can be hard for the athlete to create a new schedule.

Dramatic life changes for athletes need to be met with a strong presence of support and healthy coping mechanisms (Schinke & McGannon, 2015). The way in which they cope with the major transitions as it pertains to shifting their focus on new career aspirations and decisions is dominated by their development (Stambulova, 2017). Continuing, effective coping strategies and decision making processes for athletes can lead to them feeling more secure and comfortable as they make the move. On the other hand, not having or using effective coping procedures can lead to crisis and paralysis, in a sense that they have the inability to make their own decisions that are necessary for transition and moving forward. Continuing, if the initial crisis is not handled properly and an additional crisis presents itself, this can push them into a new crisis-transition requiring an elevated level of attention, energy, and focus to overcome.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study will be using a qualitative method approach that will allow the researcher to gain valuable insight into the mindset, career, and identity formation of African American male football student-athletes who were not able to attain their goal of making it to the professional ranks of the NFL. To be more specific, this study is geared to get an in-depth recollection of the transitional phase of life after sport that each player was subjected to as they were moving out of collegiate athletics. This will be done through the numerous personal accounts of those who are interviewed. Moreover, the hope and intent is to be able to highlight and attempt to pinpoint the salient factors that had a significant impact on this chapter of life. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What is the variation of the different aspects of identity development among an NCAA Division I football team?

2. What are the salient factors, or antecedents, in the various aspects of identity development?

3. How does identity cohesion matter for resilience and transitioning out of sport?

4. How does identity status matter for resilience and transitioning out of sport?

The intention behind the structure of this study is twofold. The first is to help arm and equip those who are coaching (psychologically, academically, and athletically) these young men and having a huge influence on their daily decisions that will help to shape their lives. This is with the desire that the professionals would be able to better serve the African American male

64

football student-athlete population. Secondly, it is to help make the African American male football student-athlete more aware of some of the issues and barriers that they are facing that may be covertly affecting them. The hope is to reveal potential pitfalls to allow for their journey through the world of collegiate football to not be as rigid as others. This is with the intent, as well, that the student-athlete will be able to help themselves.

Methodological Approach & Rationale

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research methods employ a different approach than that of a quantitative method. Qualitative and quantitative methods are not merely two different ways of answering the same question; rather, they are two very uniquely different approaches with each carrying its own strengths in the way in which the researcher chooses to inquire (Maxwell, 2013). Due to the exploratory nature of this inquiry, while seeking rich and descriptive stories, a qualitative research design will give the researcher the most appropriate results. Seeking to get a better understanding of the participants' lived experiences, this study is based upon a phenomenological framework. Qualitative research is concerned with life as it is being lived and the moments of life that happen over a series of events (Woods et al., 2022). The definition of qualitative research that will be used for the purpose of this study will be guided by Creswell (2014):

> Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at

research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (p. 4).

This study is guided by assumptions that reality is developed from various perspectives, constructed through social interactions and experiences within societal systems. This assumption is supported by Creswell (2014) that reality only exists through human interaction. As such, the proposed study is designed to construct truth from the participants through their narratives, as well as providing an in-depth understanding of their constructed identity. This construction is influenced by the social constructivist paradigm and asserts that knowledge is situated within the surrounding socio-cultural environment of the participants (Creswell, 2014). In social constructivism the meanings of the world are varied and multiple realities are constructed by individuals through sociocultural interactions.

This approach is best suited for collecting and examining the narrative construction of Black male student-athletes and their identity. Qualitative research philosophical assumptions entail the researcher as the primary instrument during the research process and is designed to provide a holistic understanding of reality through the lived experience of its participants. Seeing that studies regarding youth are sensitive in nature, qualitative in-depth interviews will be used. This way allows for the interviewees to be able to voice their perspectives which will, in turn, give the interviewer the ability to obtain a better understanding. In-depth interviews will be chosen due to the flexible nature, which enables the researcher, according to Hines et al. (2005), to "include and pursue issues related to culture and other contextual variations among respondents that [arise] during individual interviews" (p. 383).

Social identity theory was used to shape and frame this study around how the participants saw themselves within the many different group memberships they were a part of. Social identity

theory is a social psychological theory that examines the relationship between personal (self-conception) and social (group) identities (Hogg, 2016). Henri Tajfel, a Polish-born British Social Psychologist, is the original formulator of this theory (Vaughan, 2020). Phenomenology, as used here, will be based on the definition given by van Manen (2017):

> Phenomenology, if practiced well, enthralls us with insights into the enigma of life as we experience it—the world as it gives and reveals itself to the wandering gaze—thus asking us to be forever attentive to the fascinating varieties and subtleties of primal lived experience and consciousness in all its remarkable complexities, fathomless depths, rich details, startling disturbances, and luring charms. Genuine phenomenological inquiry is challenging and satisfying precisely because its meaningful revelations must be originary and existentially compelling to the soul (p. 779).

By using a phenomenology research design I am able to examine the lived experiences of Black male football student-athletes at the Division I level. Phenomenology is built upon the foundation of the inner perspectives of the participants, which provide the rich data needed for qualitative analysisI am able to learn about their experience and analyze the structures of their experiences to assist in explaining and understanding this phenomenon. This allows me to learn about complex processes or structures as perceived or interpreted by the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, phenomenology includes the assumption that I am a co-constructor of the data and findings based on my positionality and dual relationship as a researcher and former athlete to make sense of the studies phenomenon.

Researcher Positionality

Positionality makes the researcher look into their own background and past experiences to see how those instances could play a role in how they connect with the participants and how

they conduct their research studies (Call-Cummings & Ross, 2019). The openness of the researcher is held in a positive light, as that allows for beneficial and meaningful interpretation of the study. I am a former collegiate student-athlete who participated in football, while also being a Black male. In addition, it is important to note that I am also the first person in my immediate family to attend and earn a college degree. With this being stated, I am able to relate to many of the experiences that will be shared through testimonial interviews. Furthermore, the respective Universities attended by the participants and I share characteristics. A few of those would be each institution was a predominantly White, four-year institution, with a massive student population, and a high focus and attention that was paid to the football program. Now having worked within the athletic department post my playing career, I have also been afforded the opportunity to peer in from an administrative standpoint. This is important, as it now helps to explain the actions and ways in how things were run while being a student-athlete that did not make sense. Within that role, I was privileged to gain meaningful relationships with some of the student-athletes, some of whom may or may not participate in this study.

Finally, my overall goal and desire are to be able to help student-athletes with the way in which they move and understand themselves within collegiate athletics. It is imperative for me to be able to impart to them the knowledge, while they are student-athletes, that can help them to become more self-aware, especially those with whom I share similar backgrounds. This is with the intent that they make wise decisions as it pertains to their overall future. Furthermore, it is important for administrators to get a better understanding of what the student-athletes face and how they can subsequently better serve them. Ultimately, I seek to allow the voices of the past to help guide and mentor the voices of the future. Therefore, it is paramount that I remain objective in my role as the researcher in all aspects concerning this study.

Research Setting

The research setting for this study will be a university located in the Southern part of the United States. For this study, the institution used will be referred to as "University With Athletes" or "UWA". UWA is a 4-year, public university that takes part in NCAA Division I sports. UWA is a predominantly white institution (PWI) with a football team that participates in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). UWA was selected due to the relationships that I hold with both the administration and the student-athletes that were involved in the study.

UWA was a good choice for this study, due to the fact that the majority of the student-athletes who participate in football are African-American. Being a former collegiate athlete myself, in addition to working with student-athletes within athletic departments at several institutions, this gave me the credibility to be able to engage in healthy, constructive, and positive conversations.

Research Sampling & Participants

Purposeful sampling selection will be used for this study to help determine participants that have rich insightful experiences and information that would be beneficial to this research (Etikan et al., 2016). According to Creswell (2014), being intentional with those of whom you select to participate within your study or where you study is the researcher choosing the individual that will best serve to understand and answer the research problem and research questions. Purposeful sampling chooses subgroups of a total population that represents the meaningful group you are looking for. Upon studying the literature on research methods, Patton (1990, 2002) provided a great description of purposive sampling and how it can be effective:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. *Information-rich* cases are those from which one can learn a great deal

about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term *purposeful*

sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding

rather than empirical generalizations (Patton, 2002, p. 273).

Purposeful sampling essentially pulls out the "experts" within the phenomenon that is being

investigated. In this study, the experts are the Black male football student-athletes who are

transitioning out of sport and experiencing identity crises. Deploying purposeful sampling will

help to identify the participants that will be interviewed. For the purposes of this study, there

were certain factors participants will have to meet:

1. Participants must be Black male football student-athletes.

2. Participants must have been on an athletic scholarship at some point.

3. Participants must have been a major contributor to the football games.

    a. Meaning they played at critical junctures of the game.

4. Participants must have exhausted their NCAA athletic eligibility.

5. Participants must have not made it to the National Football League (NFL).

6. Participants must be a minimum of four years removed from their last collegiate football game.

7. Participants must feel comfortable with discussing their experiences.

These specific participant characteristics were chosen because of the significance of their

participation on the football team, their perceived investment in the team due to the money

(scholarship) they were receiving, the preconceived notion that the goal was to ultimately make

it to the NFL for both monetary, social, and career gain, and finally being removed for several

years allows for the participant to navigate the transition out of athletics. This gives the

70

participants the time to have had the experience of internalizing their perceived failure and attempting to move forward while trying to find a new purpose in life. When the participants enter into identity transition, once they have exhausted their eligibility, then it helps to explore the lived experience of migrating from the salient sense of identity (athletic) into an obscure and mysterious identity.

The target range of participants will be anywhere from five to ten people. This was with the hopes to achieve saturation within that range. Creswell (2014) states that saturation is when the researcher has gained enough data and can stop collecting it because there are not any new insights nor properties that are showing themselves. My personal experience as a former football student-athlete, with a dominant foreclosed athletic identity, will be used to help guide as a researcher. However, it will not be used as a tool for comparison.

This research does not, and will not, claim to cover the full breadth of every Division I institution participating in the NCAA. It also does not serve as a monolithic representation for every Black male student-athlete that plays football at the Division I level in the NCAA. This study is based on the individual responses, experiences, and perspectives of those interviewed. Concerning the participants, this will be entirely voluntary. They will be explicitly told they have the ability to participate in and/or leave at any point if they feel uncomfortable or simply if they no longer want to continue for whatever reason. There was no attempt to coerce anyone at any point during this study.

Participant Recruitment

The researcher will recruit participants through various methods. Initially, the recruitment will be deployed through purposeful sampling and conversations with key administrators within the athletic department. Having built strong interpersonal and professional relationships with the

athletic department, I hope to inquire about potential participants that fit the criteria and would be useful to the study. Additionally, an email will be sent out to eligible participants. Within this email, it will contain the description of the study, the purpose of the study, the expected time commitment, the criteria to be able to participate in the study, and a personal statement describing my former status as a Black male football student-athlete. Furthermore, it will contain my current status as a doctoral student conducting this research as partial fulfillment to obtain my Ph.D. Finally, my contact information will be provided as a means to know and verify who I am. In the midst of successfully interviewing participants, I will engage in snowball sampling. Snowball sampling allows for the researcher to use the current participants to help identify potential participants that would be a great fit for the study who also meet the required prerequisite parameters (Goodman, 1961).

When making the initial contact with the participant, the researcher will conduct a preliminary phone interview with the participant. During that phone call, several questions will be asked to ensure that the participant meets the inclusive requirements to participate in the study. Once inclusivity is met, we will then move forward with the scheduling of a follow-up call to proceed with the official interview. While interviewing the participant, the researcher will follow up on responses, when necessary, with probing questions to help clarify the participants' stance and at times assist them to go into more detail.

Due to the global pandemic (COVID-19), it was determined for the safety of all involved that we utilize the cloud-based Zoom as the method of administering the interviews. Within the Zoom room, the meeting will be locked once the participant enters, and no one will be allowed to join in. All meetings will be recorded. This will be done with informed consent from the participant. If, for some reason, either the researcher or the participant loses internet connection

during the interview, we simply will rejoin and pick up where we left off. Furthermore, for clarity and understanding during the call, the closed caption/live transcript feature will be used as an added measure to assist. It will also be used to analyze the information gathered in the interview. Approval was obtained from the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the participants were protected since the research involved human subjects.

Interview Guide Development

Each interview will be given in a semi-structured format, thus allowing for the interviewer to have the ability to probe based on the interviewee's response. This was to help the participants to engage in talking and thinking about their experiences as an African American male football player, from UWA, and transitioning out of sports. These interviews will be given through the various lenses of their personal accounts. With there being some previous research already done (Fuller, 2014; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015) I hope to expand on it and use it as a base for my research. The researcher has identified some open-ended questions that will allow for the participants to respond candidly. These broad open-ended questions followed the social constructivist paradigm, mentioned earlier, of allowing subjective, complex and diverse views of the phenomenon to be examined to gather participants' construction of meaning from their viewpoint. There will be no questions that will compromise the integrity of anonymity. The question responses were then assessed by the researcher to see where, when, and how each response was connected to the overall study purpose and research question.

The interview design was guided by the literature review (Adams et. al, 1979; Bennion & Adams, 1986; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001; Levant et. al, 2010; Sellers, 2013; Fuller, 2014) as well as the research questions outlined in this study. Each of these questions were deliberately chosen to target specific categories:

1. *Background/Childhood:* In this category questions were developed that reflect demographic information and background information on the participants childhood upbringing and socialization into football. Example questions included: *Who are you and where are you from? Was there ever the belief that you would one day become a professional athlete?*

2. *Student-Athlete Journey:* This category was used to allow participants to explore their identity, their athletic journey from childhood into college. Specific questions also included their experience during college, the facilitators, and the barriers to their identity development related to being viewed as Black, male, and student athlete. Example questions include: *Entering college, was it seen as a way to obtain a degree, or was viewed as part of the process/pit stop before becoming a professional athlete? What impact did having an identity as a Black male have on you during college?*

3. *End of Sports Journey:* This category focused on the end of the student-athlete college eligibility, perceptions of family, friends, coaches to the end of the sports career, and internal emotions. Examples included: *How did your sports career end? What was your perceived internalized reaction/feelings/thoughts of how you thought people viewed you?*

4. *Life After Sports:* The final category documents the participants' transition from a student-athlete to a revised/new identity and the role of coaches, family, and friends played in this development. Example questions include: *How did you adapt to life after sports? What role has family played in your life after sports? What role has football support services played in your life after sports?*

The proposed interview protocol is provided in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

Using the steps outlined by Creswell (2014), I will gather a rich description of each participant's life through the interview process. In general, I am looking to make sense of and gather various common themes throughout each participant's personal journey throughout the study. According to Creswell (2014), coding is referred to as the process by which the content is organized into groups and tagging them with a word or phrase that best sums them up. Moreover, to stay consistent within the interview process analyzation, phase I followed the model of Creswell (2014):

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis

2. Read or look at all the data

3. Start coding the data

4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people

5. Advance how the description and themes will be represented

6. Interpret the results

Each of the interviews were transcribed in order to be coded. When the text came back, it was subjected to a coding process that includes my reading and immersing myself in the responses. This process was used to identify categories and subcategories between participants' accounts. A content analysis was conducted, and the data was coded for themes, first through open coding to identify themes throughout the responses. Open coding was utilized throughout the interviews to identify categories and subcategories that represent major thoughts and concepts and are a reflection of my first impressions. The process of open coding included developing a list of notable quotes/statements from the data, broadly organizing these statements

into themes, creating a description of what the phenomenon was about, creating a description of the experience and its occurrence, and providing a written overview of the phenomenon.

After this process the data was analyzed following three interwoven steps: "process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction sharpens, focuses, discards, and organizes data. This step allows for the categories and subcategories to be clustered that broadly explain topics discussed in their interviews. The goal of phenomenology is not to solve the experience, but instead, try to reduce the essence of the phenomenon reported into thematic categories. As a result, the emergent themes of reported experiences were understood as "structures of experience". For each of these structures they were categorized, analyzed, and scrutinized under the guiding question "What is this an example of?". These themes yielded data to support the description of the structure of meaning of the lived experience of Black male football athletes. In the second step, data was displayed in charts and matrices to interpret them. These visual displays assisted in the analysis but also the interpretation of the findings. This reflection process assists in capturing the essential meaning and follows the phenomenological reflection process. Conclusion drawing, the final step, is the meaning that emerges from the data from the beginning to the end, and verification is a second reviewing of the data and conclusions. Triangulation occurred when all the different subpopulations had undergone their interviews. Open coding, journaling, reflection and consistency checks through data triangulation allowed for the findings of this study to be compiled and written. This process is flexible and allows going back and forth from raw data to conclusion during the analysis stage. These three steps of the analysis process are interwoven before, during and after data are collected and analyzed (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Assumptions

Throughout this study, numerous assumptions were created and acknowledged. First, the lived experiences that each individual went through as they were transitioning out of sport was a very arduous journey. One that was taxing both mentally and emotionally. This is a direct result of my personal reflexivity around this matter. When an individual has been playing sports, more specifically football, since Pop Warner, it is quite hard to adapt to reality once that part of your life is now terminated. With that being a major contributing factor to your identity, and then it suddenly becomes obsolete, or expires, and is no longer part of your life. There is a period of grieving that can elicit many emotions that were never previously there, forcing you to not only cope with the loss, but to also navigate how to move on.

Secondly, it is assumed their identity was heavily invested in the athletic realm. This is due to the fact that for most collegiate athletes, in order to make it to the level of becoming an NCAA Division I football player, you have to spend countless hours dedicating yourself to becoming great at football. This typically looks like spending copious amounts of time training, studying, watching film, practicing, rehabbing, lifting weights, all while forfeiting amenities you would have normally considered had football not been in the equation. This aids in producing a silo effect of your identity being housed in one area, limiting the exposure to opportunities outside of the athletic arena. Furthermore, producing the result of a continued career in sports (i.e. coach, trainer, advisor, or any other sport-related job) to try to curb the hunger to remain in sport or simply because it is the only field you have been exposed to.

Thirdly, the participants did not graduate within their allotted playing eligibility period. This is due to them not taking academics seriously while in college playing sports. Whereas academics is often viewed as a barrier or hurdle to overcome, as quite often it is, rather than a

tool of necessity that can benefit you long after your football career is over. When doing the bare minimum to stay eligible to play while not truly grasping nor taking advantage of all of the nuances that college has to offer outside of sport.

Finally, an assumption was made that football was a vehicle for them to escape a traumatic upbringing, whether that is a single-parent home, inconsistent housing, limited financial resources, a rough neighborhood, or a multitude of other distressing childhood experiences. Football quite often is referred to as a "safe place" where they could escape the harsh realities of life and find peace in participation.

While these assumptions existed, the researcher leaned on committee members to help with objectivity while reviewing and analyzing the data.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Establishing trustworthiness and credible practices must be the foundation whenever research is being conducted, and this study adhered to such. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four components necessary to establish trustworthiness: *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *confirmability*. Inquiring about an individual's personal experiences can be a very invasive process; with that, respecting their privacy and consent is compulsory. The following section details the strategies used for ensuring trustworthiness.

Credibility. Credibility refers to having confidence in the results as accurate and true and is comparable to internal validity. Credibility, as described by Cope (2014), is strengthened when the researcher shares their experience, expresses compassion to develop a trusting relationship and verifies the results from the study from those that participated. When establishing open, honest communication, the researcher must plan to participate in the vulnerability with which they are asking from the participants. This helps to build rapport. Sharing my own personal lived

experiences, both victories, and losses, as a student-athlete aided in connecting with the participant on common ground. This active reciprocation served as a foundation in fostering trust. While Pitts and Miller-Day (2007) go on to state that having a relationship built on trust is not only sought after, but it may be a key necessity to ensure validity or trustworthiness. Credibility is also conferred when the researcher analyzes the data in a reflexive process in order to judge the meanings and relevance of developing themes throughout the study. This was achieved here through constant reflexivity in order to ensure that the themes accurately depicted the experience of the participants. I was able to establish this by allowing the participants ample time to share their stories, speak their truth while trying to better understand the person and phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cope, 2014). For this study, I allowed each participant the opportunity to share with me stories from their lives and be honest detailing their experiences - good and bad. Finally, member checking via their interview transcripts was used to confront any personal subjectivity that may have been present as the researcher. Member checking is a way of allowing the participants the ability to validate the conclusions of the researcher's findings and allows them to provide feedback (Cope, 2014). Each participant was contacted and allowed the opportunity to review, correct, or validate their transcripts and the interpretations used for final analysis in the dissertation.

Transferability. Transferability is the idea that the results have relevance that can be transferred to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In relation to external validity in quantitative research, transferability was achieved in this study by obtaining a purposeful sample from multiple and diverse backgrounds. The sample chosen aimed to allow the reader to make a connection between this data and other similar contexts. Transferability was further expanded by providing rich and thick descriptions of the context of this research which allows for the next

researcher to make an educated judgment on the practicality of transferring the information using the transferability principles described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Dependability. Dependability, known as reliability in quantitative research, comes from showing how findings were reached, they are consistent, and the process could be replicated with the same outcome over the course of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability of the research study is achieved through the development of an audit trail and by providing summaries to a researcher not involved in this research study to provide feedback and accountability. The audit trail provides an overview of the study's procedures and processes and provides an account of the changes that occurred within study. The records also include the decisions and the thinking behind how I conducted the study and my thoughts during the analysis and interpretation stages. In this study, meetings with other researchers were conducted and they were allowed to conduct an inquiry audit. These individuals include my advisor, dissertation committee members, an editor, research mentors, and close friends. While these informal conversations were not transcribed and included in the data, it is important that I had an opportunity to verify that the data, results, and discussion were an accurate reflection of the participants' experiences. This also allowed for investigator triangulation of data analysis.

Confirmability. Confirmability addresses the idea of neutrality and ability to attribute the results to the respondents and not the bias, motivations, or personal interests of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The confirmability of the study was ensured by keeping a reflexive journal in which I documented and reflected on the decisions made throughout the research process. Memoing allowed me to explore, examine, and confront my personal interpretations throughout the process of analyzing the data. In addition, I conducted peer-debriefings with faculty members and research experts. Peer debriefing is also known as analytic triangulation

and is achieved when disinterested peers are engaged in a data interpretation process. Here, this was accomplished by soliciting feedback from three faculty members and an outside research assistant to examine the coded data, in order to ensure the thematic analysis was understandable and to ensure the results were not subjected to a single interpretation, but rather will be checked and examined for the influence of researcher bias in the process and results.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study were that my presence could have limited the richness of the conversation due to the fear of being identified through their accounts. In addition to this, not everyone has the ability to vocalize and comprehend at the same level (Creswell, 2014). It is more difficult for some to truly express what they are trying to say by finding the right words that will allow them to paint a vivid picture, while others can grab words and paint a masterpiece recounting their lived experiences. This creates issues as the researcher may have to assume and/or probe further with some more than others.

Working within this global pandemic, as mentioned before, scheduling can become an issue. Finding the right time slots that married each of our schedules to allow for an uninterrupted interview was challenging, as well. Furthermore, due to the interviews being online, some of the intimacy and comradery may have been lost.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This phenomenological research study explored the lived experiences of Black male student-athletes at a Division I institution and their identity development and how that affected their ability to recover from unmet athletic aspirations. The Black male student-athletes were all similar in many ways based on the criteria outlined to participate within this study. However, they also varied in many ways including their geographic location, upbringing, and influences within their immediate and extended social surroundings. Each participant was interviewed in a semi-structured fashion and was asked the questions outlined in Appendix A: Interview Questions. This was to capture their perceptions and lived experiences concerning their identity journey as a student-athlete. Following the interviews, they were coded and analyzed, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Patton, 2002):

1. How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?

2. How do football players self-identify in terms of their multiple roles as student, Black, male, and athlete?

3. How do football players' perceptions of the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, peer athletes, faculty, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity while in the university setting?

4. How do football players' perceptions of their relationships affect their role identity when transitioning out of sport?

The purpose of this section is to present the findings of the interviews. First, I will share the demographic data of the five participants to offer a relatively comprehensive and contextual reference for those who were interviewed. This is followed by a qualitative content analysis describing the emergent themes that developed. This is accompanied by quotes from the individual participants perspective and lived experiences. I am not verifying the perceptions of those within this study; I am merely reporting the perceptions of the participants in this study. Finally, in Chapter 5 the findings are discussed in relation to previously presented literature and viewed through the Social Identity Theory lens.

Description of Participants

Data was gathered by way of a semi-structured interview with five former Division I Black male football student-athletes. All participants agreed that they met the study criteria to participate in this study. Each of the participants were given a pseudonym which will be used throughout the results and discussion sections.

Overall, four of the five participants stated they have graduated from college. While one mentioned he has not completed his degree requirements, he did indicate having plans to return to graduate at some point. There was also one participant who had some graduate school experience and accumulated the majority of the coursework needed to graduate. He also stated that he plans to return and finish as he only has one semester left before attaining his graduate degree. Each participant affirmed they grew up in the state of Texas in cities ranging from the metropolis of Dallas/Ft. Worth to smaller suburban cities, or small towns miles from major cities. Additionally, one also indicated that he spent some time out-of-state before relocating to Texas. Two of the five mentioned growing up in a nuclear family household while the remaining three participants were raised by their mothers. One out of the five reported being married and the

other four were single. Three of the five referenced exhausted eligibility as their reason for

transitioning out of the sport, with the remaining two had to retire due to accumulated injuries.

Three of the five participants reported having a family member who played professionally in

sports, with two reporting no familial links to professional sports growing up. There was a wide

variety of current occupations, with zero of them being associated with the sports industry. The

salary ranges varied for each individual. One reported a salary range of $55,000 to $70,000, two

participants reported making "six figures", one stated $120,000 to $160,000, and another being

$150,000 to $250,000. A description of select demographic characteristics is presented below in

Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Degree Discipline	Highest Level of Education	Reason for Retirement	Childhood Household Composition	Family Member Who Played Pro Sports	Current Career
Ishmael	College of Engineering	College Graduate	Exhausted Eligibility	2-Parent	No	Entrepreneur
Rashaad	Mays Business School	College Graduate	Injury	Single Female	Cousin	Private Energy Sector
Damon	School of Education and Human Development	College Graduate	Injury	2-Parent	Brother	Private IT/Sales Sector
Xayvion	College of Agriculture & Life Sciences	Some College	Exhausted Eligibility	Single Female	Cousin	Private Environment Sector
Malcolm	College of Agriculture & Life Sciences	Some Graduate School	Exhausted Eligibility	Single Female	No	Entrepreneur

The profiles of the participants in this section are presented to communicate the various backgrounds and experiences brought together for this study. Below is a concise summary of critical background information and quotes from the participants to describe their lived experiences.

Ishmael

Ishmael is a young man who was raised in a two-parent household in a city in southeast Texas. A small town with about 18,000 people, he said, however, "it sometimes felt as small as eight." Throughout his college career he played on both the offensive, defensive, and special teams side of the ball. He is currently married and still lives in the state of Texas. Ishmael has now discovered who he is and has entered identity achievement stating "I'm a Christian, a man whose identity is really in Christ, a husband to my wife, a son to my parents, entrepreneur, Swiss Army knife when it comes to business."

Rashaad

Rashaad is a young man who was raised in a single-parent—mother-only household—in a small town on the east side of Texas he referred to as "Beast Texas." The city he referenced had a population of about 5,000 people when he was living there. A city he described as one being so small "you could drive through in a couple of minutes." Growing up here has helped him appreciate things in life more such as family, neighbors, and relationships because everyone in that city, due to the size, was so close. This city has now become pretty popular and well known, he stated, due to a very popular NFL player who also grew up there. He describes his upbringing as real humble with a country style living.

Damon

Damon is a young man who was raised in a two-parent household. He was born in a city near Dallas Texas, but then moved south to a Northwest suburb of Houston Texas. Within his home, his parents worked two very good jobs. His mother was a primary care doctor, while his father was a computer scientist/IT executive at ExxonMobil. With school being prevalent in the home he too also graduated with his degree from UWA in the School of Education and Human Development continuing that tradition.

Xavion

Xavion is a young man who was raised in a single-parent—mother-only household—in a small country city in between Dallas and Houston Texas. Within this small town there was not much going on besides highschool football, which he says "football kind of runs the area." With his mother being one of his biggest influences he attended UWA with the hopes of changing their lives. Still having not graduated yet, he mentioned questioning if he even needs it as he lives by the old adage 'It's not what you know but who you know.' Currently working in the private environment sector by way of people he knows, he is still in search of his purpose and identity.

Malcolm

Malcolm is a young man who was raised in a single-parent—mother-only household—in the inner cities of Houston Texas. Being raised in the projects of Houston's third ward with a family of six, this community is also where the late George Floyd grew up as well. He goes on to state that he "comes from humble beginnings" as he describes his living conditions as a child. With drugs and murder ever present within his community he was able to be directed towards football and went on to college and graduated. From there he continued his education into graduate school where he is only a semester away from graduating. Despite the conditions from

which he started, Malcolm has gone on to become an entrepreneur and a key figure within his childhood community shining a positive light in a profession outside of sports.

Findings

Five major themes emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. In this section, the qualitative data explored the lived experiences of Black male student-athletes at a Division I institution and their identity development and how that affected their ability to recover from unmet athletic aspirations.These five themes include *Where it All Started, Athlete-Student To NFL, 'I am Black.' However…,* and *Relationships Matter.* In a final subsection I present advice provided by the participants for readers entitled, *Is It Over Yet?* This theme is not related to a primary research question nor was it reflected in the approved interview guide when I began this study, but arose through the interviews by the participants themselves as they reflected on their student-athlete journey and transition out of football. Each research question and its corresponding theme are presented below in the table for the reader's convenience.

Table 2
Summary of research questions, five emerging themes, and example supporting quotes

Study Research Question	Emerging Theme	Example Supporting Quote
1. How do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity?	Where it All Started	*It was a real humble lifestyle, real country type living [Growing up in East Texas]. And so I would say that's a large part in why I'm like, kind of somewhat grounded today.*
2. How do football players self-identify in terms of their multiple roles as student, Black, male, and athlete?	Athlete-Student To NFL	*I would say athlete first and student second … The term student-athlete for me was a label that was given to people that were chosen, that were a little bit special walking around campus that were gifted athletically.*

Table 2 Continued

Study Research Question	Emerging Theme	Example Supporting Quote
	'I am Black.' However…	*It was tough in terms of the implications it would have on later things that happened in my career. But like, while I was in the process of experiencing it [while playing football], it was not tough for me.*
3. How do football players' perceptions of the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, peer athletes, faculty, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity while in the university setting?	Relationships Matter	*I really don't keep in contact with them [coaches]. Like a revolving cycle with their schools and things. Like the coach that recruited me to come early. When I got there in January, he was there for like six days. Then he got the linebacker's coach and the DC [defensive coordinator] job at [a different university], that was a wake-up call.*
4. How do football players' perceptions of their relationships affect their role identity when transitioning out of sport?	Is It Over Yet?	*Going through the surgeries [I was] feeling like I let the whole world down, my teammates down, my brothers down, my coaches, [and] the whole fan base [down] that didn't really know I existed. [I] Just let everybody down and being physically in pain every day.*

<div align="center">

Advice For The Next Generation

What would you tell the next young African American male football student-athlete coming up now to learn from your experience?

I would tell that young Black man to be very intentional on exploring things outside of football.

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To present the lived experiences of each of my participants, I will present the five research themes as life stories, from their childhood to their current lives, instead of a strict adherence to the progression of the research questions. This format provides an in-depth examination of each of the participants lives and gives honor to the critical stance needed for the phenomenological research approach.

THEME 1 - Where it All Started

To better understand the mindset of the participants you must first see and learn where they are from. You must see where it all started. For the participants within this study they each share commonalities within their upbringing, however, they also have many differences. Although the participants came from different backgrounds having different upbringings, all of their stories began to merge around the mindset of athletics and how they wanted to eventually play professionally. The influences both near and far helped to drive them. Each participant was asked to describe their upbringing, biggest influences, and perceived obtainable professional and educational goals within this section. The following excerpts provide detailed personal accounts of the three aforementioned areas that helped to shape and develop their identity.

Ishmael. Raised in a city in Southeast Texas, Ismael joked that, although the small town had about 18,000 people, "People can't go anywhere without somebody knowing who you are." Before moving to Texas, he was actually born in another small town in Louisiana near the border of Texas, but relocated early in his life. He went on to describe the town in Louisiana:

> That town was a lot smaller, probably the immediate neighborhood I lived in, [it was] maybe 50 people. And then the whole town itself, we were disconnected from town, but the whole town probably just a few thousand to 3000 people or something like that. But football was just kind of everything, honestly. Go outside and play football until it's time to go inside. So that influence of being a football player was always there … So I had those expectations from very early on. There wasn't any social media when I was a small, small kid. So maybe it was just that little neighborhood, honestly, that had the biggest influence on me and TV and most of the football players looked like me. So just kind of something you gravitate towards.

This set the foundation for his athletic journey. It was the building block on which his athletic identity and outlook on sports was grounded upon.

Ishmael accounts his upbringing as a kid and credits his biggest influences being his grandfather on his dad's side, his dad, and his dad's brothers. These men were the ones who helped shape who he was and how he viewed life. When asked what options he thought were obtainable as a profession as a kid he responded:

> So early on, we got the influence from most of my family members who were athletes, so I had to watch my uncle who played college football. So that was kind of always an aspiration, probably up until junior high. That was all I thought about as far as what I was going to be. I was just going to be, you know, an NFL football player … My mom was very athletic. My dad was very athletic. So being in the small town people, you know, I kind of hit the genetic lottery.

This set the tone for his mentality as it pertained to his athletic identity. He also mentions, as it pertains to the genetic lottery, that he also met a cousin of his who happened to be Dak Prescott while he was in highschool attending his family's reunion. However, it did not necessarily cause him to view the academic side in a negative way.

Ishmael was then probed to see what options he perceived to be obtainable for a profession and education wise growing up. His story shows how parents and administrators can help with identity development. He went on to say:

> So early on … I was just going to be, you know, an NFL football player.
> Eventually I realized, okay, I'm, you know, kind of smart and making really good grades and stuff like that. You know, when you are good at math and science, teachers tell you—you probably need to be an engineer. So I went to my eighth

grade counselor as I was going into high school, and we had our meetings about,

you know, what's your path going to look like? Do you want to go to college?

What do you want to do? And I was still kind of dead set on playing football. We

were talking about scholarships and college, and I was like, Oh, I'm going to get a

football scholarship. Okay, well, what's your backup plan? I was like, I don't have

a backup plan. I'm going to play college football. And they called my parents …

So, but with that, my mind really started to expand as I was leaving junior high,

going into high school [I] really took academics very seriously. My parents knew

there was kind of that, you know, the rules for most people was no pass, no play.

My parents, it was like no A, no place. So pretty much straight up, straight A's

throughout high school. Left high school early at the time, and I was ranked

second in my class … and went back to graduate with honors and everything.

This shows the importance of having a strong familial upbringing. That was able to keep

football relevant for Ishmael, however it set boundaries and standards that must have

been met academically in order to continue playing. This helped to reinforce the

importance of schooling and getting an education.

Rashaad. Rashaad is a young man who was raised in another small town on the east side

of Texas. The town had a population of about 5,000 people when he was living there. A place he

described as one being so small "you could drive through in a couple of minutes," and only had

one grocery store and a handful of fast food restaurant chains. One aspect of the small town, the

peace and quiet, was a perk that he enjoyed. However, this town also happened to produce one of

the greatest football players to ever play. Due to this, he states, more players have garnered an

interest to come play there:

There's been an influx of people that want to play football, there we are, our football

program was always pretty good. And luckily it's in an area right there. It's like five miles

from [a bigger city]. And so like [the bigger city] being the major, the biggest city out in

East Texas area period … That attracts like a lot of talent. And guys, who live in that

area, I have an option on what school to go to. And so [my school] specifically, we didn't

really recruit many players from other schools to a public school. So pretty much it's like

guys that live right there in [the town] or guys that probably live within 10-15 minutes

from there. But what you're seeing is a lot of guys moved to that area younger because

they saw like [one of the greatest professional football players] get developed and go off

to the league [NFL]. You have people like myself who were recruited pretty heavily out

of high school. We had a couple more guys as well that ended up going to play D-1 and

went to schools like Texas Tech, North Texas, Oklahoma. And so there was a big time

period of like four to five years, we had guys that were just getting pumped out one by

one one by one. And so that's definitely played a part in like the school expanding …

They have an indoor facility, which is crazy.

Growing up there has helped him appreciate things in life more such as family, neighbors, and

relationships because everyone in that city, due to the size, was so close. It has also kept him

stable and grounded as "It was a real humble lifestyle, real country type living. And so I would

say that's a large part in why I'm like, kind of somewhat grounded today." When asked about

who his influences were growing up, Rashaad went on to mention his family members:

I would say my biggest influence—period—was my mom. I watched my mom raise six

kids by herself. I watched her work two different jobs consistently working like fifteen to

sixteen hours a day. I would say another big role model for me would have to be one of

my high school coaches. He was a really well-rounded person … I would say he gave me a lot of the fundamentals that I believe in today just in terms of how to be a better person, how to be a man, and what type of attitude to carry with myself on a day-to-day basis. Then on the spiritual side, he actually got us involved with the church … My niece's father, who went on to play at [a university] back in his day and transitioned into the league and played [for two NFL teams].

Following up on his influences, he was then asked what options he thought were obtainable as a profession and educationally growing up, he mentioned his biggest goal at the time was just graduating highschool. However, Rashaad was so disconnected and unfocused on academics and so heavily immersed into football in high school, he recalls asking about his GPA:

I can't even explain how unfocused I was on going to the next level [college]. It's difficult for me to even put into words, but like, for example, I remember having a conversation my junior year with my counselor, she was talking about GPA, and I was like, what is a GPA? … And people were talking about going to colleges and college fairs. And I'm like, what do I need to go to a college fair for, I'm getting scholarships. What are we really talking about? And so there was quite literally no type of work done on my part, in order to figure out what I wanted to be when I got older.

Options he thought were obtainable as a profession was becoming a marine biologist due to his fascination with the television show *Animal Planet*. He and his grandmother would sit together and watch that show when he was a child. The late Steve Irwin and the way in which he interacted with animals gave him that idea. He also believed that he could become a doctor at one point due to his mom, who was a nurse aide. However, due to the time and strenuous nature of each profession, he was not able to pursue the majors associated with them.

Damon. Damon was born in Fort Worth/Arlington Texas but spent most of his time growing up in the Northwest Houston area in a city he described as a decent-sized suburb. Early on, he knew his home life was abnormal and described his experience growing up as being a little different. He was aware that his family dynamic was not the stereotypical Black familial upbringing of a broken home; rather, it was the exception, as only 30% of Black people are married (*Black Marriage in America*, 2022). This was due to him having a two-parent married household, with both his mother and father being his biological parents. Not only were his parents present in his life, they were also both college graduates with successful careers:

> You know, there's not a lot of people that look like us [Black] that are, you know, very successful and, the people that are, you know, a lot of times we don't have that much exposure to them. And so for me, I was very, very blessed to have both my parents and then you know, my parents were successful. My mom was a primary care doctor, my dad was a computer scientist/IT executive at ExxonMobil. And so for me, you know, I had a lot of Black friends as a kid. And you know, just my upbringing looked a lot different than a lot of them. And so that's something that I really was always very, very grateful for.

Having both parents in the home, for Damon, he says set a great foundation and example of what success looks like outside of just being a professional athlete.

When asking about his biggest influences, there was a very unique situation for Damon. In addition to his parents being successful, he also knew a professional athlete playing in the NFL who was a close family member, his brother. Furthermore, with his brother being his superhero, he accounts conflicting feelings of wanting to make it to the NFL, as well as feelings of not wanting to go due to the way he saw his older brother get treated and then again, while in

94

college, feeling as though the next step in his progression is to play in the NFL. The initial feeling arose as a young child around the age of seven:

> Like, for me, especially whenever I was younger, I expected to go to the NFL. Which is like, to me, and it's just my personal opinion. It's kind of like a little different feeling [I had] than a lot of very confident kids. They say like, oh, I'm going to go to the, you know, NFL or the NBA or whatever league only because, not that I was, but I expected it more. But it was kind of like a different feeling. Only because my brother was 14 years older than me. And he was there [in the NFL].

He then goes on to account for the time when he was seven years of age, and his brother began to share stories with him about the NFL and the way he was being treated in his circumstances. This is where his view of his initial dream started to shift:

> I feel as though I saw football a little differently … But he basically told me just straight up told me not in a negative way at all. But he was just saying that you know, like, unless you're one of like the, you know, top guys you know, that a lot of times the teams don't show you that much love as far as, you know, it's a business and the NFL and the NBA like it, like it's a business. You might have certain individuals that you know, show you love, but just how it's structured. And so, and so I remember him telling me that, and then he got cut because you know because he wasn't healthy. And that really impacted me a lot. And so, so how a lot of kids grew up, you know, dreaming about you know, playing the NFL/NBA/MLB because of that moment when I was like seven years old, I didn't know it then because I, you know, I didn't know it then but I kind of like resented the NFL like growing up. Like I didn't like it because … my brother I said was like Superman to me.

95

This allowed for Damon to get an understanding of what and how that profession treated people. It also showed more of the business side to a seven year old who comprehended it quite well.

Damon was also asked what option he thought was obtainable both educationally and professionally, and he stated:

> So for me growing up, you know, I thought I could do anything. Which is something I really, you know, to this day, all the time, you know, thank God for … So for me, having my parents who were both very, very supportive, and were both successful in their careers, and having my older brother, like, I'm like, I can do anything … For me personally, going to college, it was like going from the second grade to the third grade. Like, it wasn't really pushed on me, it was kind of just like a thing you do. Like, yeah, like, you know, what else would you do?... I wanted to be like my older brother … I'm going to be like that guy.

With many successful influences in the home and immediate family, Damon found there to be many positive influences and options to choose from. With his brother playing the major influence—he continued on with trying to follow in his footsteps.

Xayvion. Xayvion is a young man who grew up in an area he described as a country city between Houston and Dallas, Texas. This city, he said, had a population of around 4,000 people. He grew up in a home where he and his mother were very close. Watching her take care of three children by herself inspired Xayvion to understand he can always keep pushing and doing more. When asked about who his biggest influence was, there was only one:

> Probably my momma, easily. Just watching her just do the things that she's done with me, my sister, my brother. You know, and seeing the things that she's faced and you know, still overcoming it all, and she's still going hard. You know, my sister has two daughters,

my two nieces. And you know, she's still doing the things that she needs to do for them as well. So you know, she's still doing her thing to this day. So you know, [it's] still motivation for me.

Unlike some of the other participants who had a relative they looked up to who played in the NFL, Xayvion's influence came in a different way. He explained that there was a distinct moment in his life that began to shift his mindset into really believing that he had a legitimate shot to make it professionally playing football in the NFL. He accounted for this event during his high school career when he received his first "big time" scholarship offer from a Power 5 conference University:

Yeah, once my first … well really it was kind of around my first offer kind of let me know that I got a shot. But I noticed for real once, you know the [Power 5] offer came cause [this school] was like my first big offer. [The head coach] brought me out and everything. Once I got the [offer], the [Power 5] big-time offer I said dang I could probably do something now.

Knowing that these large institutions were interested in his talent gave him the drive to work harder. It also showed him that the NFL was attainable due to most of the student-athletes that get drafted come from institutions such as the ones recruiting him.

Xayvion, now garnering the interest of major NCAA collegiate programs, understood he would need to make sure his academics were good. However, it was still not something he prioritized nor was it a motivating factor for Xayvion. So when asked about what he thought his profession and educational options would be, he responded with:

Honestly, for me you know, I just didn't really even see myself doing anything real big. Just really be, you know like I'm not gonna necessarily say forced to play ball but you

know, I was just like, you just get put in and so young and that's just what you're used to doing. So I wouldn't have even thought or believe I would have made it that far in football. But, professional wise I never knew what I really wanted to do either. Even from a young age, you know, I just had that go with the flow type of life, you know, life gone take me where it take me … I used to think of going to college, but it never was a goal until, you know, once I started seeing the football thing going around—but you know, maybe like a junior college route, or maybe a lower level, just college route, and just going that type of way … I really didn't get to taking the education part serious until I got with [the athletic academic support staff in college]. Sitting with [the academic staff] and having those talks is when it finally just kicked in. Like let's get in these books ... [If you had] Conversations with my old teachers and my mom and things I would be going through back in school, they will tell you the same thing. Like man, it [school/college/education] just wasn't a big motivation of mine.

This idea and mentality was further entrenched by those who he looked up to in his neighborhood. While in junior high he saw the older kids who were in high school, whom he looked up to, playing sports and leaving the neighborhood. In his mind they were leaving to do big things, play sports in college, and start their careers. Unfortunately, Xayvion said they would be gone for maybe a year, "which felt like a few months", and then they would be "back in the hood." Now the allure of college was fading and hope was being lost as he stated, "If they [are] not making it, I don't see how I can." Xayvion continued on to express, "So I think that it kind of set in my mind early like, if they can't do it and I look at them like they [are] the greatest to touch earth—it's kind of like, what can I do?"

Malcolm. Malcolm is a young man who grew up in the Cuney Homes projects of

Downtown Houston's historic Third Ward community. The same place he mentioned is home to the late George Floyd who was murdered by a Minneapolis Police Officer, which captured the attention of the nation. Malcolm continues on to say he is a man who comes from a humble beginning. He grew up in a single parent household of six. In addition to the six immediate family members, his older sister would go on to have three kids that also lived there. He speaks of his mother in such an admirable light stating how she is strong, passionate, how she "puts the 'T' in tough", and whatever she had to do to provide for her family, she did it. The way in which he saw her operate as a child growing up helped to propel him into the man he is today. Furthermore, with very few positive role models present, when asked who his biggest influences were growing up he stated:

> To be honest it was the dope boys [drug dealers] who were getting money. That was my first sense of freedom, my first sign of freedom. A sign of attitude, a sign of toughness, a sign of what it was like to be bold you know as a young black man. A lot of us didn't have father figures growing up, and being from the projects we weren't allowed to have men inside the home. So you would see a lot of these single parent homes bonding over similar trauma, whether it be their fathers [absence] or whatever. It be a lot going on, but we all are bonding over that. The dope boys were always fresh. They taught me how to stand up for myself and taught me how to hustle. Some of those characteristics to this day I still carry with me all the way through life and some of the lessons that I learned growing up in those projects. It made me everything I am and it made me everything I'm not.

In addition, he was asked what he thought was obtainable as a kid from an educational aspect as well as professionally. With no educational pillars or influences present, it is not far-fetched for

Malcolm to be unaware of the benefits of gaining a college education. Malcolm shared:

> I honestly didn't think about going to college, that wasn't a thing. I knew of colleges and I knew of universities … expectations for college weren't really high … You didn't see a lot of business owners, you didn't see a lot of entrepreneurs, you didn't even see professional athletes coming back, you know, and helping out. It was little to no resources and little to no outreach in the projects and it was almost a sense of the kids were almost left for dead. It's kind of sad. So as a kid feeling that way, you do get a sense of a chip on your shoulder, you get a sense of nastiness, you get a sense of me against the world because you feel left out all the time and come to feel like nobody cares about you … Nobody really strived to get out.

Due to the immediate influences he spoke of, one would surmise his professional aspirations would have been that of a "dope boy." However, Malcolm had two other influences he recalled that lead him to think football would be his profession:

> My older brother loved football and [always] kept a football in his hand. If anyone has an older or younger brother, they know the first person they see do everything. So if I see my brother throw a football, I want to throw a football with him. If he said he wanted to be a football player, I wanted to be a football player with him. He kind of built the blueprint of what it was to be an athlete. Another was [a family friend]. He was one of the guys who taught me competitiveness and the competitive spirit and how to take that and cross it into everything I do. To see them try to make it out through football gave me a blueprint of something to strive for. Football was really on my mind. There was no one in the hood saying you can be a lawyer, you can be a doctor, you can be an entrepreneur, you can be in politics, you can be a police officer or a firefighter. I never seen anyone

fight for anything meaningful growing up. Everything was day by day and everybody

around me was struggling ... The fight was the day-to-day struggle.

Malcolm's reality made it difficult for him to dream and think past the present time. The innate

pressures to continue to survive forced him to focus on simply making it to the next day.

Nevertheless, with the two aforementioned influences in his life, he was able to gain a

perspective and mindset towards football to try and rise out of his circumstances.

THEME 2 - Athlete-Student To NFL

Each participant's narrative of their lived experience helped to shine a light on what it

was like to have the sense of wanting to go to the NFL and the influences of individuals within

their family, school, and community. All of the participants in this study at some point during

their athletic journey truly believed that they were destined to make it to the National Football

League due to the continued emphasis by those around them. Each participant also displayed a

level of narrow-focused form of identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966) centered on athletics. Upon

entering college and participating in Division I football, everything they did in their daily

routines revolved around their sports needs. This ranged from academics, weightlifting,

conditioning, nutrition, film study, practice, and competition. It was apparent that the participants

felt as though due to their dedication to those areas and the fact they were at a major institution

with a history of sending players to the NFL, they had a legitimate shot of obtaining their athletic

aspirations. Moreover, each participant believed that the culture of collegiate sports also played a

major role in perpetuating this belief. Football was seen, viewed, and treated as the main, and

only, thing amongst those within the confines of the football program.

Throughout this theme will be a detailed account of the way in which their athletic identity was enforced by their social surroundings and experiences. Participants will also detail the way in which they viewed college, was it a great opportunity to advance their education or as it merely a pitstop on the road to the NFL. Continuing, they will also define what the term "student-athlete" meant to them.

Ishmael. For Ishmael, he began to recognize early on in highschool not only was he uber-talented on the football field but he was also gifted in the classroom. In high school he began to take his academics seriously as he made mostly A's, ranking second in his class, and graduating early with honors. This set the stage for the recruiting process. So when he was asked whether he viewed college as an opportunity or a pitstop becoming a professional athlete he stated:

> I would say the culture of collegiate sports, in particular in football, where you do have
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> the opportunity to go and play professionally and make a lot of money. College, right up
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> here. However, my parents—[My parents] they weren't having that. I think honestly, I
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> think the thing that saved me, was my mind frame about it. But like whenever the
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> coaches came to recruit me, I think they got the immediate sense that, okay, like he's
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> going to be able to do it his way and we're not going to be able to change that. I saw a lot
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> of guys come in and essentially like, have aspirations like I want to do engineering, I
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> want to do business, and you know, they essentially got shoved into some other major
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> that they didn't want to be in just so that they could stay eligible. And whether that is
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> based on their level of capability or just selfishness essentially from the program.

For Ishmael and his parents, college was seen as a necessary opportunity to enhance his life. He continued on to say:

You're not getting an education. You're getting passed through school, probably just like

your high school did because of football. So the level of people that graduate without

being educated is terrible, honestly, because I have a lot of guys that call me now and

they're just like, I don't know what to do … So the level of actual education needs to

improve … You know, I've heard other coaches say we recruited you to play football, not

to do school. Yeah, it's just stuff like that, that's kind of the culture of college sports.

Following that, he was asked to define what the term 'student-athlete' meant to him. He then

went on to say that he believed his view was not the normal sentiment that most would assume or

feel. This was due to his upbringing and his familial backing of understanding education was

important:

I felt like I was a student first. However, I would identify myself as the minority on the

team that felt like a student first. I was able to essentially miss some practices because of

engineering labs that were only offered at one time. I know some guys that were in the

same exact major that I was in that wanted to complete it. However, Coach wouldn't let

them miss practice. They came from different backgrounds that I came from. They didn't

have anybody in their corner to go "No, he's going to his class because he may or may

not even finish his four years in college due to injuries or whatever may happen." My

parents weren't having it.

With this strong upbringing and his familial influence towards education, this would help to

shape his academic journey throughout college.

Rashaad. Rashaad was asked if becoming a professional athlete was one of the options

he considered as a profession. After a brief chuckle, he went on to say "Was that a rhetorical

question man? Absolutely! Absolutely! … Everything circled around me making it to the NFL."

Next, he was asked if he viewed college as an opportunity to obtain an education or a pitstop to becoming a professional athlete. He then gave some in-depth insight into his mindset stating:

I think calling it a pitstop is maybe a little bit nice … So in my mind, it's like man, give me a couple of years, maybe I redshirt a year and I leave my sophomore year … So that was fully expected. In fact, I would even say that was partially perpetuated by some of the coaches that were recruiting us at the time. if you look at the statistics around the percentage of people that make it to the NFL, because I was smart enough to look at those stats, it's like man, 1% of 1% of people even make it to this level. However, you know, a lot of those statistics take into account guys that are playing across the conferences, amongst the FBS, it takes into account guys that are playing in the FCS, it takes into account guys that are playing at the JUCO level. And so it takes into account all of these different leagues of people that are playing. However, what I looked at was like, man, the people that are the percentage of people that are starters, at Division One colleges, and not even just that, what's the percent of the people that are starters at [schools in my conference], what is the percentage of those people going into the NFL? … So I was fully locked in on that idea.

The reason this statement is important is due to the very low percentage of players that make it to the NFL. However, Rashaad chose to focus on the extremely high percentage of players that get drafted from Power 5 conferences to the NFL with this being, 72.5% (NCAA, 2018).

When Rashaad was asked what the term 'student-athlete' meant to him he had a response that was quite different from Ishmael. He stated:

I would say athlete first and student second … The term student-athlete for me was a label that was given to people that were chosen, that were a little bit special walking

104

around campus that were gifted athletically … I admit we were athletes for the University number one and then we also had classes to participate in, in order to maintain eligibility … I think that most people going to college view it the same way I viewed it, which is that you're an athlete first … I think it was partially perpetuated by just our environment … if 90% of your day is allocated towards going to meetings, going to training sessions, going to workouts, going to actual practice, and doing all those things and then there is just a portion of your day that's allocated towards your study halls, your actual class, and maybe doing homework, you're naturally going to feel as if more of your life is about football than it is about the educational side.

This thought goes against the narrative that the NCAA intended for students-athletes. Where they are supposed to be students first and foremost, he was feeling the exact opposite.

Damon. Upon entering college, Damon began to have success at his institution. This then triggered the feelings of wanting to make it to the NFL; however, it was no longer the main dream but more of "the natural progression" of playing the game. Due to the amount of success on the football field, to him, it made sense that naturally, the next step along the athletic journey was to play in the NFL. All the while, Damon also was taking his academics seriously due to this relationship, as he recounts his brother not only having success on the field but also taking his academics seriously. Damon went on to say "Even though coaches said that academics were important, we were investing our time [in football] from 4:30/5:00 am until 9:00/9:30 pm. So … for me it felt like we were taking breaks from football to go to class."

He went on to explain whether or not he viewed college as an opportunity to obtain a degree and further his education, or was it viewed as a pitstop in the process of making it to the NFL:

105

For me it wasn't one or the other. It was like hey, what I need to do is be the very best I can be at football. So put in a ton of work so that I can be the very best I can possibly be, and then do my thing the way I know I'm capable of doing. Try to maximize my potential at the end of the day. Then while doing that, be serious about the books. So for me it was, I didn't see college as a pitstop to the NFL and I didnt see it as I'm playing football so I can get a scholarship, get these books paid for, or get a good degree. It's kind of like hey, I'm going to try to do my very best and both and we will see what happens.

This identity that was shaped by his brother's experience helped mold his identity and how he viewed sports. To further illustrate that, Damon was asked about his identity upon entering college, and he was able to articulate based on lived experiences and stories shared by his older brother:

Like, for me that [brothers experience] showed me right there, it's like it could be gone like that! So it's like knowing that is like yeah, like, you know, you can love football or whatever sport that you're playing, you know, that I'm playing, but it's temporary. Like even if you are blessed to be healthy for a good while it's temporary. And so just seeing that at a young age, seeing my older brother deal with the surgeries and his injuries and, and then and then you know, leaving the NFL. And then just the appreciation that I had for it from my upbringing. Like, my dad and mom … just being at home, and just, you know, and that's because they were about their business and went to school. You know, make good grades, and got a good career, all that good stuff. And then I don't forget to mention that so my freshman year, I broke my knee really bad. Like it was a compound fracture my freshman year of high school. So my first year of high school, I was in a wheelchair for a while. So that happened to me at 14, and I was never the same after that.

106

That just reinforced what I already knew about my older brother, with him having to stop

playing football, because of his injuries. So for me, yeah I loved football and it is a lot of

my life, and I care about it, but I gotta make sure I'm about my business with the books

and I have a plan B.

Having lived vicariously through his brother's experience, he was able to see how important it

was to have a backup plan. This allowed him to see academics in a positive light while working

to attain his degree.

When Damon was asked to define the term 'student-athlete' and what this meant to him,

he was able to state:

What this means to me and for most people at my school … Football is your life. Like,

It's as simple as that. As far as how much time you have to invest in it. How much it

requires from you, and that's not even counting the extra hours and all the extra time that

you would put in it if you want to be better than average ... It's so time consuming. It's

very very very challenging to even explore other things outside of football. 'Athlete' is

going to take up the majority of your time, straight up.

He was then probed asking whether or not he felt as though he was a student first and an athlete

second, or an athlete first and a student second. He followed up answering "Oh athlete first! No

question. No question. No question."

Xayvion. The dream of the NFL began to become more realistic for Xayvion as he began

to see how interested the major universities were in his talent. This began to plant the seeds of

the NFL actually being attainable, as Xayvion viewed the path to the NFL was paved through

these specific institutions. Additionally, college for him was seen as a pitstop on the road to the

professional ranks:

107

I think it was more so the pitstop route for me. Not like I didn't have people in my corner telling me, you know you got a chance to get an education and all the great things [this school] can do for me and all that. Like I had people definitely telling me that, you know my grandma being one of them, but for me like it was still just an athlete mindset. A pitstop. Get in, get out, and go do what I need to do in the League.

This idea was reinforced by the fact that he did not obtain his degree during his playing career. He went on to reference that upon entering college he had plans to do three years, the minimum amount of years before being eligible to play professional football, and be gone.

When asked how he would define the term 'student-athlete' and what he thought of when hearing that term, he went on to explain:

To me, somebody that just gets the job done in both aspects of being a student and being an athlete. Because coming in for me personally, like just how I got by in high school. You know, being the athlete. You think that can kind of go through the college route. But it doesn't work like that. So coming in I will say being a student athlete is knowing that you are a student, also as being an athlete.

Furthermore, to understand his identity upon leaving high school and entering college he was asked about his identity. He stated that he definitely held an athlete's identity and the student identification did not come until later in his freshman year. He then doubled down on emphasizing 'definitely just a straight athlete identity' coming in. This was built on a foundation of being "passed through" and getting the "athlete privilege" during highschool where a teacher may bump a grade in order to keep him eligible and moving towards graduation. So upon entering college, Xayvion believed this "athlete privilege" was going to continue throughout the collegiate ranks as well, however he was mistaken.

108

Malcolm. Upon entering college, Malcolm was asked how he viewed the college experience. Did he see college as a pitstop or an opportunity to get an education? He went on to say:

> My grandmother was super strict on education. She made me promise her that before I leave college that I will graduate. I didn't understand what that mean. I'm like, yeah graduate, like everybody graduates. So I made the promise. But I'm thinking like how you said, it was a pitstop. I'm trying to do this college and go to the league [NFL]. I didn't look at college as an opportunity to have my education. I didn't see college as an opportunity, for what it was, as a networking opportunity until later in my years. It was not initially. Being there for football, the coaches and the culture make it obvious that football is first and student is second. Majors were chosen to work around football schedules.

Having made promises that he had no intentions of keeping, he went into college as a student-athlete strictly focused on playing football. Promises of graduating were a very distant second, third, or even fifth option.

Looking at the identity of the 'student-athlete' and what that term meant to him upon entering college, it was interesting to hear and see how Malcolm viewed this term. He went on to say that the term 'student-athlete' was defined by his coaches as student first [while holding up two fingers], and athlete second [while holding up one finger]. These hand gestures indicate that the words spoken, the mentality, and action taken were contradicting. These acts were two diametrically opposed viewpoints. An extreme case was mentioned where he stated, "coaches damn near blamed the player for going to class. Blaming him [the student-athlete] for his [the football coach] job's safety on the kid going to class for his future." Actions such as this

109

reinforce the idea that these young men were truly there to play football, and football only. Further saturating the athletic identity and mentality that nothing else mattered outside of sport. Moreover, it places a responsibility on the student-athlete to perform as though they are responsible for the coaches family and well being. As a result, pulling them closer to football and further from any other outlet, activity, and organizations to help them grow and develop holistically.

THEME 3 - 'I am Black.' However…

While speaking to the student-athlete participants about race, one of the greatest phenomena occurred. Each identified as being Black, and each of them attended a predominantly white institution. But each described race as being a non-factor by which they were treated; unlike in society, where they are being judged and discriminated against due to the color of their skin. The racial bias, per each participant's experience, seemed to be removed: 'I am Black.' However, when we were participating in the game of football, it did not matter. The participants mentioned that they were surely aware of the differences and the disparity between Black students and staff on campus, mentioning how they were the only persons of color in classes at times. Some referenced being stereotyped as they walked through campus or into class by being asked if they were on the football team. This seemingly categorizes and minimizes their worth on Earth to athletics as though they have nothing else to offer. Outside of that, each stated that nothing overtly racist happened during their time in college playing football. Within this theme it will detail the lived experiences of the participants and account the way in which they describe being a Black male playing football.

Ishmael. Pivoting to the racial aspect of his identity, Ishmael was asked what it was like being a Black male and what impact it had on him. He was also probed and asked if this was

110

tough. He then stated:

> I never thought about it, to be honest. I think that's due in part to my upbringing and what
> I mean by that is, like, for the first ten years of my life, I was predominantly surrounded
> by people that looked like me. For the eight years before I came to college, I was always,
> no matter what, like in the school I went to a minority by a large margin. So I was already
> exposed to what it was like to essentially be the only person that looked like me in most
> rooms. So whenever I got to college it was just like that on steroids. So the culture was a
> little bit different. But the traditions … it was a culture shock on that level, not
> necessarily like the racial difference and barriers.

Within the culture he referenced, many traditions at the university were rooted in old ways of
thinking during times where only whites were allowed to attend the university. Many of those
traditions, for example, statues of historical figures that practiced oppression, exist on campus
and are currently standing tall to this day.

Rashaad. When asked what impact having an identity as a Black male had on him during
college, Rashaad replied: "that is a really good question." He went on to voice that he was aware
of the very low percentage of African American people at the university with it being "around
2%." There is also the fact that the student-athlete population also makes up a significant portion
of that percentage. The number was shocking to him, however, when he would walk around
campus or be in class, other students would ask "are you an athlete?" To him this was not a
negative thing, alternatively, he viewed this as a compliment. He felt as though it was a badge of
honor and would routinely lean into this identity as it came with a level of "coolness, reverence,
and respect around the city." Digging deeper, based on the previous answer given, he was asked
if being a Black male in college was tough for him, he responded by saying:

111

Yeah, it was. It was tough in terms of the implications it would have on later things that happened in my career. But like, while I was in the process of experiencing it [while playing football], it was not tough for me.

Rashaad discussed how entering college was exciting, having the title of "student-athlete" and being labeled as such was an honor. And for many, being a student-athlete is an honor, but when being viewed as only an athlete by others, the term can become demeaning. Rashaad realized this as his academic and athletic career went on. He began to realize the microaggressive undertone in being labeled only as an athlete by all his peers at first sight. This did not make Rashaad any less proud of being a black male, however, it did allow him to understand how he was viewed solely as an athlete in society and the negative connotations that came along with it.

Damon. When Damon was asked about the impact of having identities of being Black and male he recalled:

I feel like that is a profound question. Whenever I hear that question, I think about how a lot of other people might have viewed me more so than how I viewed myself. I don't know if there were challenges specifically because I was Black. I know I definitely felt that you know, I wish there were a lot more people that looked like me from you know, a comfort level. As far as how I was treated on a day-to-day, you know, wasn't much negative but I felt as though I was viewed as "oh he's Black" and "he's probably an athlete." Nothing aggressively overt … but always being conscious of I'm the only Black person in here.

It was Damon's perception that his peers assumed he was an athlete merely because he was Black. Even while noticing he was the only Black person, like Rashaad, it did not negatively

112

affect him. However, he did wish there were more students who looked like him to add to his level of comfortability and sense of belonging.

Xayvion. Continuing on, Xayvion self-identified as a Black male and was asked if it was tough going through college identifying with these two identities. He stated, "I would say from my experience, I will say no." However, he did mention that as time passed he began to "realize things" in his later years. Following that, he was asked to share the impact of identifying as a Black male during college. There was then a revelation as to why he felt so strongly connected to football:

> I just felt that there might have been just more so it was the thing to be [Black]. Maybe because when you look on… you look on the TV when you watch the game all you see is Black athletes. Like not that it was a given, but that's just what you thought. So you don't see unless you turn it on the Harvard and the Princeton games and things like that. But when you watch the real deal football, you watch us [Black males]. So, it's more so like, you know, not that it was expected… but definitely, I fit the mold in a sense to go and get a chance.

For Xayvion, in the beginning being a Black male student-athlete was not particularly tough for him. Overtime, however, he began to see the negative effects it could have on him. For example, having the stigma placed on his back that he was going to be a 'lazy' student (Edwards, 1984). In addition to this, constantly seeing those who resembled him on television, running on the football fields, reinforced his athletic identity and the way in which he viewed himself. His athletic identity was strengthened again, as he realized that others only saw him as a jock and treated him with praise because of his athletic status and not due to his individual self.

Malcolm. When Malcolm was asked the same questions, he went on to articulate and

describe a time when a number of his teammates got in trouble with law enforcement and how that changed the way he walked around the facility:

> Being a Black athlete was not tough, but you're definitely put into a stereotype. So it can go two ways. You can be the 'token' guy or the All-American guy that everybody loves that they really don't see color. But you have to be careful … like one semester, like thirteen of my teammates got arrested, and the athletic department and police department weren't too friendly with us and we had to walk really, really light. So being a Black man in that type of environment was scary and I think that was around the time Trump got elected, too. This was the first time that I felt vulnerable in life and that anything could happen to me.

Malcolm viewed this a little differently than the other participants. This was due to the fact that he had a particular situation: teammates who had gotten in trouble with the law. As a result, this made being Black around the campus and in the football facilities rough. Adding in the political climate at the time also did not help.

THEME 4 - Relationships Matter

Each participant voiced how during their time in college, they were able to build different relationships with different people. These relationships ultimately either helped or hindered their growth and development. For example, the relationship between student-athlete and coaches was one mentioned that did not help broaden their perspective outside of football nor cope with injury from football. Each participant chronicled that the coaching staff was neither supportive nor encouraging of activities outside of football. However, some stated although they weren't encouraging, they didn't discourage it either. During their injury, some referenced how the relationship changed between coach and player, essentially stating there was no longer a

114

relationship. Some coaches, as told by the participants, went to the extent of ignoring the student-athlete. The participants also voiced not knowing how to cope with said injury(s). In addition, the time spent on football-related activities and the fatigue associated was almost a natural deterrent to venturing out to seek other opportunities for growth.

Many showed a level of appreciation towards the academic staff who built relationships with them and planted seeds of inspiration, motivation, and knowledge that they did not recognize or understand until their careers were coming to an end. Every participant mentioned they had the ability to reach out to their athletic academic advisors for that level of support while being a student-athlete. These relationships continued throughout college as well as their life after college and sport. Further stating, the academic advisors were some of the most important and influential figures during their time in college.

Furthermore, each participant discussed their relationship with their faith. Holding strong to their belief in God and His reasoning and plan for each event that occurred allowed them to refocus on who they were and redefine who they wanted to be. This was critical, as it allowed each participant to hold strong in their faith and to the promise of brighter days.

Ishmael. Ishmael was asked whether football players were encouraged or discouraged from attending activities outside of football:

> I have a couple of organizations that'll find themselves to my resume. I wasn't active in those organizations. It was clear that you're a football player and they tried to bring stuff in-house for us. But to join something externally was not highly encouraged. And depending on who you talk to, it may be discouraged … I think most people realized we just didn't have time for that, especially if you had aspirations of going into the NFL … I would say the circumstances themselves almost discourage you from wanting to do

anything, actually. Who wants to go to an organization with a bunch of lively students …

after you just finished running … The desire wasn't there to do anything but get in the ice

tub and then go home and fall asleep.

He went on to say that, due to the level of intensity his academic major required, the best thing

for his coaches to do was to merely suggest events for him to attend and leave it at that.

Ishmael continued to explain his relationship with his faith and how it was a cornerstone

for him at this time in his life:

If my identity is wrapped up in the house I live in and the car I drive and the money I

make and whatever I have and whenever that's gone, who are you? So that was the

biggest thing for me, like building that house on the cornerstone on that foundation of

faith. That's not going to change ... Hardships have come. I've lost family. I'll lose this.

Lose that. You can take all of that stuff from me. My DNA is still in Christ at the end of

the day.

Ishamael viewed his identity in God to be much more important than any physical possession he

could attain. His faith helps to ground him from superficial monetary gains.

Rashaad. Rashaad recalls events around other activities outside of football related events

being discouraged and/or encouraged:

I remember guys getting made fun of in meetings. Like we had guys that tried to get jobs

and stuff like that, and it's like dude he's supposed to be studying his playbook we're

playing against [another university] next week [and he's] over here or over there at the

Smoothie King [working]. So I would definitely say it was discouraged … but it's

somewhat perpetuated by our environment.

116

He was then probed as to whether this was discouraged by teammates, coaches, or administrators and the reply was, "I would say primarily, teammates and coaches." There was also a mention of social media playing a role where the fans of the individuals or fans of their respective university wanted to see you only post about your sport. Anything outside of that was deemed as 'not being focused.' Frustrated, Rashaad said, "People don't want to see you be multifaceted as an athlete representing a university." Having been previously injured and sustaining a new injury, Rashaad began to seek advice from coaches, staff and administration. He mentioned seeking advice from the Player Development Director at his university and how that impacted him. The Player Development Director told Rashaad, "whatever you decide to do, I am here for you and I support you as a brother." Rashaad reflected and stated, "hearing that full support that I have from him was refreshing man, it was a real like, embrace and I hadn't felt that up until that point."

He also references conversations had with the athletic academic advisors who, at that point after multiple season-ending injuries and surgeries, advised him to get more involved in organizations and activities that are not related to football to begin mapping out a life that doesn't involve sport. At the time he said that he wanted to prove them wrong, feeling as though they didn't care because they didn't feed into his dream of making it to the NFL. However, looking back on those moments:

> Hindsight, of course, like dude, I appreciate that. I needed to hear that. I needed to hear it. Listen to it. I remember being so like angry when people would tell me stuff like that. That was like in hindsight, so realistic. But because I was not grounded In reality, I couldn't comprehend it. It like didn't make sense to me at all.

Once retiring and then becoming a regular with the academic staff, he mentioned that moment being "so cool" as he is now able to see every way in which they were trying to help him with a

117

different perspective. He began to realize that they were there to try and help him network and find a job or internship opportunity. He goes on to say that he had viewed support staff through a lens of competition when in fact they were not competing with my football focus, they were trying to enrich my experience. "I was so zoomed in [to football] I lost focus of the bigger picture."

Rashaad also went into detail regarding how he was treated by most of his coaches after the injuries:

> I would say a lot of them … they're not counselors, they're not motivational coaches, they're not your father figures, you know, they're just football coaches. So I would imagine some of them didn't know how to process it properly, so they just didn't talk to me anymore or associate with me. Some of them even went as far as to start ignoring me when they saw me around the complex.

There was one coach in particular that did reach out during this time to let him know that he was still part of the team, regardless of playing or retiring, and that was the head coach. Rashaad categorizes the conversations he had with the head coach as "extremely genuine."

Finally, when asked about his relationship with his faith and whether his faith played a role while in college, he exclaimed "100%. 100%. Shout out to [the team chaplain] … I leaned into that for sure."

Damon. Damon was asked about activities he participated in outside of football and his view was shaped due to injuries sustained:

> For me, football took up so much time. I was in a completely different mental space. My junior and senior years I dealt with severe depression, like my entire junior and senior years. I'm having these multiple surgeries, so whenever people were trying to explore …

I wasn't trying anything because I was trying to just walk or you know rehabbing my shoulder and my knee to try to just bounce back … Even before then, like my freshman and sophomore years, like football consumes so much of my time that I don't even know how I would find out about things [activities/organizations] outside of randomly meeting somebody … You can attend one of those things [activity/organization meetings] that one day, but you're going to miss the other twenty days so you might as well just not do it.

While Damon may have had the passion to explore opportunities outside of football, injuries and time consumption made this difficult.

As with the other participants, Damon was asked if his faith played a role while he was transitioning out of sport:

That is what got me through. Yeah. Like, and it's funny because after these 12 surgeries that I've had, and, and actually being in, you know, really severe pain every day for the last eight years, and just knowing the dark place that I was in for my junior and senior years if I didn't have faith, I don't, I don't know. I don't know how I would have gotten through that.

Damon held strong to his faith as he proclaimed without it he never would have made it. Holding strong to his faith allowed him to continue to fight on through each adverse situation.

Xayvion. Xayvion talked about his experience when it came to participating in activities or organizations outside of football and he said "not so many extracurricular [activities] outside of football." He was then probed as to whether or not the involvement of said extracurriculars was encouraged or discouraged, and he said those who worked in the academic role encouraged events such as job and career fairs. However, he admitted:

119

I just felt like me just being who I was and my way of thinking just how I just needed that

extra just kick to be like a man really go and really go see things and go talk to these

people.

Then switching the conversation focus to coaches specifically seeing if they encouraged or

discouraged him from participating in outside activities:

I definitely didn't see any encouragement. I definitely didn't see any encouragement. I'm

not gonna sit here and play like there was … But it definitely wasn't like, "Hey, you guys.

There's a job fair and a bunch of alumni are going to be here talking to you, trying to give

you opportunities." It wasn't none of that.

He made mention of that upon leaving the university and wanting to return to eventually

graduate, the athletic academic staff at the university was still trying to help him to graduate.

When Xayvion was asked about his faith and if it played a role throughout this process he

stated "Definitely. Definitely. I would say so." Probing, he continued to expound on how this

relationship helped:

I wasn't trying to get too much into questioning [God], but you know it was more so like

alright, what is really going on? I was looking at it more so like, did I do something

wrong? What did I do wrong, you know. Battling myself but battling like the higher

power in a sense. But I do feel like it made me just closer [to God] and gave me some

closure to that [unmet athletic aspirations] as life went on.

This relationship, although it seems to have been a strained relationship at times, has helped him

to try and move on and leave the past in the past. Helping to allow for the development of not

only a new identity but also a life beyond football.

Malcolm. Malcolm went on to talk about his interest in wanting to participate in extracurricular activities such as the Greek life on campus, but time was a big issue:

Me being a Black man … I was drawn to the Black crowds and the Black parties and stuff like that. The Greeks [life], for the frats, sororities, and stuff like that. But … football took a lot of your time in school and I double majored. So I didn't have time ... But if I had a chance to, I would.

When asked if it was encouraged or discouraged by coaches:

It wasn't encouraged. But it wasn't discouraged. But it was like you had to make sure you were in good standards with football and certain things of that nature. Like, yeah, because certain coaches may or may not be on board with what you're trying to do, especially if it doesn't pertain to football.

He went further into stating how he truly appreciated the athletic academic advisor who encouraged him, kept in touch with him, and helped him throughout his time at the university. Malcolm went on to state this relationship reached further than just academics during his time at the university as it has also extended to help him with many other things in his life. He deeply expressed how that impacted his life.

As Malcolm was making his transition out of athletics due to exhausting his eligibility, he was asked did any of the relationships change with the coaches or other support staff members (i.e. academics, life skills, etc):

I really don't keep in contact with them [coaches]. Like a revolving cycle with their schools and things. Like the coach that recruited me to come early. When I got there in January, he was there for like six days. Then he got the linebacker's coach and the DC [defensive coordinator] job at [a different university], that was a wake-up call.

121

As for the academic side of things with the support services:

> I tell people, they support me, they support me big time. Those are the people who really showed us the most support because I see that they see the big picture. And like a lot of those guys and a lot of those people can see it before it happened. A lot of those people [athletic academic services] were former athletes. You see what I'm saying? So a lot [of them] know the importance of getting an education. So when you are making a transition, they really tell you, hey … So I had [an athletic academic services employee] there but she was one of those who was very, very important to me. She [was] constantly reminding me of the things that I had and the different attributes that I had this world was in constant need of.

For Malcolm, those who truly mattered to him had been former athletes who had gone through a similar situation. They knew the importance of getting an education and thinking beyond football.

Malcolm talked briefly about his relationship with God and how that affected him during this time in college, stating, "Yeah, for sure. I believe in God. Having faith. I've seen a lot, I've been through a lot. But man, God was the reason that I can still be sane … He kept me focused."

THEME 5 - Is It Over Yet?

Towards the end of the process of interviewing these five individuals, some were ready for sports to be over and done with while others were at peace with the end. Some were not enjoying the process and were not having fun, whether that was due to injury, burnout, or just simply being ready for a new chapter of life. In fact, there was only one student-athlete who held strong to that foreclosed athletic identity and continued to try and pursue his dream of making it to the NFL. Some disclosed a level of disdain due to it not working out how they envisioned it

would entering college; on the other hand, each was happy to have had the opportunity to play. These athletes experienced not only the loss of their collegiate athletic career, but a number of them lost friends and family members. Once the outcome did not happen as though the friends and family thought it should, they then realized they were not as close as they thought. Their perception, now jaded, turned to ask "were you ever really here for me, or were you only here for what I could display on the field and the hope of me making it to the NFL to benefit you?"

Ishmael. Ishmael's career ended due to him exhausting his eligibility; however, during that same time period, he was experiencing major injuries as well. Yet, when asked about his reaction when his eligibility ended he stated "I had already graduated so, I think just kind of being how I am in every phase of life. When it's time to go, I go. I don't look back." Ishmael experienced injuries with his legs that prohibited him from participating in practice or games at times. This reduced his desire and accelerated his drive to be done with the sport of football. After graduating he and the team traveled to the bowl game. He then goes on to detail his thought process heading into the last game of his collegiate career with one thing on his mind, and one prayer on his lips which was "'God help me to walk off that field.' A win for me is walking off the field because that is how scary it kind of started to get for me." He emphasized walking due to the amount of pain he experienced in his legs stating that it began during his junior year when he was driving home one day [from the bowl game] and he couldn't feel his legs. Following the conclusion of his senior year's bowl game, in which he walked off the field, and arrived back to campus, he immediately packed up his football locker, went to his apartment complex, packed his belongings up inside, loaded up his car, and got on the road to go home and never look back.

Upon Ishmael completing his collegiate athletic career, he was then asked what was the reaction of those closest to him. Fortunately for Ishmael, he had a great support system:

I mean, I would say the support was great, honestly, all the way around. I'd done a lot of groundwork early on upfront in my college career networking. So I had, you know, job offers pretty much to go anywhere. Coaches were supportive, you know, academics [were supportive]. Everyone supported me in the next phase. And, you know, if I ever need anything, I knew I'd call those folks. All of my family was supportive. However…there were some that were a little disappointed that I did not take the opportunity to go to the [NFL] Combine or further pursue that. Like, I didn't exhaust in their minds the opportunity of playing professional football. Like, there were other things I could have done. But for me, the trade-off which was my health, like it just wasn't. It just wasn't there for me.

The way in which Ishmael's trusted supporters treated him upon completing his career, it allowed for a smoother transition. There was a level of comfort knowing that he was not being pressured to continue with something they wanted for themselves, rather than disregarding Ishmael's health, well-being, and decision.

Rashaad. Rashaad characterized his college career, which was shut down due to injury, ending as "it was taken from me for sure." Giving the impression that he truly felt as though he owned the game of football and it was taken from him without his permission. As though the game of football owed him something it had not given. There were multiple injuries that preceded the final one that retired Rashaad. The culmination of all the injuries had him express retiring and wanting to be done regardless of what the last MRI said due to the mental fatigue that weighed upon him:

And so I told him [the athletic trainer] at that time, like, "look, I don't know if I can take another disappointment. Like if it comes back, and it says in the MRI that something is torn or, you know, extremely damaged, at least, I'm probably just going to be done." I told him that in that moment. I didn't really mean it. You know, because deep down, I was hoping that nothing came back. But I still want to play, but my big thing was always feeling as if I had a choice to walk away as opposed to the game being taken away from me. So I told him I was done … If it came back something like that. We ended up doing the MRI. I came in the following day … I pretty much told him Iike "look man, you know, whatever regardless of what it says I'm probably just done. You got to be honest, I'm kind of tired of this. I'm gonna just go ahead and retire … I'm not really trying to do it anymore."

After getting the news of his injury being an MCL, ACL, and meniscus tear, he followed through and retired. Leaving the doctor's office, he walked to his car and "broke down, broke down." Recapping and recalling all of the many words and life lessons that many would preach to him concerning a plan B and how quickly the game of football can be taken away, he then realized for his situation, each of these things was true. Now forced to recreate his identity, at that point, he states:

I look back at my entire collegiate experience with a little bit of embarrassment on how I handled my priorities … So while I was regretful about how I handled things up until that point, I was optimistic about how to handle things going forward. So it was a blessing going through those experiences.

Rashaad's injuries were a reality that he faced by dealing only with his emotions tied to his athletic identity, rather than truly considering the doctors' advice for his future.

Now no longer able to participate in collegiate sports, Rashaad had to face the people who supported him throughout his career. Two relationships, in particular, made him very nervous to broach the subject, as he would have to alert them that he was no longer able to play football. He was no longer able to pursue his dream of making it to the NFL to give them a better life. These relationships were that of his mother and his grandmother. His perception was negative. This was due to his inability to provide for them in the way in which he had promised and envisioned when growing up. It was negative due to him thinking they saw him as only a football player and not as a son and grandson, a view they never stated themselves:

What I wanted to achieve more than anything else was putting Mom in a position where she can retire someday. Having to go back home and have a conversation with her and let her know that I can no longer do what I thought I was going to … Put her in a position where she could retire and live a healthy and long retired life and happiness was scary for me. It was very scary … Then when I finally got back home over the holidays and I sat down, my mom [and I] had a conversation and I realized that she treated me like I was the exact same person. She didn't have a bit of the remorse and like the sorrow in this for me. However, she treated me the exact same way still with love and compassion, and care. That made me feel really, really good.

Similarly, Rashaad thought that when his grandmother heard the news she would be disappointed. That her view of her grandson was now less due to his inability to perform on the football field; however, he was wrong:

"[Grandma], I'm going to be unable to participate anymore, and I want to apologize to you guys for letting you down. I know you enjoyed watching me on TV and I just wanted to express my sorrow and not being able to make it happen for you all I promise. I did my

126

very best, and I put my best foot forward, but I'm just unable to do it anymore." And she's just like, "okay, that's all right. That's alright. Yeah, what's for dinner tonight?"

Rashaad sums it up as he goes on to state "I definitely equated [the] inability to play, to failing, despite the fact that all the injuries were out of my control. The failure part is the biggest."

Damon. Damon, whose reason for retiring was the same as Rashaad's, internally was over football after the last injury. This was due to the operating surgeon suggesting to him that if he wanted to play with his children and live a somewhat 'normal' life in the future, he needed to retire:

> So from that, you know, I stopped playing. I really didn't even tell anybody because I was just so upset about it. Like, I just didn't tell anybody. I didn't have some beautifully written player message that I released on Instagram … I wish I would have had a beautiful post. Yeah, I just, I just went dark. I'm just like, man, like, just because it was injury, on injury, on injury. I felt like I was letting everybody down in my last season. Like, I was horrible, because it was just so many things wrong … And like, for me, it was a tough time, and just having knee surgeries, it's kind of like never questioning God. But wondering, like, why is this happening? Like, everything happens for a reason. So what was the reason, God? Like, where are we going with this? Like, where are you taking me with this, with all these surgeries? Then, later on my junior year, my girlfriend who I was in love with, she died in a car accident. So that, compounded with all the surgeries, had me feeling like a weight on my shoulder. I used to be one of the better players on the team.

After multiple surgeries and bouts of depression, Damon felt as though he let everyone down. Even those who never met him:

Going through the surgeries [I was] feeling like I let the whole world down, my

teammates down, my brothers down, my coaches, the whole fan base [down] that didn't

really know I existed. [I] Just let everybody down and being physically in pain every day.

I'm still in physical pain to this very day. So I was in a ton of pain then. And, you know,

losing, you know, a young lady who I thought I was going to marry one day.

Injuries forced Damon to perceive he was solely responsible for the success of the team.

Consequently, he felt as though he failed everyone associated with the team due to his injuries

rendering him unable to compete.

Post-retirement, he was faced with the task of having to face his current situation. When

going back to his family he felt less than and struggled communicating his thoughts and feelings

due to how he was conditioned as a Black male as well as leaning on his faith in God:

You know, looking back, you know, I did a poor job of communicating [to my parents]

what I was going through. I had, I guess, conditioned myself to always be like, "Hey, I'm

fine. Like, I'm good". And I think, you know, just as a young Black man, I think, you

know, as a community, especially, you know, as a young Black man, we're kind of

conditioned to just always say, "I'm good, I'm straight. I'm fine". You know, looking

back, reflecting is like, you know, I would have gotten a lot more support that I needed

had I communicated more of what I was going through … If I didn't have faith, I don't

know, I don't know, I don't know how I would have gotten through that.

While dealing with his mental health issues, due to the way he perceived he was supposed to act,

Damon never reached out for help. Instead he internalized the pain and leaned heavily on his

faith in God.

Xayvion. Xayvion was the only participant who went on to try to play professionally once his eligibility expired. However, he was not able to attain the dream destination of the NFL. He spoke about how that affected him and his mindset throughout:

> Kind of not in a hole, not in a rut or anything, but still was just in disbelief that it was kind of over in the sense of how I kind of doubted myself already, you know, through the whole season. But when it finally kind of got to the end, it was like damn, like, now it was really time to put some work in. But yeah, it was just kind of just disbelief in the sense.

Moreover, his first thought he said after the draft reinforced his internal feelings about his athletic identity. Xayvion stated that his plan B was to go and try to play in the Canadian Football League first and then try to head back to his higher education institution to complete more credits towards graduation. In the meantime, he went overseas to play football with the hopes to attain and generate interest with the film collected from playing.

When Xayvion's unmet athletic aspirations were joined with his immediate family, it made for an encouraging moment. Though he did not achieve what he thought he wanted, his disappointment was combated by the support of his loved ones throughout the process:

> You know, they were pretty, you know, uplifting still. It wasn't like I had any bad apples in those circles telling me like you know what I'm saying "this [is] over" and things like that, you know, I just had a pretty uplifting circle. Like, you know, my parents, my mom, grandma, Papa. You know, they kept me motivated just throughout the process. So, it was tough, but I'm thinking I had a pretty good circle around me.

His mother was the most influential person for Xayvion during this period as she would keep an attentive eye on his mood. Xayvion said his mother was able to see "the dark cloud over my

head" and this would spur him to talk and allow her to uplift her son. Today, he says the hardest part he had to deal with post football was "letting go." Holding on to the hope and dream long after it ends due to feeling like there is still a chance:

> Man just letting go of just trying to hold on to [foot]ball. Like, like I told my mama. Like, I could try definitely. Like still now [today] I know, if I probably put in like, four, five, six months of work, I could be back … But, you know, like, at this point, like, I started to just realize, like, I just felt like football was just kind of hindering the growth part of my life because a lot of it was me being scared to start, you know, a career.

Xayvion's internal perception of how others viewed him was that of a negative connotation. Without anyone in his immediate family confirming this thought, he immediately took his mentality into defense mode. The operative term used to characterize his internalized thought process of how others viewed him was 'failure':

> I definitely kind of went through that failure phase of, you know, I didn't get a job done. The guilt, kind of the little guilt that I didn't get the job done. You know, and I really just, I will say, I probably really just got over that really a few months ago, because I had a good little long talk with my auntie. But yeah, I definitely went through feelings of like, just failure. Thought that was how people were looking at me … When I'm back home, I didn't want to go be seen by people because, you know, they just look at me like "he could have did this or he should have did this," but you know, you know, just kind of let that guilt eat at me awhile.

Xayvion's internal guilt was crippling, prohibiting him from wanting to interact with people back in his hometown. He would much rather not be seen to avoid all contact, questioning, and communication.

Continuing, he was asked to compare the internal perception in his mind to the reality of how others were treating him. The two did not align, as he states that in each conversation he would basically be thinking about how he should be in the NFL and not here talking to this individual:

> I would definitely say everything was more so internal. You know, I will go out, you know, I might see you know, an old teacher or anybody from back in the day. You know, it was, you know, it was all love, but I think I was just more so like, dang, when I would look at it like we're not supposed to be having this conversation. I'm supposed to be in the [NFL] League doing what I'm doing, and that's it. But, it was coming from [my]self for sure.

Xavion was able to recognize the self-sabotage that he was committing after not making it to the NFL. As no one treated him differently he began to be the catalyst of negative thinking.

Malcolm. Similar to the majority of the participants, Malcolm's eligibility ended once he exhausted his years of competition. He expressed a level of gratitude as he claims, "When I was done I walked away with no major injuries, no major surgeries … So for the most part I was healthy as I could be." Malcolm then talks about a measure of peace that came with the conclusion of his career, even though things did not work out how he initially planned coming into college:

> Coming into college, I was thinking I was gone play in the NFL. As I went through college, I saw the NFL wasn't really a big deal because there is bigger stuff in life. So after finishing, then I was like, okay, I'm content. I'm complete. I'm good with that. I was at peace with hanging up the cleats.

131

Malcolm was at peace with the way his career ended. He stated that he had no regrets and that he knew the time had come to move on to a new venture. There was more that life had to offer than just playing sports, and he was ready for that voyage.

Contrarily, those around him did not feel the same way about the decision. Many felt as though he should have tried to make it to the NFL post-college neglecting all the thoughts and feelings Malcolm had. Malcolm was not given the chance to perceive how those close to him felt as they were very vocal and overt in their words and treatment of his decision. He went on to talk about the way in which those around him started to change:

> That shit ran me hot more than anything. To break that down, that angered me man because I didn't see and I didn't notice all these people were on my coattail number one. Number two, a lot of people didn't respect my decision which also angered me. Three, how could you not respect my decision and this is my journey? This is my process. I went through this. I made the sound decision on closing this chapter. You as my friend or you as whoever, you are supposed to help me make this transition, you see what I'm saying. So I didn't get a lot of support. I didn't get as much support from certain people in my community as I thought I should ... I don't feel I let anybody down because nobody did what I did. The people who were telling me about this and asking me "why I didn't go to the league?" or were frustrated with me, they couldn't walk a day in my shoes.

Malcolm's reflection on the way he had to navigate the perceptions and treatment of those closest to him is evidence of how others can make the transition more difficult. He was not only dealing with a major part of his identity being changed but others who seemed to be living vicariously through him also projected their thoughts and feelings upon him, disregarding his own feelings and emotions towards the subject.

Advice for the Next Generation

Concluding each interview, every participant was asked to think back to their younger self. Think back to the time in which they were entering college with what little knowledge they had of the journey that laid ahead of them. To take inventory of what they thought they knew, compared to what they really knew, based on what they know now. What one thing would you tell the next young African American male football student-athlete coming up now to learn from your experience? Each participant was able to give the advice of making sure you handle your business and knowing that being something more than an athlete is also "cool." To be courageous enough to step outside of your comfort and fear zone to seek outside opportunities to be better prepared and a more well-rounded individual. This section will account their advice from a current perspective based on past lived experiences for the generations to come.

Ishmael. Ishmael's account of the advice that he would offer up was a great takeaway. He acknowledged that the Universities could do a better job in some areas, however, at his institution he felt as though they were doing better than most. Continuing, he went on to state how the athletes need to step up and take responsibility for their own lives:

At some point in life, you're going to have to take responsibility for your life. So we can blame the coach, we can blame the support staff. We can blame this and that and that in the way I was raised. Hey, it may not be your fault, but it's your responsibility. At some point, a man has to be a man and go, you know what? My story may not have started like it should have. The [proverbial] cards I was dealt are the cards I was dealt. Play your hand and play it well.

Rashaad. Rashaad offered advice to begin to shape their mind around the idea that going professional in a field outside of sports is also a good thing. Have passions outside of just playing

your sport and truly explore those so that when the time comes, you can be more prepared. He went on to stress how vital it was to get out of your comfort zone:

> I would really try to solidify in their mind that it is cool to be something outside of just an athlete, like, it's cool to have hobbies, it's cool to have things that you're passionate about. It's cool to have other goals and things that you're working towards becoming to just be a bigger and better version of what you really are. It's also really cool to lean into that other part of your identity, you know, I realized that you are so much more than just an athlete … I would advise them to get involved with some different organizations that would naturally force them to kind of see that as the case. So join these organizations, try more things outside of your comfort zone, listen to the people around you that are put in place because they're there for a reason. And yeah, capitalize, take advantage of the opportunity and appreciate every single moment because it will be taken away from you someday … But if you appreciate it, you're gonna walk away knowing that you did everything that you could do in order to really capitalize on what you were given.

Damon. Damon, much like Rashaad, gave advice about being intentional with your actions. Understanding that at some point it will end and you will need to have spent time exploring other options. Having a plan B and not being overly fixated on one avenue of success:

> I would tell that young Black man to be very intentional on exploring things outside of football. And, oftentimes, you're not going to feel like you have time. And it might be quite literal, oftentimes. But you need to be intentional about making time, whether it's talking to your coach and asking for that time … Make sure that you are exploring things outside of football… make sure you're talking to people and people know where you're at

134

[mentally] ... Last thing is that you can be anything you want to be like. I feel like as

young Black kids, most often times because of the lack of exposure, resources, and just

the environment that you know, black and brown kids come from, you don't really get

and it's hard to visualize yourself being certain things … But you can still be anything

you want to be and never doubt that.

He goes on and finishes to articulate "just make sure you're always doing what is best for you"

and wanting them to not compromise that.

Xayvion. Xayvion was able to offer insight on how to treat yourself with his advice. He

wanted to express how to truly look inward and appreciate the person doing the work. As

Xayvion continues to define his identity and search his soul for happiness, he expresses that

advice for the generation coming behind him:

Make sure that, you know what I'm saying, you love yourself first before anything.

Check-in with yourself. Love yourself. Motivate yourself. Find your purpose in yourself,

to do what you got to do. Man, my experience when I look back on it was more so never

checking in with what I wanted, and kind of just did what other people wanted me to do,

needed me to do, told me to do. I never did for me. I never did for myself.

Malcolm. Unlike Xayvion, who was thinking more internally, Malcolm focused on the

external factor for his words of wisdom. He articulated:

Be mindful of who you pick as your friends because that is going to ultimately show you

the direction you are going [in life]. If you [can], get around like-minded people or if you

[can] get around people that are trying to go somewhere … try to get around people who

[can] help [you] where you are weak at to bring you up, because when you are young you

don't have all the answers. You don't know where you are going, but you think you do …

The company you keep is the main thing. Make sure your company is a strong company and make sure everybody is headed in the right direction on something positive.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The primary focus of this study was to explore the psychological and social factors that are connected to self-identity of African-American male student-athletes and how these can affect their ability to recover from unmet athletic aspirations. This study was developed to specifically examine the Black Male football student-athlete based on a multitude of factors such as race, self-perception, family, and influences with the assumption that the aforementioned factors could lead to a challenging transition. This phenomenological research was conducted to help assist in amplifying the voices of Black men who have gone through the process of transitioning out of collegiate football into their lives post-college. Relationships, resources, and upbringing are a few factors that contributed to both the detrimental and beneficial effects that assisted them in moving on. This study aimed to understand and seek knowledge pertaining to the general experience within collegiate football for Black males and to attempt to build on existing research (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Bimper & Harrison, 2011; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Brown et al., 2003; Edwards, 1984; Good et al., 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Singer, 2008; Singer, 2019).

Summary of the Findings

Overall, the participants expressed that each of the primary focal points explored in this research has shaped the way in which they viewed football and transitioned out of sport. Findings from this study aim to provide implications to ethically and morally improve the balance for Black male football student-athletes (academically, socially, and athletically) at predominantly White institutions (PWI) to enhance their experience without having football

137

dictate everything in their identity formation process. The Social Identity Theory was used as the theoretical framework and foundation on which this study was built (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Phenomenology was used as a guiding methodological approach to research this topic. One semi-structured interview per participant was administered to collect the data. The data analysis revealed the findings of the following five themes: *Where it All Started, Athlete-Student To NFL, 'I am Black.' However…, Relationships Matter,* and *Is It Over Yet?*. These themes were then discussed in order to find how Black Male football student-athletes understood and interpreted their time while in college playing sports. It also helped to reveal the way in which their self-identity was shaped and molded. During the interview each participant openly and freely spoke, as they felt most comfortable, to share their truth. Moreover, probing questions and verification was utilized to ensure the interpretation of their accounts were accurate.

Findings, based on the five emergent themes, suggests that each participant at some point was foreclosed on their athletic identity and seen the NFL as the ultimate goal. The reason this goal was so prevalent amongst the group was due to their upbringing and social influences as an adolescent. Having family members who played professionally played a major role in three out of the five participants. Throughout each person's interview the importance of relationships were a major factor in many aspects of their life. This ranged from coaches who did not encourage them to explore opportunities outside of football to their relationship with God and how that helped them manage life. Finally, for most of the participants they were ready for collegiate football to end and wanted to move on with the next chapter in their lives. However, one participant went on to pursue his professional football career with the hopes of making it to the NFL. Four of the five participants have achieved identity achievement, while one is still in the identity moratorium phase, searching for his true purpose.

Interpretation of the Findings

Recalling from the previous chapter, as well as mentioned above, there were five themes that emerged from the data analysis. These themes arose from the phenomena shared by the participants in this study. This section will discuss how each theme answered the study research questions, compare that theme to previous literature and research, and discuss the commonalities and differences from previous literature and the lived experience of the participants.

Research Question 1

The first research question for this study was how do early experiences contribute to the formation of role identity? Previous research has shown that the childhood experiences of adolescence serve as a foundation for their role identity. This is especially true for the identity development of Black males. Erikson (1968) states that identity formation has been termed as the disposition of the individual, which precedes them through each individual stage of development. With societal perceptions and negative stereotypes, this defining of self is compounded by layers of demonizing adjectives that must be navigated properly (Howard, 2014). Within this research question participants discussed their individual upbringing and the different factors that helped to shape their identity. Each shared details to help deliver a fuller understanding of their identity formation.

Each of the participants' upbringing were uniquely different in many ways, while some shared a few commonalities. The unique differences amongst the participants are primarily found in the ways in which they were raised during their adolescence. Two of the five participants were brought up in a two parent household where education was either enforced or displayed through the educational capital gained by the parents. Both parents were together during the participants' entire upbringing. Ishamel for example, was not allowed to view or let his academics become an

afterthought to football. He shared that this mentality was enforced by his parents who did not allow his mind to think college was a pitstop, nor was football his only way of being successful. When he was recruited in his latter highschool days, it was made very clear he was going to be a student pursuing an engineering degree first—then he would be an athlete pursuing success athletically second. This identity is in alignment with previous research and definitions on Identity Verification and Identity Commitment.

Identity Verification (Stets & Serpe, 2013) is when an individual thinks that others see them in the same light as they see themselves.With his parents seeing and treating him as a student first and then an athlete second it verified his student identity. Allowing for him to lean into that identity and begin to see and understand that he was more than just an athlete, which in return carried over into his collegiate journey. Pursuing his education first, regardless of what others said and how they viewed him. Furthermore, with Ishmael's parents recognizing the academic excellence within their son, they helped with identity verification concerning academia, allowing for Ishmael to engage in identity commitment within that same identity (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Continuing, Identity Commitment is based on the number of people that the individual comes in contact with as a result of holding said identity and the encounters within and thereafter. This allowed for Ishmael to feel as though he belonged both in the classroom and study hall. It enabled him to pursue his education in addition to his athletic one as the importance of education was emphasized in the home.

Contrarily, Xayvion's upbringing was in a single parent household watching his mother raise three children. For Xayvion, he never saw or wanted much, stating, "honestly, for me you know, I just didn't really even see myself doing anything real big." College and education was not something that was modeled in the home nor was it something on his radar until he began to

get recruited. However, even then due to his mindset and identity, he viewed college as a pitstop to the NFL and not as an opportunity to gain his education. His identity salience based on his upbringing and lived experiences were that of an athlete, as playing football was something he was just used to doing (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Furthermore, the influences he had growing up who played football and went away to college—ended up back in the neighborhood after a year.

Additionally, reinforcing a narrative and belief of not being able to do or accomplish much because "if they [his influences] can't do it and I look at them like they [are] the greatest to touch earth—it's kind of like, what can I do?" This way of retaining information and learning from an observational standpoint is a way that development happens through different modeling agencies (Bandura, 1986; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978). In addition, during this early stage of development their abilities and future career trajectories are shaped by those closest to them. This is an important aspect of social identity theory as each of the aforementioned participants' sense of belonging to a social group helped to shape their belief in themselves (Abrams & Hogg, 1999).

With each participant's upbringing having both similarities and differences, it is clear to see, based on the phenomena, that when there is a positive influence and social surrounding, the outcomes have a greater likelihood of being positive. This was modeled by the participants in this study as four of the five began to lean in and see themselves as more than just an athlete. They began to develop an identity outside of sports, some by way of being forced to retire early, but nonetheless understanding their academics was important. Previous research conducted by Stets & Burke (2000), goes on to show that one derives their identity from within the social group by which they maintain. Furthermore, research done by Kurtines et al. (2008) also goes on to state that identity is self-constructed, however positive youth development programming is a

key contributor to the upbringing of adolescents. Furthermore, despite the literature suggesting that many African American student-athletes may be the first in their family to attend college (Reynolds, Fisher, Cavil, 2014), and are faced with many challenges due to lack of higher educational guidance, these participants were not only well adjusted but their expectations of their future careers through various support systems assisted in the process. Programming, conversations, and alternate perspectives on success by way of exploring alternative options outside of football began to reinforce what family and support staff tried explaining early on in their careers.

Research Question 2

The second research question for this study sought to determine how football players self-identify in terms of their multiple roles as student, Black, male, and athlete? This study emphasized how numerous social influences shape the participants' belief and view of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It also reflects the way in which the participants viewed other aspects of their life, particularly academics and college. In a study done by Singer (2008), it was postulated that the environment around collegiate athletics, which at its core should be centered on the holistic development of the student-athlete, is not a space for the Black student-athlete to truly venture out and explore other opportunities outside of sport. Furthermore, athletics takes up the majority of their time. It is of note that each participant bypassed the identity diffusion stage, which is a low level of exploration and commitment, as they were each thrusted into sports without truly having a choice in the matter (Marcia, 1966).

<u>Overall Identity Development</u>. The participants in this study enjoyed themselves while they were playing football; however, only one participant, Ishamael, conveyed that they felt prepared for life after college. The other four participants never explicitly stated they felt

unprepared for life after college, however they expressed the difficulty in discovering their identity outside of sport. Feeling as though sport was their only way of having value. This further perpetuates the narrative that Black men's skill set is very limited and seems to only be useful inside of athletics (Harrison, 2008; Beamon, 2008; Beamon, 2014).

Four out of the five participants have successfully attained identity achievement (Marcia, 1966). One out of the five participants, Xayvion, is in the identity moratorium phase, still seeking to find where his heart and passions lie with who he is becoming (Marcia, 1966). Ultimately, he is still pursuing and exploring opportunities and ventures that he feels may benefit him, as well as opportunities that he feels moves him closer to his purpose.

Finally, each participant—at some point throughout their journey of being a football athlete—experienced some level of identity foreclosure, adopting an identity that was seen, modeled, practiced, and/or told by people closest to them (Marcia, 1966). As a result, some of the participants struggled with the "nowhere land" that they were headed to upon retiring from the game of football (Ronkainen et al., 2016). Consequently, the participants faced numerous challenges during the transitional phase after their football career ended (Grove et al., 1997). Many of these challenges were due to them not actively seeking out opportunities that were available and present outside of football while playing football, alongside coaches who did not encourage exploration of other outside opportunities. Instead, they made an active decision to solely focus on sport, which in return made the transition out of football even more difficult. Black student-athletes must navigate this landscape of being called a 'student-athlete' when the reality seems to clearly define them as 'athlete-student' while exploiting their athletic talents and disregarding their social and academic development (Beamon, 2008; Singer, 2008; Singer, 2019; Smith et al., 2014).

143

Black Male Identity. All of the participants within this research study identified as being Black and male. Furthermore, they were all aware of what that means in a larger societal context. Black males' identity within society can be depicted as being a thug, deviant, predator, and many other negative adjectives (Howard, 2014). This portrayal is not one that is new; rather it stems from hundreds of years of slavery and racism that has historically and continues to portray them as an inferior species (Polite & Davis, 1999). Continuing, popular culture coins the Black male as being a magnet to criminal activity as well as being violent (Tucker, 2007). Contrarily, this was not the case while the participants were within the game of football at their respective universities. Within the confines of sport, in particular football —locker room, field, meeting rooms, campus, etc.—each participant stated they never experienced any of the aforementioned negative biases held for Black males. There seemed to be a sense of community, family, and brotherhood that surpassed most all stereotypes. This narrative counters some of the previous work done by Beamon (2014) where 55% of the participants stated there was a clear racial divide amongst their teammates with little to no interaction, that was of substance, happening outside of the sport as well. However, some of the participants spoke of being stereotyped due to the color of their skin and their body structure being larger than the average college student by their peers on campus. Damon was able to articulate this idea most coherently for the group:

> I don't know if there were challenges specifically because I was Black … As far as how I was treated on a day-to-day, you know, wasn't much negative but I felt as though I was viewed as "oh he's Black" and "he's probably an athlete." Nothing aggressively overt.

For these student-athletes, being Black was not a negative aspect of their identity. However, their experience would imply more of a neutral connotation rather than a positive one.

One participant in particular, Rashaad, came into college embracing the continual stereotyping and microaggressions of being an athlete by his peers and viewed it as a badge of honor. He alluded to having a sense of pride in being categorized as only an athlete due to him thinking only a select few can do what he was doing, which was playing football in college. With his head held high and shoulders back he relished each comment, moment, and conversation where he was seen in an athletic light, feeling as though he was truly being seen and acknowledged. This is in alignment with previous research done by Howard (2014) which states that "the athletic domain is one of the few settings in the United States where Black males see their excellence acknowledged, their creativity cheered, their bravado and masculinity replicated …" (p. 74).

As time continued to pass and his maturity level progressively rose, Rashaad became more aware of the detrimental effects the underbelly of racism and negative stereotypes had on him and his identity development as a Black male (Beamon, 2014; Edwards, 1984). Rashaad's nigrescence pre-encounter stage of the racism and negative stereotypes led to him reflecting later in life in the stage of immersion/emersion based off of the encounters he had experienced (Cross, 1971). This allowed for enlightening and a heightened sense of self-awareness.

Research Question 3

Research question three for this study was how do football players' perceptions of the athletic department, coaches, academic staff, peer athletes, faculty, and non-athlete peers affect their role identity while in the university setting? The data from this study supports the idea that relationships truly matter to Black male student-athletes, especially in their identity development. Each participant relished the importance of relationships and the effects it had on their overall development. Referencing some negative influential relationships that seemed to hold them back

from seeking opportunities outside of football, as Rashaad mentioned that guys [football players] would be made fun of in the football meetings for trying to get a job versus studying their playbook. On the other hand, you had positive interactions where that same individual, Rashaad, referenced having been challenged to begin seeing himself as more than an athlete and yet he took it as a sign of disrespect. However, as time passed and life happened he went on to express his appreciation for the challenge and explained why he did not listen when he was playing football, "Hindsight, of course, like dude, I appreciate that. I needed to hear that…But because I was not grounded in reality, I couldn't comprehend it…". This goes on to show the power of positive influences and relationships in student-athletes' lives.

 <u>Student-Athlete and Coaching Relationships.</u> Participants emphasized how there was no coach that truly encouraged them to explore opportunities beyond football. Even when they went to class or thought of participating in other extracurricular activities, the participants felt like outcasts based on responses from coaches and teammates. This was made clear as Ishmael stated, "To join something externally was not highly encouraged. And depending on who you talk to, it may be discouraged …". Moreover, the participants referenced their relationships with the athletic support staff—academic advisors, learning specialists, etc.—and how those relationships kept them encouraged through the difficult transitional phase. These relationships help to attempt to balance the dynamic of student and athlete, as it has been researched previously and shown that forgoing all identities outside of the athletic one can create major issues when you are no longer playing or dealing with injuries (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Thus, it is essential that coaches, administrators, professors, and athletic support staff members remain diligent in seeing the student-athletes as humans and individuals, while also challenging these young men to see a bigger picture outside

of football. Previous research has shown that a great leader or coach will likely have a greater influence on the student-athlete, thus allowing them to ultimately develop a great individual (Peterson, 2004).

Student-Athlete and Staff Relationships. There was an appreciation for connecting with those who spend countless hours toward helping student-athletes grow holistically within the athletic academic center. Within this research study the four of the five participants did not value the knowledge shared or the relationships of the support staff while they were playing sports; they only began to realize the importance of these individual relationships once their career was ending. Referencing the athletic academic advisors, Malcolm stated, "I tell people, they support me, they support me big time. Those are the people who really showed us the most support because I see that they see the big picture." Previous research shows that relationships such as these are truly vital, because once the student-athlete becomes just a student—and has been disconnected from the athletic group—it can have a long-lasting effect on their self esteem (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

With relationships on a continual cycle of change, both with sport and people, it is important to always continue to foster each intimately. Furthermore, the collective perceptions of every participant referenced their relationship with God, their faith, and how that relationship helped them. One participant stated, "I believe in God. Having faith … God was the reason that I can still be sane … He kept me focused." Yet another reason why maintaining healthy relationships outside of sport are of the essence, as this participant notes it is the reason he is still in his right state of mind.

Research Question 4

The final research question – four, sought to answer how do football players' perceptions

of their relationships affect their role identity when transitioning out of sport? Throughout the interview process, four of the five participants referenced a moment in time where they were wanting or came to the realization that sport was ending. Of these participants, two careers ended due to them exhausting their eligibility, and two ended due to injury. However, there was one participant whose career ended due to eligibility exhaustion who truly wanted to continue his playing career in the NFL.

With each participant's unique set of circumstances in tow alongside their athletic retirement journey, all of them had a perception of being viewed negatively once they were unable to achieve the initial goal of making it professionally in football. This negative perception was internalized to be seen by coaches, peers, as well as by family members. This is in accordance with previous research done by Carter-Francique et al. (2015) stating that student-athletes, much like non-student-athletes, face the same developmental challenges, in addition to what comes along with sports, maintaining many different types of relationships across many mediums, and adjusting to life after sports. Now faced with dealing with society without the identity of 'athlete' in a way in which they never imagined creates negative stereotypes and harms their identity growth (Edwards, 1984; Singer, 2008; Singer, 2019).

With the participants in this study who were ready for sports to end, they had encounters where they entered the space and internally made the assumption they were 'failures. Feeling as though they were now useless and worth little to nothing, once each of them engaged in conversation with people who genuinely cared for them, there was a realization that they still truly mattered. There was an actualization of the pressure they felt was derived from an internal personal desire to achieve a specific goal. Attaining a professional sports career, their ultimate goal, would have allowed them to better financially take care of themselves and the ones they

loved most, while living out their athletic aspirations. This internalized self-doubt and failure was then projected upon everyone they would come in contact with. Due to this salient athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993) it complicates the transition out of sports (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Contrary to their beliefs, once they engaged in conversation with most who they truly cared for in their lives, they soon realized they were still loved and seen as a human, family member, and individual.

In the same fashion as the previously mentioned participants, one individual who attempted to make it professionally had the same sentiments. However, he is still attempting to overcome his salient athletic identity that still seems to be present. With him being the only person that did not graduate from college—it goes to show if you are not actively engaged in your own academic journey, this is a possible outcome—there is a perceived bias that these major Division I institutions will put precedence on athletics over academics (Singer, 2019). This ultimately prolongs the individual's development of their identity as well as puts them behind career-wise, as he will ultimately have to go and complete his degree to qualify for many public and private sector jobs.

The transition out of sports, which will be the case for every athlete at some point, takes 80% of athletes roughly two years to deal and cope with the new reality (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Furthermore, roughly 20% experience a crisis during their transition out of sports (Stambulova, 2017) and need to find ways internally and externally to find ways of coping to maintain their mental health. Concurrent with previous research, these dramatic life changes need to be embraced with a strong supporting mechanism and healthy coping methods (Schinke & McGannon, 2015).

Practice Implications & Recommendations

The implications from this study's findings aim to provide football coaches, administrators, athletic support staff, and everyone who engages with student-athletes strategies to assist Black male football student-athletes prioritize their academic, social, and athletic commitments while not programming them to put football above all. Furthermore, these implications are intended to help student-athletes transition out of football better equipped with a skill set and mentality to minimize the detrimental effects of their career ending (Simon & Docherty, 2014).

Historically, for the Black community, athletics has served as one of the primary vehicles for obtaining a post-secondary education (Van Rheenen, 2013). Moreover, many times the Black male student-athletes that do not obtain a career in professional sports are often overlooked and forgotten about. With this particular study, combined with those done previously, athletic administrators, coaches, athletic support staff, professors, and student-athletes can gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of Black male football student-athletes at a PWI. Another purpose for this study is for it to be used as a guide with administrators and coaching staff, furthering their skills to empower Black male student-athletes. Future implications would be those administrative and athletic staff positions encouraging Black male student-athletes to venture outside of their sport and explore other identities and options for their career. This is to allow Black male student-athletes time to think proactively regarding their future, rather than being reactive once a crisis happens (Marcia, 1966). From this study, it was revealed that each Black male student-athlete participant has experienced identity foreclosure at some point in their athletic journey. Additionally, it is important for administrators and coaches to understand the impact of identity foreclosure for Black male student-athletes. Ultimately, it is crucial to help

Black male student-athletes manage and expand their identity beyond sports by cultivating genuine relationships. The findings from this study highlight the importance of having a balance between the student and the athlete. It can be contended that the combination of being encouraged and given the opportunity to explore endeavors beyond football can have a great impact on the student-athlete's journey (Singer, 2008). A number of implications exist that need to be addressed in order to better support Black male football student-athletes and provide coping resources and recovery from unmet athletic aspirations. I provided an overview of each of these implications and possible solutions that may assist in the development of Black male student-athletes.

1. **Acknowledging the socialization, upbringing, and influences that occur during adolescence**. The child does not have the ability to determine where they are raised, their socio-economic status, nor do they choose how they are raised (Fraiberg, 1968). As stated before, many are thrusted into sports as a way to keep them out of harm's way. Each participant referenced playing football at a very young age and how this is where their identity began to take shape around athletics. Some even stated how they viewed making it to the NFL as the way to take care of their family. This is where the athlete-student mentality was formed and nurtured. This is done not only through the act of playing, but also through the lens of all the social media and television outlets (Hogg, 2016).

   However, I propose, those who are entrusted with the minds of these young athletes at a very impressionable age must use their voice to speak life into them. If the pee-wee league and/or high school coaches can begin to mentor and educate these young men and give them insight on life, this could ultimately change the way in which they view themselves and their future. Furthermore, it is of the essence that Black males are

exposed to other career options to allow these young men to understand that football is just one of many ways to provide for their family and become a professional. Three participants—Ishmael, Damon, and Malcolm—referenced how parent(s) or grandparent(s) were very keen on them understanding the importance of academics; however, none mentioned a coach. Coaches oftentime have the greatest influence on student-athletes, and this is due to their position (Black & Weiss, 1992; Sinclair & Vealey, 1989). Being synchronized and aligned with the messaging of the parents and athletic academic support services may have a greater probability of enhancing effectiveness in understanding the importance of education and alternative professions. In addition to all of this, educating the parents and the student-athletes on the minute possibility of them making it to the NFL could be helpful as they could begin to set up a graduation and backup plan in conjunction with them pursuing their athletic career.

2. **Addressing is the way in which coaches view and verbalize their respect for the student-athlete**. Here, we are referring to their verbiage in which they use to express their thoughts on what it means to be a student-athlete. Upon entering college, each participant already reported they had aspirations of making it to the NFL (Fuller, 2014; Beamon, 2008; Good et al., 1993; Singer, 2019). One participant mentioned the coach's words and how the fingers he displayed contradict one another stating they were a student first (two fingers) and an athlete second (one finger). Referencing how a coach essentially blamed the individual for pursuing his education rather than focusing on football to help protect his job's safety. These behaviors ultimately shaped, due to the findings, the way in which these young men viewed college athletics. This installed a mindset and identity for: Football. Football. Football, and then attempting to find time for academics as an

afterthought. Additionally, every participant interviewed stated that none of their coaches encouraged them to seek opportunities or organizations outside of football. This helps to fixate the individual's mind on their athletic identity and development, while forgoing the thoughts of preparing for life after sport; becoming a well-rounded individual, and transitioning out of college are never imagined (Fuller, 2014).

Therefore, I suggest coaches truly work to understand the detrimental effects that having a foreclosed athletic identity can have on an individual attempting to transition out of sport. While it can be useful, selfishly, for their own career gains, it can be adversely crippling when Black male student-athletes can no longer compete. Having to make up for lost time puts an added strain on the student-athlete who now feels as though they have "wasted" four to five years of time, when they could have been exploring other identities, opportunities, and organizations. In the grand scheme of things, they are in college to get an education first and foremost, as the NFL is not promised.

Coaches must be charged with understanding how encouraging and allowing the student-athletes to venture out and join professional organizations within a field or job sector of their interest can begin to cultivate relationships that can benefit them post-collegiate career. Encouraging them to explore the many social clubs can provide them with an outlet to shape their mind on opportunities, people, and places that exist both on campus and in the world. This, I believe, could ultimately help Black male student-athletes with their transition out of sports after unmet athletic aspirations. The truth of the matter is that, based on previous research, a great leader or coach can ultimately help to cultivate a better individual, as they will likely be heavily influenced by them (Peterson, 2004).

3. **Understanding that relationships truly matter**. This is in all aspects and walks of life. Strong relationships are based on trust, respect, and clear communication. Each of the participants were recruited to their respective university, and in every recruiting pitch there is a reference to graduating, being part of a 'family', and playing football at a high level. When you are part of a family, you choose to support, encourage, and love that member through the highs and lows. The findings show that when a few of the participants got injured, they quickly felt as though they were on an island. Unable to now perform the duties to which they were previously praised for, it seems as though the coaches lost sight of their 'family' members during their roughest times. It was here that they experienced the most mental instability with how quickly treatment changed towards them. Understanding that the NCAA and college football is a big business and must go on, as a coach, you are still responsible for the young man you recruited to the university. There is still a level of care and love that needs to be in place to allow the student-athletes to cope and deal with life as they know it.

I recommend a program, such as a Lunch & Learn, where the coaches and all the student-athletes who can no longer play due to injury participate in an informal gathering together. Here the student-athletes can sit and express themselves and the coaches can sit to hear and take the time to understand the nuances of their new lives. This can give a better understanding as to how important it is to stay locked in with their relationship, as that is what ultimately convinced them to attend the university.

Furthermore, I encourage athletic support staff members (advisors, learning specialists, reading specialists, mentors, etc.) to continue to cultivate meaningful relationships with the student-athletes. Due to the findings of this study, these

relationships have shown to be some of the most impactful during the later years of the participants' journeys. Whether due to injury, exhausted eligibility, or simply maturing while in college, each participant stated how these relationships started in college but go far beyond that as well.

Ultimately the NCAA, university, athletic departments, parents, support staff, and the coaches need to understand who makes college athletics run. It is the young men and women that have been promised the opportunity to be a student-athlete. The primary goal of a student-athlete is to pursue their education and earn a degree while playing the sport in which they enjoy. It is the responsibility of the aforementioned parties to ensure and prepare these student-athletes for life after college.

Research Limitations & Future Directions

There were numerous limitations that this study can be improved on for future research.

1. **The research had a limited sample size.** Thus, the results from this study may not be interpretable to the larger population of student-athletes (Morse, 1994). The researcher deployed purposeful sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) and snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) where the participants were chosen. Though this can be prone to researcher bias in quantitative studies, the acknowledgement of trustworthiness strategies in qualitative studies allows for the next researcher to make an educated judgment on the practicality of transferring the information using the transferability principles described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

    Thus, the research design is adequate but a recommendation for future research to expand on these findings should explore the use of simple random sampling techniques for future quantitative studies and a broadening of the sample group with everyone

having an opportunity to be selected (Olken & Rotem, 1995). FOr qualitative designs a more in-depth design that includes ethnographic studies or case studies could also provide a larger sample.

2. **The research only sampled a single Division I Power Five institution.** A recommendation for future research would be to expand it to multiple, if not all, Division I Power Five institutions. This would allow researchers the opportunity to see if there is a difference amongst the institutions within the same conference, as well as providing the chance to compare each conference to another. Furthermore, future research could expand this work to every Division (I, II, and III) within the NCAA. This would allow researchers to see if there is a different challenge in mindset and identity towards athletics amongst the different Divisions.

   Continuing, this research could be expanded to the Historically Black Colleges and Universities to compare and contrast the lived experiences of student-athletes on their campuses also. Research could also see how the racial component, being Black on an HBCU campus, is handled and if the experiences are different.

3. **Research was only limited to one sport, that being football.** A recommendation for future research could be to add sports outside of football to allow for the cross referencing of themes and identities amongst other sports. This would allow for researchers to see if other collegiate sports deal with the same challenges. This would also allow for you to research if there is a difference amongst certain sports within the different division levels associated with the NCAA.

4. **The research study was exclusively limited to Black males.** For future research It could be recommended to see if Black females shared some of the same thematic views

as well. There could be a cultural and racial alignment component that can be observed. Conversely, you could also find that the athletic identity may not be as prevalent due to the sport played not being viewed as an attainable or sustainable career for that particular group of student-athletes.Opening future research up to view all ethnic and racial backgrounds could be considered. This research again focused solely on the African American/Black male journey, yet widening the ethnic/racial scope can illuminate cultural, gender, racial, and social upbringing factors that could prove to be educational.

Parting Thoughts

Having lived through and sharing many of the same experiences as the participants within this study, it is quite alarming that some of the same treatment of Black male student-athletes in football is still present today. The fact that we are still dealing with the marginalization of Black males and validating their worth in sports and little to nothing else hurts. What I have gained from this study is that many Black male football players, regardless of their background and upbringing, still experience identity issues concerning athletics. I have learned that, like many things in life, it is better understood looking backwards. For myself, as well as most of the participants in this study, we never truly understand what is important until things are taken away. Most of us did not prioritize our future, we only lived in the present. Most of us never sought to find an identity outside of sports that could help us transition out of sports. In addition to that, we ignored the statistics and other people in our life who attempted to help guide us. Having gone through, survived, and obtained identity achievement years later, I can now share my experience with the next generation.

In sharing my story, while continuing to educate myself on the research and the lived experience of others, my purpose in life is to help educate the next group of Black male football

players.

> *I plan to not lambast but love,*
>
> *To not look down upon but reach out,*
>
> *To not undermine but to uplift,*
>
> *To not criticize but to challenge,*
>
> *To not attack but ask how I can help,*
>
> *To not mute but to magnify,*
>
> *To not lecture but to listen, and*
>
> *To always be a tangible beacon of hope for any individual to be able to see what can be possible.*
>
> *To show that we, as Black men,*
>
> *Have value and can attain success outside of sports.*

Conclusion

The findings within this study can be added to the broader research that has been done on this topic concerning the transition out of sports. More specifically, these findings bolster the body of research that has to do with identity foreclosure and that of unmet athletic aspirations. The data collected within this research study revealed numerous areas where Black male football student-athletes can be better supported throughout their journeys playing football in college. For the Black males within this study, it is very apparent that transition out of sports was ultimately difficult due to the way in which they saw themselves, their belief in making it to the NFL, being a Black male, the way in which they perceived how others viewed them, as well as the relationships with key stakeholders throughout their collegiate journey. Foreclosing on making it to the professional ranks of the NFL and having that as your sole focus can lead to major

disappointment when that is not realized. Forgoing all other professional options and suppressing every other personal identity, that narrow road, statistically, is one that often leads to more defeat than success. Realizing this and being intentional about taking control of your own life and seeking out other identities can ultimately help with transitioning. The social surroundings of the individual must understand the detriment of only steering them down the NFL path, and instead help them understand there are many other options to find success in life. Coaches have to understand their responsibility is not restricted to just wins and losses on the football field. Their responsibility, when recruiting these young men, is to uphold the promises they gave the families to convince them to come. They have a much greater responsibility to help lead, guide, mentor, and ensure the safety of the men and women they have the pleasure to serve. Relegating the job of being a coach to strictly wins and losses and records is a detriment to everyone under their leadership. However, holding them accountable on and off the field to become a better person helps everyone in the long run. Ultimately, it is very important for the student-athlete and everyone that is put in a position of service to them, along with those who are part of their upbringing and development in adolescence to remain actively involved and responsible in supporting Black male student-athletes in the most positive ways possible to help ensure their success.

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EMAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Subject Line:

Interview Request About A Study Done on Identity Development Among Black Male
Student-Athletes

Body:

IRB Number: IRB2022-0805

IRB Approval Date: 9/19/22

Hello, Mr. (insert the last name),

My name is Robert Carlisle, I am a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) student in the Recreation,
Parks, and Tourism Science department within the College of Agriculture at Texas A&M
University. I am contacting you to see if you would be willing to help me with a research study
that I am conducting. My goal and overall purpose with this study are to examine the varying
identity development roles and their influence on the transition out of sports among NCAA
Division I Black male football players. Furthermore, this study hopes to provide a link for
athletic academic advisors and all support staff trained to serve and assist student-athletes to be
able to provide workshops, counseling services, and most importantly, time for the
student-athletes to be able to explore life's many offerings.

What you will need to do, to voluntarily participate, is to read and fill out the consent forms
attached to this email, participate in a single one-on-one 60-minute interview, and review and
offer feedback once the data has been analyzed to ensure fidelity. My hope is that your voice and
experience can help those current Black male football players on their journey through college

athletics. Participants who are chosen will receive a $20 Visa gift card upon the completion and transcription of the interview.

Please understand, that for you to participate in this study you must meet the following criteria:

1. Participants must be Black male football student-athletes.

2. Participants must have been on an athletic scholarship at some point.

3. Participants must have been a major contributor to the football games.

    a. Meaning they played at critical junctures of the game.

4. Participants must have exhausted their NCAA athletic eligibility.

5. Participants must have not made it to the National Football League (NFL).

6. Participants must be a minimum of four years removed from their last collegiate football game.

7. Participants must feel comfortable discussing their experiences.

If you are interested and willing to be a participant in this study, please read through, sign, and scan back the Social and Behavioral Consent Form attached to this email.

If you choose to be a participant in this study, you have the option to stop or discontinue at any point without cause or penalty. If you have any questions please feel free to reach out to me (Rob Carlisle - rcarlisle@tamu.edu) or the chair of my doctoral committee (Dr. Andrea Ettekal - andrea.ettekal@ag.tamu.edu). You may also contact the Human Research Protection Program at Texas A&M University (which is a group of people who review the research to protect your rights) by phone at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at irb@tamu.edu for:

- additional help with any questions about the research

- voicing concerns or complaints about the research

- obtaining answers to questions about your rights as a research participant

- concerns in the event the research staff could not be reached

- the desire to talk to someone other than the research staff

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Research Study: Identity Development Among Black Male Student-Athletes And Their Ability To Recover From Unmet Athletic Aspirations

Investigator: Dr. Andrea Ettekal

Funded/Supported By: This research is funded/supported by Texas A&M University.

Why are you being invited to take part in a research study?

You are being asked to participate because you fit the criteria needed to participate in this research study. The criteria to participate are as follows:

1. Participants must be Black male football student-athletes.

2. Participants must have been on an athletic scholarship at some point.

3. Participants must have been a major contributor to the football games.

   a. Meaning they played at critical junctures of the game.

4. Participants must have exhausted their NCAA athletic eligibility.

5. Participants must have not made it to the National Football League (NFL).

6. Participants must be a minimum of four years removed from their last collegiate football game.

7. Participants must feel comfortable discussing their experiences.

What should you know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.

- Whether or not you take part is up to you.

- You can choose not to take part.

- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.

- Your decision will not be held against you.

- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the

research team Dr. Corliss Outley at coutley@tamu.edu or Dr. Andrea Ettekal at

andrea.ettekal@ag.tamu.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M Institutional Review Board

(IRB). You may talk to them at 1-979-458-4067, toll-free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at

irb@tamu.edu., if

- You cannot reach the research team.

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.

- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.

- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

The overall purpose of this study is to examine varying identity development roles and their

influences on the transition out of sports among NCAA Division I African American male

football players. Within this study, the researcher will look to examine different possible

relationships and connections between the athletic identity, identity foreclosure, and other

possible identities (i.e. social, racial, academic) that are held by the student-athlete. This study

hopes to provide a link for athletic academic advisors and all support staff trained to serve and

assist student-athletes to be able to provide workshops, counseling services, and most importantly, time for the student-athletes to be able to explore life's many offerings.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for 90 minutes. This consists of 10 minutes to fill out the survey, 60 minutes for the interview, and 20 minutes to review and offer feedback on the analyzed data themes.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about 5-10 people in this research study.

What happens if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research"?

If you are chosen to participate: You will be requested to complete a single 60-minute interview via Zoom during the Fall semester of 2022.

- Completing and submitting a short demographic form.
- Participating in a single 60-minute interview which the researcher will record via zoom and translate.
- After the data is analyzed, review the themes that are identified and offer feedback, if any.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens if I say "Yes", but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

The potential risks associated with this study may be that some questions may solicit an emotional response as participants recall past experiences.

Confidentiality: Efforts will be made to keep the intimate details you provide for this study confidential. However, there may be times when the information within this study may be disclosed if it is required by state or federal law. Furthermore, the information may be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include helping the next generation of Black Male Football Student-Athletes avoid identity issues and transition out of sports smoother.

Will my information be used for other research?

When the study is complete, all information that identifies you will be removed, and the deidentified information or biospecimens may then be used for future research studies or given to other researchers for future research studies without additional consent from you.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research studies and other records, to people who need to review this information. We cannot promise complete privacy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the TAMU HRPP/IRB and other representatives of this institution

Confidentiality: Efforts will be made to keep the intimate details you provide for this study confidential. However, there may be times when the information within this study may be disclosed if it is required by state or federal law. Furthermore, the information may be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University.

What else do I need to know?

If you agree to take part in this research study, we will pay you $20 Visa gift cards for your time and effort.

The participants will be informed of the results of the research once the data has been analyzed. They will then be able to see the results to be sure it matches how they wanted it to come across and mean.

Other Elements:

The following research activities are required, meaning that you have to agree to them to participate in the research study. Please indicate your willingness to participate in these activities by placing your initials next to each activity.

	I	
agree	disagree	
_____	_____	The researcher may audio and/or video record me to aid with data analysis. The researcher will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the immediate study team or TAMU Compliance.
_____	_____	The researcher may audio and/or video record me for use in scholarly presentations or publications. My identity may be shared as part of this activity, although the researcher will attempt to limit such identification. I understand the risks associated with such identification.

<div style="text-align:center">

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

</div>

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of the person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG BLACK MALE FOOTBALL STUDENT-ATHLETES AND THEIR ABILITY TO RECOVER FROM UNMET ATHLETIC ASPIRATIONS

Researcher:

Hello, my name is Robert Carlisle, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Sciences department within the College of Agriculture at Texas A&M University. Thank you for taking the time and being willing to participate in this research to complete my dissertation. During this time, we will be discussing several different items, all stemming from you and your upbringing through your journey of college and beyond. I would like to remind you that you may choose to discontinue your participation at any time, for any reason. You may also decline to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable answering. If you choose to not participate fully, none of the information you share will be used within this study.

Are there any questions thus far?

Next, we will begin with the interview questions.

BACKGROUND/CHILDHOOD

1. Who are you, and where are you from?
    a. Probe on background and upbringing
    b. Biggest influencers
2. How old are you?

3. As a child, what options did you think were obtainable as a profession/education?

   a. Who instilled these beliefs in your mind?

      i. Biggest influencers

      ii. Television, family, social surroundings

4. Did you have a family member or close friend that played professional sports?

   a. If so, what sport?

   b. If so, how did this influence you?

5. Was there ever the thought or belief that you would one day become a professional athlete?

   a. Why or why not?

STUDENT-ATHLETE JOURNEY

6. Entering college, what would you say your identity was? (IF)

   a. What drove that?

7. When entering college, was it viewed as an opportunity to obtain an education/degree? Or was it viewed as part of the process, or pitstop, before becoming a professional athlete?

8. What does the term "student-athlete" mean to you?

   a. Do you feel as though you were a student first and an athlete second?

   b. What was the driving factor/force behind this?

9. Was being a black male student-athlete in college tough? OR what impact did having an identity as a Black male have on you during college?

   a. If so, in what ways?

10. During your time in college, what other activities (i.e., careers, majors, courses, organizations, identities, etc.,) did you participate in or were drawn to?

    a. Were these activities encouraged or discouraged?

        i. If discouraged, by whom?

        ii. If encouraged, by whom?

11. While in college did this view of being an athlete ever change?

    a. If not, why?

    b. If so, how?

    c. If so, when? (what year or experience changed it)

ENDING OF SPORTS JOURNEY

12. How did your sports career end?

    a. Was it due to exhausted eligibility, cut, burnout, or injury?

    b. What was your reaction?

        i. Was this what/how you expected?

        ii. During this time, did you think it was over?

13. What was the reaction of those closest to you?

    a. What was the reaction from the coaches?

    b. What was the reaction from support staff (academics, life skills, etc)?

    c. Who was the most influential/supportive person during this time?

14. Did faith/religion/belief in a higher power ever play a role during this time?

    a. If so, how?

    b. If not, why?

15. What was your perceived internalized reaction/feelings/thoughts of how you thought

people viewed you?

    a. What drove this reaction?

    b. Did this differ from what others said/showed you?

16. At what point did a Plan B (backup plan) enter the equation?

    a. What was Plan B?

    b. Who were the ones to help with this?

        i. Did the coaching staff help?

        ii. Did the academic staff help?

        iii. Did the life skills or student engagement staff help?

        iv. Did the university resources help?

LIFE AFTER SPORTS

17. What is your highest level of education?

18. (If applicable) Did your degree help you during life after sport?

    a. Would your major choice have been different knowing initially you wouldn't

    become a professional athlete?

        i. What major?

19. How did you adapt to life after sports?

    a. What, if any, major obstacles did you face?

20. What role has family played in your life after sports?

    a. Coaches?

    b. Friends?

    c. Football support services (academics, life skills, administration, etc.)?

21. What is your current career?

22. What is your yearly income?

    a. 10k-30k

    b. 30k-50k

    c. 50k-70k

    d. 70k-100k

    e. 100k+

23. Do you feel as though you have found your passion/purpose/calling in life now?

    a. If so, what is it?

    b. If not, why?

24. Do you have any regrets concerning your approach to sports and education?

25. What is your current identity?

    a. Do you still see yourself as an athlete?

    b. Are you happy/satisfied with that?

ADVICE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

26. What one thing would you tell the next young African American male football student-athlete coming up now to learn from your experience?

CLOSING

27. Is there anything that you would like to add or revisit?

Researcher:

Your time is greatly appreciated and I am thankful for your willingness to participate in this research study. My next steps include analyzing all of the information that I have received from

the interviews and then providing you with the opportunity to review your account. At that time you will be able to offer feedback on the data analysis to help with further clarification if any is needed. I will be sending you an email once I have reached the point where your review/feedback is needed.

Thank you, and have a wonderful day.