AN INTERSECTIONAL GROUNDED THEORY STUDY EXAMINING
IDENTITY EXPLORATION FOR FORMER STUDENT-ATHLETES
AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF 2020

Crystle M. Dorsey
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AN INTERSECTIONAL GROUNDED THEORY STUDY
EXAMINING IDENTITY EXPLORATION FOR FORMER
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by

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DISSERTATION
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Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Albuquerque, New Mexico

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DEDICATION

This is for my family, the one I was born into, the one I get to choose, and the one that will follow me.
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To my family, I hope you see me as a reflection of you. To my mom, who taught me it was possible to be both tough and caring but most importantly, to be a light in this world, to care for people, to bring them to your table, thank you. To my dad, who instilled in me an inquisitive nature, a sense for adventure and a mind that’s always looking “two lights ahead,” thank you. Coonie, I’m still working on the apartment above the garage. Brit, thank you for bringing light back into my life when you did, you remind me that life is a celebration, sometimes we just have to create it! Misa, to think of all the ways our lives have intertwined over the last 11 years is crazy. Thank you for bringing Amarie and I into the Martinez clan and helping me navigate all things work, motherhood and school; we are lucky to have you x5. To the Dorsey/Swayzers, what an honor it is to be brought into your family. Your faith, grace and stability have brought so much peace to our lives (not to mention the fun!).

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand how student-athletes explored and made meaning of their intersecting identities through identity-focused curriculum against the backdrop of 2020. With intersectionality as a theoretical framework, this study examines how axes of oppression influenced the process of identity exploration for student-athletes. Guided by constructivism and critical theory as its epistemological foundations, this constructivist grounded theory study included three guiding research questions alluding to the how, what and why student-athletes explored their identities in 2020. The outcome of this study was an intersectional grounded theory detailing how student-athletes explore and make meaning of their intersecting identities and environments. The theory centers a process of learning and unlearning: learning new ways to understand identities while unlearning oppressive discourses that may have previously been internalized. Salient experiences in 2020 - losing sport, social unrest/the athlete voice, mental/physical health - set the backdrop to the process of exploration.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

I was twenty-eight when I had my daughter. I had been working full-time for 6 years at a university and while nervous about the future, wasn’t scared. Her father had just recently returned to the city to play arena football after a couple of years chasing his NFL dreams.

While pregnant, I applied and was accepted into my Master’s program. I began classes when she was 2 months old. People now ask me how I did it, work full-time and take graduate classes with an infant, and the reality is, I don’t remember. I do, however, remember thinking that it was necessary, that if I was going to make it in this world with my little girl, that I needed more education, and nothing was going to stop me. Maybe that’s why his mentality bewildered me.

Having made it through the first season of the city’s inaugural year of arena football, he was now without a job. He stayed at my house during the days to watch our daughter while I worked. I would return home after work, take over the parenting duties, spending the precious time I had with my baby before needing to get her to sleep and begin my homework. It wasn’t easy. I remember becoming frustrated as the sole financial provider for our daughter. As my frustrations grew, I pressured him to find a job. I’ll never forget his response to me during one heated argument, “I wasn’t made for 9-5.” I looked at him with confused eyes, my gut wrenching, thinking about all I had done to make sure this baby was provided for; I thought to myself, “what were you made for?” For the rest of that semester and the years that have followed, I learned about the concept of identity foreclosure specific to student-athletes (Beamon, 2010), and thoroughly researched the societal pressures and systems of oppression that restrict self-concept for Black males in America (Bimper, 2011).
I searched for existing mediums used to reach the population outside of athletics, I found student organizations and mentorship programs, all of which were voluntary and added responsibility. It is through my research on the development of self-concept for Black male student-athletes that I created LAIS 309: Student-Athlete Identity, an undergraduate course exploring the phenomenon. Research in the past had been done from a deficit model whereas my study took an active approach to provide a space for student-athletes to explore their identities through specific curriculum and assignments. This course has addressed a long-standing issue of not providing this opportunity for athletes to further develop their sense of self as part of existing expectations of student-athletes (coursework).

My research here focused specifically on the experience of student-athletes exploring concepts of identity through this course’s curriculum in the year 2020. The curriculum encourages holistic evaluation of one’s sense of self with the concepts of reflexivity, intersectionality and in-depth critiques of the systems of power that sustain the current college athletic culture. The year 2020 brought with it incredible challenges, old and new, to this unique population. College basketball players never made it to the tournament; off-seasons extended months beyond the schedule; riots and protesting created division and fear; and a polarized presidential election season illuminated cracks in the foundations we have constructed. The intent of the research was to uncover the processing of self by student athletes within the instability of 2020. Research includes student-athlete identity, in conjunction with identity theory, and how intersectionality theory is used in curriculum such that historical and current implications are addressed and discerning outcomes from student papers and responses.
Problem Statement

Hours upon hours are dedicated to the practice of sport, often overshadowing other parts of life, athletes focus solely on their role as an athlete (Schnell, 2013). The more involved in the sport the athletes become, the more risks they are willing to take for it, whether it be mentally, physically, emotionally, socially or academically. Black males, in particular, are more likely to risk their academic success for athletic success than their peers, often pressured into believing that success in sports is their path to greatness (Beamon, 2010). Their parents are also found to put more emphasis on athletics than academics (Beamon, 2010). Families and communities continually contribute to the superstar dream. Even if these student-athletes are academically inclined, the education system works against them, “…the schooling of these children is already patterned for them at the age of six or seven. ‘Not much is expected from them,’ they are from poor families, they are black, and they are ‘disadvantaged’” (Spindler, 1967, p. 97). It is easy to understand how one’s identity can quickly become about one thing in an environment where exploration of other identities goes unsupported.

Until 2020, the loss of sport for current student athletes was merely hypothetical or circumstantial. For the athletes who focused primarily on making it to professional leagues, the global Covid-19 pandemic brought with it a harsh reality when all activities came to a screeching halt. The cancellation of winter championships and spring seasons in 2020 forced students away from support and resources in coaches, teammates, university housing and meal plans, etc. National data collection from the spring of 2020 showed 1 of every 12 student-athletes indicated depression levels so high that it was difficult to function (NCAA Research, 2020). Feelings of being overwhelmed, difficulty sleeping, and exhaustion were the most frequent responses as a result of the pandemic (NCAA Research, 2020). There was
constant change and persistent uncertainty day-to-day. The pandemic alone was not the only concern facing student-athletes, they also experienced unprecedented social unrest within their lifetime, and a polarizing presidential election (see Appendix A for comprehensive 2020 event timeline). Given the events of 2020, allowing space for student-athletes to explore their own identity in an online classroom experience was imperative.

As Kroger and Marcia (2011) explain, the exploration of identity in higher education involves “re-thinking, sorting through, and trying out various roles and life plans” (p. 33). According to Stewart (2009), higher education settings offer students various chances to examine their own identity. While existing ideas about social identities are critical in higher education, these theories frequently place too much onus on the individual rather than explaining how larger social, historical, and cultural contexts impact a person’s view of their identities (Jones & Studart, 2016). By failing to address these dynamics, theories on constructs, such as identity exploration, mask the realities of students with multiple marginalized identities. This study addresses a gap in literature, providing the realities student-athletes faced within a volatile year while simultaneously exploring and making meaning of their intersecting identities. Below you will find: (1) purpose of this study and research questions; (2) research design; (3) its significance to the field of college athletics research.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

It is important to articulate the purpose of the study and the research questions informing the design. There is a need to center the experience of student-athletes when it comes to theories on identity and identity exploration during times of turmoil. More scholarship is required to examine how collegiate students understand their intersecting
oppressed and privileged identities from a power-based analysis (Abes, 2016). Existing literature avoids explicit attention to the influence of institutional environments on identity and development (Patton et al., 2016), especially during 2020. The purpose of this study was to generate a grounded theory that explains how collegiate student-athletes explored and made meaning of their intersecting identities through the backdrop of 2020.

While researchers such as Erick Erickson (1963, 1964, 1968, 1959/1994), James Marcia (1966, 1994) and Arthur Chickering (1969) served as formative practitioners of college student identity theory, little work has been done specific to, and proactively on, college student-athlete identities nor in relation to their experiences in 2020. Furthermore, the work that has been done has focused on the existing developmental theories rather than evaluating the overlapping power structures that currently assign athletes their identity in an attempt to deconstruct them. The student-athlete identity curriculum focuses on the understanding of reflexivity, intersectionality and structures of power that can act as mile-markers in the life of students who have yet to critically question their roles in their lives. The information this study hoped to discover may help to establish a blueprint for others who wish to develop and implement student-athlete identity curriculum in their institutions to create space for exploration of self-concept. Using intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) as a framework required analysis on how historical and contemporary systems of inequality influence the process of identity exploration for student-athletes. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How did student-athletes explore and make meaning of their identities against the backdrop of 2020?
2. How did the loss of athletics play a role in the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?

3. How did systems of power influence the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?

Research Design

A constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to answer the research questions (Charmaz, 2014). This methodology was chosen because it allows researchers the ability to construct a theory directly from qualitative data. As described by Charmaz (2008b), constructivist grounded theory is “inductive, indeterminate, and open-ended. An emergent method begins with the empirical world and builds an inductive understanding of it as events unfold and knowledge accrues” (p. 155). Because grounded theorists seek to understand a social process, this methodology is ideal to comprehend identity exploration, generating a theory that stays true to the students’ stories.

The research was informed by the epistemological traditions of critical theory (Denzin, 2015, 2017; Fay 1987; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) and constructivism (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994). Adhering to both allowed reality to be explored as a social construct and also acknowledged the role that systems of oppression play in shaping realities. Additionally, these epistemological foundations align with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) as a theoretical framework - using lived experiences as a way to comprehend how overlapping systems of power and oppression influence marginalized populations (May, 2015).
With these practices serving as the foundation, this study extracted data from reflection and assigned topic papers that were collected from about 75 student-athletes through 8-week courses throughout the 2020 academic year. These various data sets provide a thick description to analyze using a constant comparative method, a critical component of grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014). These methods lead to a theory that has the potential to influence college athletics and the development of student-athletes in higher education.
The primary focus of this study was to understand how the events of 2020 influenced the exploration of identity and meaning making for student-athletes and their intersectional identities. The year 2020 demanded constant processing, change and transition for all of the world, but in unique ways for this population. As explained by Schlossberg (1981), “Transition is any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, roles, identity, or routines” (p. 59). Unlike normative transitions, non-normative transitions are not typically predicted or planned for and therefore, are more challenging to manage. For Division I student-athletes, transitions may be anticipated, but are still mentally and emotionally problematic for some. Transition can trigger a sense of loss, forcing individuals to face the reality without their day-to-day norms (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Due to the intense nature of college athletics, many Division I programs provide support services such as tutoring, medical services, and academic advising to ensure peak performance (Gaston Gayles, 2015). Student-athletes' social life, scheduled routine, and daily activities center around their sport and the people associated with the sport. This environment provides student-athletes with a sense of belonging, support, and interaction with others who share similar goals and passion. Very few studies have addressed the changes for student-athletes impacted by transitions forced by the events of 2020. When sport has been a refuge and coping mechanism for the better part of an athlete's lifetime, forced transition out of the athletic environment resulted in uncertainty, angst, and higher levels of mental health concerns and depression (NCAA Research, 2020).
To set a foundation for this study on identity exploration of student-athletes in 2020, it is important to examine the existing research that relates to this process. Grounded theorists debate the need for creating a literature review prior to conducting a study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Dunne, 2011; El Hussein et al., 2017; McGhee et al., 2007). Glaser and Strauss (1967) encouraged researchers to generate a literature review only after they completed data analysis, this is to ensure that theory construction emerges from the data and not existent thought. However, more recent perspectives on grounded theory highlight the informative effect that a literature review has on a research study (Charmaz, 2014; Dunne, 2011; El Hussein et al., 2017; McGhee et al., 2007). Charmaz (2014) describes literature review as “sensitizing concepts,” and those sensitizing concepts are a “place to start inquiry, not to end it” (p. 31). Consensus around the topic suggests that a literature review should stimulate thought, not dictate analysis. Thus, understanding existing research can greatly enhance a grounded theory study. This chapter provides a summary of the literature that provided sensitizing concepts in this study.

**Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework**

To begin, an introduction to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) as a theoretical framework, including its origins, tenets, and application for identity research. Intersectionality, in tandem with the chronological happenings of 2020, will provide a structure for the next areas of literature review. The first section illustrates how systems of power manifest at historically White institutions (the macro-), the second section merges existing scholarship on identity with a focus on identity exploration (the micro-). Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of literature on the events within the year 2020.
Intersectionality has gained attention in recent decades as an academic theory with strong applications to educational research (Barnett & Felten, 2016; Bhopal & Preston, 2012; Davis, Brunn-Bevel, & Olive, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2014). Barnett and Felten (2016), discuss the potential benefits of intersectional thinking on campuses and state that it allows professionals to “be attentive to both the complexity of individual experiences on campus and the organizational structures that make it possible (or seemingly impossible) for us to engage deeply with difficult questions of diversity and inclusion” (p.xv). It is important to note, intersectionality has roots outside of education; professionals must acknowledge this to engage the framework appropriately.

Originating in critical legal studies, intersectionality first emerged in the late 1980s (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Crenshaw (1989, 1991) used the term to name the ineffectiveness of single-axis approaches to address the marginalized experience of Black women and Women of Color. Crenshaw (1991) continued her argument by stating “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (p. 1244). Crenshaw (1991) describes intersectionality manifestation in three main forms: structural, representational, and political. Political intersectionality focuses on the different needs and goals of an individual’s identified group (Shields, 2008). Structural intersectionality refers to how a person’s legal status or social needs are marginalized (Shields, 2008). Representational intersectionality refers to the cultural construction of the identity, including the production and the contemporary critiques of the identity (Crenshaw, 1991).

Researchers today have extended intersectionality for populations other than Women of Color (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 2011; Dill, 2009; Hancock, 2007a,
2007b, 2016; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008). Collins (2015) noted the reach of intersectionality and observed the framework “reference[s] the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (p. 2). Intersectionality is a useful framework to understand identity exploration for collegiate student-athletes with attention to structures of power and oppression (particularly for marginalized identities). Before explaining how intersectionality was applied to this study, it is important to describe its genealogy in and outside of the academic setting.

**Genealogy of Intersectionality**

The concepts framing intersectionality stem from a rich history of Black feminism and Women of Color activists (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hancock, 2016). Hancock (2016), in her text describing the intellectual history behind intersectionality, states how “intersectionality-like thought” has existed since 1831. Like Crenshaw (1989), Hancock (2015, 2016) argued that it was the battle of Black women fighting against violence and subjugation experienced through slavery that gave rise to intersectional thought. Though scholars frequently contend that Crenshaw (1989, 1991) created the term intersectionality, Hancock (2015, 2016) maintains that Maria Stewart serves as one of the originators of similar thought. Stewart disseminated pamphlets highlighting overlapping forms of discrimination as part of her activist work in 1831.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, Women of Color feminists resisted the systems of oppression that result from being in the intersections of sexism and racism without calling it intersectionality. Collins (2015) stated,
broader social movements of which Chicanas and other Latinas, indigenous women, and Asian American women (who subsequently became redefined as women of color) were at the forefront, raising claims about the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality in their everyday lived experience. (p. 7)

Collins (2015) indicates here the use of resistance across several racial/ethnic identities (e.g., Beal, 1969/1970; Combahee River Collective, 1977/1983; García, 1997; Lorde, 1982; Min-Ha, 1989; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Sandoval, 2000). To be an accurate practitioner of intersectional thought, researchers must first acknowledge the histories and interventions that intersectionality makes (Hancock, 2016; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

In recent years, intersectionality in sport research has aided in identifying the experiences of female coaches of color (Carter-Francique & Olushola, 2016); examined black and gay male athletes (Anderson & McCormack, 2010); and helped to understand LGBTIQ people in sport (Stewart, 2018) to name a few examples. Carter-Francique and Olushola (2016) focused on the tokenism, marginalization and homologous reproduction that occurs particularly when women are coaching in men’s sports. The authors argued toward Kanter’s seminal work on occupational sex segregation work, suggesting that opportunity, power, and proportion influence the lack of women in organizations. Anderson & McCormack (2010) used social movement theory to highlight the patterns of oppression levied upon gay and black men in sport. They conclude that further research is necessary to understand the intersectionality of race and sexuality with respect to men in sports. Finally, Stewart (2018) used intersectionality to remind readers to locate how the effects of multiple axes of subjection to systemic oppression impacts life chances for people marginalized by multiple identities, including athletes. Each of the described studies push readers to analyze
the existing layers of oppression found within intersectionality for different marginalized
groups and share the repercussions. It is only from within intersectionality that
understanding of the total experience is revealed.

**Using Intersectionality**

Increasingly, researchers have utilized intersectionality as a tool to understand the
role of oppression and power for those with multiple marginalized identities (Cho et al.,
2013; Hancock, 2016). Some have brought up the lack of an explicit methodology when it
comes to intersectionality (see Collins, 2015; Nash, 2008), but there are characteristics that
define the use of this framework. Dill and Zambrana (2009) identified four main theoretical
concepts central to intersectionality:

1. Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other
   marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory;
2. Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing
   that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized;
3. Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and
   oppression; and
4. Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to
   changing social and higher education institutions. (p.5)

This framing of intersectionality is particularly helpful because of how the four tenets
manifest across social issues, including higher education. This study explored what it means
to use intersectionality in education and identity-centered research, specifically as it pertains
to collegiate student-athletes. Below, I explore the four interventions before considering
what it means to utilize intersectionality in identity-centered research.
Intersectionality posits that marginalized groups should be at the center of the development of theory (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). This means that when constructing equitable practices, they should revolve around the perspectives of targeted groups (Harris, 1989; Matsuda, 1987, 1992). As a theoretical lens, intersectionality argues that marginalized people should be given the opportunity to speak on their realities as they are able to describe multiple social injustices. Nash (2008) illustrates this by saying, “For intersectional theorists, marginalized subjects have an epistemic advantage, a particular perspective that scholars should consider, if not adopt, when crafting a normative vision of a just society” (p. 3). For marginalized populations, the history of social oppression informs thought processes, making them the most qualified to maneuver the dismantling of hegemonic influences (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Hancock, 2007a; Harris, 1989; Matsuda, 1987, 1992; Nash, 2008). Note, intersectional scholars must also be attentive to privilege caused by oppression as to avoid using the framework as a more generalized theory of identity (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; May, 2015; Warner & Shields, 2013).

As a framework, intersectionality aims to understand the complexities of individual and group identities, impacted by overlapping systems of oppression. It also encourages scholars to consider within-group differences as much as across-group (Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Hancock, 2007b, 2016; McCall, 2005). Rogers and Lott (1997) stated “oppressed groups struggle not only against the boundaries dividing them from privileged groups but also against boundaries constituted by mixes of privilege and disprivilege within their ranks” (p. 445). This means that researchers must pay attention to various privileges that exist within groups in addition to ways that communities are oppressed. This take on intersectionality has implications for the ways that scholars
understand the notion of coalition-building; when thinking about political movements, intersectionality fights against the erasure of people with multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991). As a theoretical intervention, intersectionality illustrates how students from multiple underserved populations can remain on the margins of institutional policy-making or student advocacy. College students encounter intersecting axes of oppression, a key characteristic of intersectionality.

Understanding how intersecting systems of power frame social inequality and create varying experiences for those who are marginalized is imperative (Collins, 2000/2009a; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Collins (2000/2009a), with a matrix of domination, explained how the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class disproportionately affect Black women (p.3). This is similar to Crenshaw’s (1989) argument that Black women “experience double-discrimination-the combined effects of practices with discriminate on the basis of race and on the basis of sex” (p. 149). This demonstration of intersectionality illustrates individual’s varying degrees of privilege and how their specific marginalization shapes their social hierarchies.

While intersectionality first brought attention to systems of power within the legal realm (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), researchers have expanded the analysis to include additional social issues (Collins, 2015), expanding its use to different disciplines. In sport research, scholars have been able to disassemble experiences of the individual to understand and facilitate actions to disrupt overlapping systems of oppression (Kriger, et.al., 2022). Collins (2009b) determined that while not a problem, spreading the term intersectionality has concluded in it “turning inward,” due to scholars using the theory to center the intersections of identities and now power systems (p.ix). . The attention to intersecting systems of power
ensures the last theoretical intervention of intersectionality: promoting social justice and social action.

Intersectionality brings awareness to the marginalization of certain groups by exposing social inequalities. Researchers using this theoretical framework must move past simply raising these issues, and strive toward promoting social justice and action (Collins, 2000/2009a; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Hancock, 2007b, 2015, 2016). Crenshaw (1991) called attention to this in the first sentence of her work, “Over the last two decades, women have organized against the almost routine violence that shapes their lives” (p. 1241). By focusing on the agency of women, Women of Color in particular, Crenshaw (1991) provides an example of how to eradicate the political, legal and social violence against the oppressed group. Researchers need to explain how intersectional analysis aids in the dismantling of the social structures, not simply how the systems of power work (Cho et al, 2013; Cole, 2008; Hancock, 2007a, 2016). With this in mind, it makes sense why intersectionality is used in higher education, to create a more equitable approach on campuses. Given the four tenants of intersectionality, particularly the focus on not simply acknowledging the systems of power and privilege, but actively working to dismantle them--this study centered the intersectional experiences of participants through identity work within the systems of collegiate athletics and higher education with the goal to create more equitable spaces for all individuals.

**Using Intersectionality in Identity Research**

The debate on if researchers should utilize intersectionality to understand identity is polarized. As stated by researchers Dill et al. (2007), “to a large extent, intersectional work is about identity” (p. 630). Conversely, Nash (2008) and Staunaes (2013) question the ability
of intersectionality to research identity. Staunaes (2013) stated that you must use an additional theory in conjunction with intersectionality in order to understand the lived experiences because it only functions as a macro-level tool. Cho et al. (2013) argued in the same vein, stating that intersectionality is about “the way things work rather than who people are” (p. 923). These scholars conclude that intersectionality should only be used to examine overlapping structures of power and not the influence on self they have. Other scholars argue the complete opposite, contending that intersectionality focuses too much on identity matters and not enough on structures (Conaghan, 2009; Grabham, Herman, Cooper, & Krishnadas, 2009). Conaghan (2009) specifically stated, “Intersectionality has become too bound up with the notions of identity and identity formation” (p.29). For the purpose of this study, I argue that intersectionality embraces a both/and approach, as articulated by May (2015),

A more thorough reading of intersectionality literatures would reveal that a both/and approach to (multiple) identities contextualized within myriad social structures and attendant to the relational nature of power and privilege within and between groups is (and has long been fundamental) to intersectionality” (p. 114).

Those who choose an intersectional framework in their research share focus between lived experiences and structures of power and oppression. Specific to this study, the identity exploration of the student athletes in the year 2020, within the overlapping structures of power and influence, requires the both/and approach to the research. As it pertains to student development, Jones and Stewart (2016) stated, “student development theorists have an opportunity…to consider how intersectionality can be useful for understanding how both privilege and marginality shape and inform each other in individuals’ identity meaning making and in the context of their environments” (p. 25). To understand how
intersectionality functions in the study of identity exploration, the next section of literature review details how power manifests at historically white institutions.

**Manifestations of Power in Historically White Institutions**

It is important to note that for this study, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is defined as a “historically white institution” because of the part it has played in the hegemonic power structures that continue to be replicated. While senior leadership roles within the NCAA have diversified, positions that work directly with student athletes at the college level have not seen much progress. In 2022, the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) reported that 82.3% of athletic directors at Division I schools were White and that Black coaches held only 9% of head positions. Conversely, according to the NCAA’s 2020-2021 database, 62% of men’s basketball and 55% of men’s football players identified as non-White, illustrating the white-dominated power structure over marginalized populations. Intersectional theorizing requires an attention to the structures of power that shape the lives of individuals with multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Nunez (2014) argues that it is not always clear how higher education researchers operationalize the notion of power itself, explaining that “concept of power is difficult to conceptualize and theorize, much less be applied to guide empirical work to identify specific power dynamics that reproduce social inequality” (p. 47). To be explicit in how this study analyzes macro-forces of oppression, I look to Collins’ (2000/2009) four domains of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal). These four domains are operationalized by Dill and Zambrana (2009) and align with Crenshaw’s (1991) forms of intersectionality: structural (structural/disciplinary), representational (hegemonic) and political (interpersonal). The subsections below attempt to
make clear how these domains of power appear in policies, practices, and ideologies within the higher education system in the U.S., and within the NCAA.

**Structural and Disciplinary Forms of Power**

The structural and disciplinary domains of power work hand in hand to reinforce social dominance. The structural form of power examines how social institutions and policies create and progress oppression of certain groups, and disciplinary power refers to the “ways that organizations are run” (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 299). At an academic institution level, structural power describes the social and economic policies that govern the institution and disciplinary power describes the bureaucratic processes that inhibit individuals with marginalized identities to access resources. This includes the policies that mold collegiate environments and the resources on each campus.

**Policy.** Federal, state and institutional higher education policies shape campus environments, particularly for marginalized populations (Iverson, 2007). Higher education continues to reproduce inequitable student outcomes for racial minorities through institutional stratification (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). The process through which higher education stratifies students into selective and broad-access institutions is a direct result of racist admissions practices (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). Carnevale and Strohl (2013) stated that though the numbers of students who identify as Black or Latino continues to grow, the most selective institutions (predominantly HWIs) still disproportionately admit large numbers of White students. These findings prompted Carnevale and Strohl (2013) to write that “the postsecondary system mimics and magnifies the racial and ethnic inequality in educational preparation it inherits from the K-12 system and then projects this inequality into the labor market” (p. 7). By recruiting predominantly white students to their campuses, HWIs
then generate institutional environments where Students of Color feel like they are the only one (Museus et al., 2015), affecting the ways they understand and develop their identities and interactions with peers, faculty and staff.

Additionally, scholars such as Iverson (2007) have examined diversity policies to see how statements intended to promote equitable environments can actually reproduce inequalities at HWIs. For example, Iverson (2007) stated that many “diversity policies use a majority (White and male) as the standard against which to measure minority progress and success” (p. 594). By setting whiteness as the standard, historically white institutions inherently disenfranchise Students of Color. For example, whiteness filters the “trash talking” done by white athletes and condemns that of Black athletes. Sports media has linked trash-talking to Blackness and hip-hop culture, an expression of unsportsmanlike conduct and “a pollutant that is destroying the sports fabric” (Leonard, 2017, p. 65). On the contrary, white athletes engaged in trash-talking are described as free spirited, passionate, and energetic. While Black athletes talk trash, white athletes are celebrated for their competitive banter. Similarly, in centering the male experience as the standard, you can find the women’s teams and events marked as such: “Texas Tech Lady Raiders,” “Mississippi Valley State Devilettes,” or more recently publicized “Women’s NCAA Tournament.” This normativity is both the product of power relations and a source of differential power.

Resource availability. Historically white institutions further the oppression of their student population by having and distributing a limited number of financial and human resources to marginalized populations on college campuses. Particular to college athletics, funding is a byproduct of winning and a healthy booster system. Therefore, a lion’s share of annual budgets are spent on facilities and coaches to recruit the best players and thus,
continue the winning. Lack of funding for mental health and other human services communicates for athletes an inattention to the student population in comparison to the salaries of coaches, etc. Additionally, as indicated by the National Bureau of Economic Research,

> Strict limitations on player compensation in revenue-generating college sports such as men’s football and basketball result in a transfer of resources away from student-athletes in those sports, who are more likely to be from lower-income households, to those in other sports. The student-athletes in the sports receiving subsidies are more likely to be from affluent backgrounds.

The researchers reported drastic differences between players in revenue-producing sports and other student-athletes in Power Five athletic programs. As previously stated, Black players account for nearly half the football and basketball players, but only 11 percent of the players in money-losing sports. Additionally, revenue-sport athletes attended high schools with a median family income of $58,400; where players in other sports came from high schools with a median family income of $80,000 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020). So not only are majority White coaches reaping the benefits from athletes of color, so are their White peers.

**Hegemonic Power**

Another domain of power that exists in higher education institutions includes the dominant ideologies perpetuated on and off campus. Collins (2000/2009) defined hegemonic power as “ideology, culture, and consciousness” (p. 302). Collins (2000/2009) states, this power emanates from the fact that “dominant groups create and maintain a popular system of ‘commonsense’ ideas that support their right to rule” (p. 302). In higher education, these
ideologies are rooted in a history of exclusion that positions marginalized groups as the “Other.” The perception of campus climates as being (un)welcoming to certain demographics of students and the lack of diversity in classroom curricula serves to reinforce dominant power.

The naming of colleges and universities as historically white institutions versus predominantly White institutions (PWIs) connects their history of privileging whiteness to their names (Museus et al., 2015, Smith et al., 2007). Describing these institutions as HWIs exposes their pasts as oppressive spaces (Smith et al., 2007). Additionally, Museus et al. (2015) concluded that “since [its] genesis, racism has manifested in higher education policy at federal, state, and institutional levels” (p. 49). It is not surprising that models of campus climate such as Hurtado et al. (1998) include historical snapshots that illustrate how legacies of exclusion exist at institutions and shape how students experience the campus. As Hurtado et al. (1998) explained, this historical dimension highlights that “because they are embedded in the culture of a historically segregated environment, many campuses sustain long-standing, often unrecognized, benefits for particular student groups” (p. 283). This connection between history at HWIs and the ways students experience their collegiate environments emphasizes a need to examine the literature on campus climate.

In order to understand the culture within sports, and its meaning for groups traditionally viewed as “others,” we must look at how power dynamics and policies can influence and justify both participation and representation of these groups. Also to consider, is the dominant ideologies, media and legislation that can influence the marginalization of “other” in sport. Carter-Francique & Flowers (2013) use the definition of sport (provided by Coakley, 2004, p.21) as “institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous
physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by participants motivated by internal and external rewards” and argue that because sport is presented as an institution, it holds a specific place in our society. Just as the oppressive systems of race, gender, ethnicity, and class are entrenched within the social fabric of America, so are they in the sporting culture. “...depending on the group and/or society participating [in the sport], the motivation to participate varies in meaning, purpose, organization and cultural significance.” (Carter-Francique & Flowers, 2013, p. 74). To understand the implications of oppressive systems in sport, one must understand the implications of the American system in which they have been built.

Campus Climate. In higher education, campus climate research largely began by investigating the experiences of Students of Color and their experiences in historically white institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Campus climate studies have since specified different racial/ethnic communities, including those who identify as Black/African American (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), Latino (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), and Asian/Asian American (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Johnston & Yeung, 2014). This research has examined differences in campus climate perception across different races, including white students (e.g., Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Museus et al., 2008; Radloff & Evans, 2003; Rankin & Reason, 2005). In the majority of these studies, white students perceive campus climates to be accepting of racial diversity more so than Students of Color. Conversely, Students of Color believe that universities make matters worse by replicating systems of power within the institution, as well as failing to address racism on campuses.

Scholars have highlighted the damaging effects that campus climate can have on different aspects of identity for Students of Color (e.g., Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Hurtado &
Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2014; Maramba & Museus, 2011). Museus’ (2011), indicated that Latino and Filipino Americans report lower levels of belonging because of a negative racial climate at their institutions alongside a pressure to separate from their cultures. Maramba and Museus (2011) echoed this, “Related to the lack of belonging, students reported feeling voiceless on campus. All of the participants spoke of not having a voice within the campus environment” (p. 97). Experiencing hostile climates on campus caused these students to lose a sense of belonging and to have a more negative view of their social identities.

Campus climate for student athletes. Given the aforementioned historical, social, political and cultural structures surrounding the establishment of the NCAA and their partnership with American higher education institutions, sport researchers acknowledge that there is a range of discriminatory policies and practices in college sport founded on racism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, and many other marginalized identities (Cooper, et al., 2020). While recent statements and actions have come from the NCAA, regarding the improvement of diversity and inclusion within their association, they have yet to explicitly acknowledge how previous and currently standing policies continue to perpetuate inequities (Cooper et all, 2017; Cunningham, 2019). The historical precedent explains the barriers experienced for “others” operating in a system rooted in Whiteness and maleness (Fink et al., 2001; Hextrum, 2020).

Research shows that students experience campus climates differently based on their social group membership (Rankin & Reason, 2005, 2008; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). Although institutions say they welcome diverse bodies and create inclusive environments, they are not free of negative societal attitudes or discriminatory behaviors
There is an intricate relationship between college athletics, student athlete demographics, and campus climate. In 2012, Comeaux found that faculty and student perceptions of athletes related to questioning of athletes’ intellectual abilities, academic motivation, or treatment by the university. Microaggressions like these perpetuate the dumb jock stereotype (Simons et al., 2007) as they often happen in the classroom, creating internal and external messaging of otherness and unfavorable campus climates for athletes, especially Athletes of Color.

Extensive research on racial and ethnic identity within the campus environment suggests that Black student athletes are aware of how their racial identity evokes negative stereotypes from peers and faculty on campus (Melendez, 2008; Singer 2008). Singer (2005) and Lawrence (2005) discussed manifestations of racism related to leadership and decision-making opportunities for African American athletes. Martin et al. (2010) and Oseguera (2010) separately found that African American athletes perceive different expectations for Black athletes versus their White peers and that this is exacerbated for athletes in revenue versus non revenue generating sports. Differential treatment of African American athletes may relate to low graduation and high attrition rates, and requires an understanding of broader environmental contexts in higher education (Hawkins, 1999).

Identity, Identity Exploration, and Meaning Making

Theories on college student identity are foundational in the field of higher education and student affairs (Jones & Abes, 2013; Torres et al., 2009). Scholars interested in this area have explored identity development, identity negotiation, and relevant to this research, identity exploration. At its core, researchers in this area have posed the question, “Who am I?” (Erikson, 1968). In addition to psychosocial development theories (e.g., Chickering,
social identity theories emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Patton et al., 2016). These theories explored privileged and oppressed identities, in effort to understand how individuals make sense of their identities in relation to others (McEwen, 2003). More specifically, the majority of theories focused on how people developed in relationship to singular social identities (e.g., race, sexuality, or gender). Research on student athlete identity has primarily focused on four overarching themes: identity development, role conflict and wellbeing, career maturity and motivation, and student athlete stereotypes (Steele, van Rens & Ashley, 2020). This section of the literature review will examine the areas of college student identity within: foundational understandings of identity, identity exploration, sense of self, and social identities; themes in social identity exploration and development; theories on the multiple dimensions of identity; and the role of meaning making in student development.

**Identity, Exploration, Sense of Self and Social Identities**

Psychosocial research serves as the foundation for work specific to social identity development and examines the development of self and ego (Patton et al., 2016). Once rooted in studying identity as a singular concept, researchers have shifted toward the understanding of identities as socially constructed (Jones & Abes, 2013). To provide historical context, the subsections below will call attention to foundational research on identity, identity exploration, sense of self, and social identities.

through eight stages of psychosocial development, one of which is “identity versus role confusion.” Erikson’s (1963, 1964, 1968, 1994) idea of identity recognized as ego identity, involves the ways that a person saw themselves and how they behaved based on this view. In summary, Erikson (1963) said that the ego identity is “the ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly” (p.42). Additionally, Erikson (1963) acknowledged how others view an individual affects a person’s identity, citing the role of contextual influences. Therefore, Erikson’s work proposes that identity is developed through people’s interactions with others, involving both a conscious and unconscious process. Scholars such as Cote and Levine (1987) suggested that the formation of the ego identity was not limited to the identity versus role confusion, but throughout the eight stages of psychosocial development.

Furthering the work of Erikson, Marcia (1966, 1994) advanced research on ego identity stages. Specifically, Marcia’s (1966, 1994) work showed that individuals encounter the following four statuses: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. These identity statuses were most applicable to “occupational choice, religion, and political identity” (Marcia, 1966, p. 551). This study postulates that identity formation occurs when individuals experience exploration, which Marcia (1966) originally termed crisis, and commitment (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Commitment represents how personally invested a person is in their behaviors and actions, whereas identity exploration takes place in “a time when the late adolescent is actively involved in choosing among meaningful alternatives” (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p.33). Identity exploration then denotes a specific period in a person’s development that not everyone undergoes, with some people having high commitment but no exploration (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Those that do engage in this
process of exploration encounter both a cognitive (how people are seeing themselves) and behavioral component (how individuals seek out opportunities to experience difference). Importantly, more recent perspectives on identity exploration have also focused on contextual and environmental influences, as illustrated by the social-cognitive models of identity styles (Berzonsky, 1990, 2011; Soenens et al., 2005). Berzonsky (1990) posits that the manner in which one’s self-identity is created and revised is over a lifetime, through a process of decision making and problem solving. His model focuses on the individual differences between the way people encode, process and represent information and experiences. Soenens et al. (2005) proposed that individual’s views about the motivations that influence behavior may play a part in interindividual variability in the exploration and construction of identity. Consequently, this present study focuses on these various dimensions of identity exploration in relation to student-athletes and their social identities.

Researchers have long been intrigued by the notion of “sense of self” while pursuing their work in identity. For Cote and Levine (2002), the difference between the two mirrors the “generic distinction between cognitive process and cognitive content” (p.88). Whereas the self “refers to a person’s internalized behavioral repertoires… and it can be an object of social experience” (Cote & Levine, 2002, p. 88), identity is conceptualized more in terms of how an individual’s self-manifests in relationship to others. Identity represents not only a sense of self, but also the “inter-relationships between the self and the other” (Cote & Levine, 2002, p. 16). This belief in identity as being constructed through interaction is then complicated by the presence of social identities.

**Social identity theory research.** Different from Erikson’s (1963, 1964, 1968, 1994) and Marcia’s (1966, 1994) concept of ego identity, subsequent literature investigated the
concept of social identities. Researchers commonly attribute the notion of social identity theory to Tajfel (1978, 1982) who examined how individuals develop a more positive personal identity by connecting with certain groups. This relationship between the personal and social set the groundwork for future research on socially constructed identities. For example, Tajfel (1978, 1982) noted that individuals attributed salience to different groups based on physical context and time. Tajfel and Turner (1979) also observed how an individual’s sense of self depended on their membership in various groups, emphasizing the importance of social group membership. This argument allowed scholars to then elucidate how individuals may have more salient socially constructed identities including but not limited to race, sexuality, and gender. Using these foundations, researchers then examined how people, including students, developed in their view of their social identities (Jones & Abes, 2013). In sport research, social identity theory has been used largely to evaluate belongingness phenomena in and around sports. For example, performative sport fandom (Osbourne, A.C., & Coombs, D.S., 2013), sport tourism (Gibson, H., 2005), identities in the sport workplace (Oja, B.D., et al. 2020), and youth sport as a vehicle for social identity and positive youth development (Bruner, M.W., et al., 2017). Pertinent to this research, the following section discusses identity exploration and development in the context of social identities.

**Social Identity Exploration and Development**

Interactions that occur in collegiate settings prompt students to think about their identities critically (Stewart, 2009), this has spared researchers to consider how higher education fits into the scholarship on social identities. This section provides an overview of
the literature on identity exploration pertaining to social identities followed by a brief synthesis on the scholarship on racial and student athlete identity development.

**Identity exploration and social identities.** Researchers have adapted the construct of social identity, largely grounded in psychosocial perspectives, to the study of social identities (see Dillon et al., 2001; Phinney, 1993; Syed et al., 2013; Umana-Taylor, Kornienko, Bayless & Updegraff, 2018; Whitehead, et al., 2009; Worthington, et. al., 2008). An early example of this application appeared in Phinney’s (1993) model of ethnic identity development. Phinney’s (1993) model detailed a process by which people explored their ethnic identities to a point where they could reconcile their ethnic identity within a larger socio-historical context. This work is pivotal because of its attention to not only the cognitive and behavioral aspects of identity exploration, but also to the affective components of this process. As Phinney (1993) found, those with low ethnic exploration showed negative sentiments toward one’s own group, some citing that they would change their ethnicity if they could. Studies continue to explore the role that identity exploration plays in ethnic/racial identity development. Umana-Taylor et al. (2018) described this relationship,

> the developmental process of ethnic-racial identity involves individuals’ exploration of their ethnic-racial background, and the extent to which they feel a sense of clarity or resolution regarding this aspect of their identity and how it fits in with their general self-concept. (p.1)

While Umana-Taylor et al.’s (2018) work serves as an example of ethnic/racial identity exploration, there is a limited amount of research existing that looks at racial identity exploration specifically. To contextualize the task of identity exploration within the larger
scholarly landscape of social identity development, we must also look at models of intersecting identities.

**Multiple Intersecting Identities**

While there are several models describing how students interpret their multiple intersecting identities during their time in education, the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI, Jones & McEwen, 2000) and the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI, Abes et al., 2007) have most influenced the ways that student affairs professionals comprehend the intersecting identities of their students. Little-to-no research on student-athletes has utilized either of these models. In the last decade, scholars have used intersectionality as a lens to understand identities (Jones & Abes, 2013; Wijeyesinghe, 2012). These models will set a foundation for this study and therefore, further explored here.

Jones and McEwen’s (2000) MMDI and Abes et al.’s (2007) RMMDI. These two models have advanced student development by encouraging understanding of student’s multiple identities. The MMDI came from a grounded theory study looking at the multiple dimensions of identity of college students who identified as women (Jones, 1997). It depicted how students’ social identities intersect with one another, depending on the context in which students are situated and their personal identity. MMDI describes the process in which students understand their intersecting identities as continuous and in-flux. Jones and McEwen (2000) stated, “The model is a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development” (p.408). Central to the model is a core self (student’s personal identity, attributes, etc.), surrounded by the various social identities that students claim, each shifting
based on the shifting contexts. Examples of shifting contexts include: family history, collegiate experiences, and sociocultural conditions (Jones & McEwen, 2000). For student affairs professionals, this allows understanding around context, social identities and personal identities. There are limitations to this model, some of which are addressed by the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity.

RMMDI integrated notions of meaning making into the study of multiple identities (Abes et al., 2007). Using data from a constructivist narrative study on lesbian college students (Abes & Jones, 2004), the RMMDI showed how an individuals’ meaning-making capabilities affected their ability to filter contextual influences as they were coming to know their multiple identities. The meaning-making aspect of the model combined the work of Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001), who declared that individuals grow in their cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions by relying on external forces before eventually developing an inner voice and internal meaning-making capability. The RRMDI, however, does not have an explicit focus on systems of inequality, limiting its scope as it pertains to critical frameworks (Jones & Abes, 2013). It is crucial to look at a couple of existing models of identity that integrate a specific power-based analysis.

**Intersectional identity models.** There are limited existing models that incorporate intersectionality into the study of identity, two of them are: The Intersectional Model of Multiracial Identity (IMMI, Wijeyesinghe, 2012) and the Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions (I-MMDI, Jones & Abes, 2013). Building on the MMDI and RMMDI, IMMI defines how multiracial individuals make sense of their identities within axes of oppression. IMMI places “choice and experience of racial identity” at the center of what is portrayed as a galaxy (Wijeyesinghe, 2012, p. 100). Around the center are several environmental and
personal factors, including socio historical contexts, other social identities, and socialization messages. The analogy of the galaxy is to illustrate the movement of the surrounding facets, moving closer and away from the center, showing that they will have differing silence depending on the time and context. The IMMI impacted the view of multiracial identity and connections with intersectionality.

The Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions, or the I-MMDI (Jones & Ames, 2013), took a more critical approach and power-based conceptualization. It takes into consideration the various systems of oppression that people experience every day, including racism and sexism. Additionally, I-MMDI challenges salience, stating that salience “is also determined by the larger socio historical context, and not just by the importance an individual attaches to specific identities'” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 158). I-MMDI suggests that salience, context, and the core are all connected and related to one another. One final difference in I-MMDI than RMMDI: the meaning-making filter that came to be in RMMDI is reconsidered with the sociohistorical context in which an individual sits as a great influence in I-MMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013). What this means is that the larger amount of oppression that someone experiences, affects how they make meaning of situations and environments. All of the aforementioned models state that meaning-making structures affect understanding of identity.

Meaning Making in Student Development

Researchers of student development have examined the ways that collegians make both meaning of their identities and sense of self (e.g., Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes et al., 2007; Baxter Magolda, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2009; Pizzolato, et al., 2012; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the concept of meaning making came from the work of constructivist-developmental psychologist Robert Kegan (1982, 1994). The
following subsections share the early conceptualizations of meaning making and then in relation to social identities.

**Meaning making and social identities.** Over the past twenty years, higher education scholars have looked at the role of meaning making in identity development with students from marginalized communities (e.g., Abes, 2012; Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Hernández, 2012; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Torres, 2009; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). As Perez (2019) noted, researchers have started to consider meaning making as shaped by systems of power. In Torres’ (2009) article on the relationship between ethnic identity and self-authorship, for example, she stated that the ability to recognize racist systems depended on a more complex manner of meaning making than relying on external convention.

**Meaning making within college sport.** Student-athletes at the college level are often pressured to quickly adapt to a new environment, coaches and team in addition to figuring out how to juggle academic and social demands outside of sport. As highlighted by Springer and Dixon (2021), the question higher education and sport administrators should be asking is how the sport environment supports and/or hinders individual development. Managing additional roles outside of sport can be particularly challenging for collegiate athletes; often considered elite sports, this level of competition requires students to commit a considerable amount of time and effort to their athletic development (Ayers, Pazminocevallos, & Dobose, 2012; Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Gayles, 2009a, 2009b, 2014; Wolverton, 2008). The importance of other non-sport developmental areas is viewed and managed in relation to how they help or hinder students’ athletic progress (Anderson & Dixon, 2019). Broadening the concept of student-athlete identity development allows scholars to consider
both athletic and non-athletic outcomes that have largely been passed over in formal sport environments (e.g., epistemological and moral development) (Springer & Dixon, 2021).

This chapter provided a body of scholarship that was integral to shaping a study on the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in the year 2020. To begin, this chapter presented the origins, central tenets, and role of intersectionality in higher education and identity research. Intersectionality also helped guide the later sections in the literature review. Specifically, I reviewed literature highlighting the stereotyping and marginalization that student-athletes face on college campuses. Additionally, this chapter explored formative ideas of identity, identity exploration, sense of self, and meaning making. This study was uniquely positioned to encapsulate the experience of student-athletes exploring identity through power structure and social event influences in 2020. To accomplish these objectives, I employed a grounded theory approach guided by constructivism and critical theory, as explained in the next chapter.
Chapter 3
Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand how collegiate student-athletes explored and made meaning of their intersecting identities through an online identity course in the year 2020. Constructivism and critical theory served as the epistemological foundations for the research design. These two epistemologies align with the theoretical perspective of intersectionality (under the umbrella of critical theory) and the methodology of constructivist grounded theory. For this study, a constructivist grounded theory approach was selected because this methodological tradition allows researchers to “produce substantive theories addressing delimited problems in specific substantive areas” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 10). The three research questions that informed this study are as follows:

1. How did student-athletes explore and make meaning of their identities against the backdrop of 2020?
2. How did the loss of athletics play a role in the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?
3. How did systems of power influence the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?

The following sections elaborate on the research design of this study, describing the epistemological foundations, methodology, and methods that informed this study. With intersectionality serving as the theoretical perspective, an attention to intersectional theorizing appears throughout this study design, a marker of using the theory appropriately (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).
Epistemological Foundations

Epistemological foundations shape the research process by providing a set of beliefs about the origins of knowledge (Jones et al., 2014). Crotty (1998) defined the role of epistemology in qualitative research by stating that it functions as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). The epistemology of a research project influences every part of a study design, including the research questions, researcher-participant relationship, and data analysis procedure (Jones et al., 2014). Using both critical theory and constructivism allowed understanding of the meanings that participants assign to their experiences while also providing the tools to interrogate the role of power and domination in their stories. The blending also honors the tradition of intersectional theorizing that honors the epistemic advantages of marginalized populations (constructivism) to comprehend and disrupt systemic injustices (critical theory; Nash, 2008; May, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016). To explain the relationship between these epistemological traditions, the following sections discuss both of these in greater detail.

Constructivism

Researchers who utilize constructivism (Charmaz, 2000, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994) understand knowledge as a social construction, viewing both the researcher and participants as co-constructors of meaning. In describing constructivism, Crotty (1998) stated that it is “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). With strong attention to context and social interactions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994),
constructivism is a helpful perspective to utilize in the evaluation of students’ meaning-making capacities as it pertains to their social identities (Jones & Abes, 2013).

With roots in Piagetian psychology (Jones et al., 2014) and various philosophers’ studies of hermeneutics (Mertens, 2015), constructivism suggests that multiple realities exist, each constructed by different individuals’ subjectivities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994). A constructivist researcher attempts to find these varied realities and understanding of a phenomenon as noted by participants. The subjectivities exist within interactions with others, and as a result, meanings are produced out of their sociohistorical contexts (Charmez, 2000, 2011, 2014; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Another key characteristic of constructivism is recognizing that the researcher’s own perspective and background will affect their interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2014; Mertens, 2015). The researcher must remain cognizant of the assumptions that they bring into a research project, constantly engaging in the process of reflexivity. These characteristics of constructivism lend themselves to the research study, providing a baseline to understand the identity construction of collegiate student-athletes. However, scholars like Abes (2012) argued that constructivism by itself isn’t enough to challenge power structures as it relates to college students’ multiple social identities. Therefore, this study integrated critical theory as part of its epistemological foundations.

**Critical Theory**

Critical theory (Denzin, 2015, 2017; Fay, 1987; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) provided the tools necessary to name and critique the power structures influencing the process of identity exploration for collegiate student-athletes. Discussing the potential that critical theory has for qualitative research, Lincoln and Denzin...
(2000) stated that it strives for a “radical restructuring [of] society toward the ends of reclaiming historic cultural legacies, social justice, the redistribution of power and the achievement of truly democratic societies” (p. 1056). Designed to challenge social inequities, critical theory aims to better the lives of groups from historically marginalized backgrounds. Powering its aim for social action, critical theory draws attention to the fact that power influences the social construction of reality and knowledge (Denzin, 2015, 2017).

With roots in German philosophy, including the work of Kant and Hegel, critical theory addresses the role of culture and history in shaping interactions, meaning making, and research (Jones et al., 2014). Qualitative researchers who use critical epistemology question how participants’ stories are situated within the context of power and oppression (Denzin, 2015, 2017). A critical researcher also pays attention to political, social, and cultural influences on the phenomenon of interest (Denzin, 2015, 2017; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000; Mertens, 2015). Additionally, critical theory centers the experiences of individuals who have often remained on the margins of society and research, making it a beneficial foundation for this study (Mertens, 2015). Similar to constructivism, critical theory also stresses researcher reflexivity, emphasizing the need for scholars to understand the power they hold (Jones et al., 2014; Tierney & Rhoads, 2004). Providing attention to macro/socio/historical conditions that affect identity, critical theory provides an important lens to identify and analyze the systems like racism, sexism and classism that student-athletes encounter on college campuses. Still, it is necessary to note how critical theory and constructivism work with one another to inform this study.

Individually, constructivism and critical theory are incomplete lenses to understand how student-athletes make meaning of their identities. However, this research combined the
two epistemological traditions to unlock the power that comes with utilizing multiple theoretical perspectives (Abes, 2009), aligning with intersectionality. As a theoretical framework, intersectionality values a person’s lived experiences (along the lines of constructivism), while using these stories as a pathway to critique the influence of systems of power (a focus of critical inquiry). Belief in the “both/and,” a space of contradictions and possibilities, guided this study (May, 2015). To articulate how these epistemological foundations informed the study, an overview of constructivist grounded theory methodology, and how it relates to these epistemologies, follows below.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology**

Guided by constructivism and critical theory, this study used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, 2017) as its methodology. Constructivist grounded theory is a qualitative methodology that seeks to develop a theory from the data, providing a “theoretical explanation about the why and how something happens” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 15). Unique to constructivist grounded theory is its use of a constant comparative method to develop categories of interest that inevitably lead to theory (Charmaz, 2014). This constant comparative process indicates that researchers “compare interview statements and incidents within the same interview and compare statements and incidents in different interviews” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 132) through various coding procedures. Therefore, the initial set of data are analyzed soon after in the hopes that they will inform future interviews with participants, with the ultimate goal of generating categories that lead to the construction of theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With an attention to social construction that is representative of constructivist epistemology, this methodology has informed higher education scholarship on college students’ multiple social
identities (e.g., Tillman-Kelly, 2015), with researchers communicating its utility in student affairs research (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002). The following section illustrates the evolution of grounded theory that led to its constructivist mission, argues for its use in social justice research, before investigating its compatibility with the theoretical perspective of intersectionality.

**Evolution of Grounded Theory**

To provide context for the emergence of constructivist grounded theory, readers must understand grounded theory’s history and its iterations throughout time. Originating from the text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), grounded theory, as a methodology, was an attempt to create a systematic and scientifically valid way to analyze qualitative research (Charmaz, 2000, 2008a, 2014). Charmaz (2014) described the characteristics of this early version of grounded theory, referred to as objectivist grounded theory, as having “a close fit with the data, usefulness, conceptual density, durability over time, modifiability, and explanatory power (p. 8). Early grounded theory texts (Glaser, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) argued that qualitative research can be objective and credible (Charmaz, 2000, 2014). Charmaz (2008) named this objectivist form of grounded theory as having “roots in mid-20th-century positivism,” with a goal of “explicitly aim[ing] to answer why questions” (p. 398). This iteration of grounded theory created a distance between the researcher and the data (Charmaz, 2000, 2008a, 2014), asserting a reliability and objectivity found in quantitative research. As time went on, grounded theory evolved to take on different shapes and forms.

Notable scholars of grounded theory include Anselm L. Strauss, Barney G. Glaser, Juliet M. Corbin, and Kathy Charmaz. Although Glaser and Strauss created the methodology,
they have since shifted their approaches to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz (2014) described Glaser as having stayed true to the original interpretation of the methodology, while Strauss “further moved the method toward seeing grounded theory as a method of verification” (p. 11). Strauss expects an inter-subjective relationship to evolve between the researcher and the method as the researcher is to be active in the interrogation of the data as they are gathered and analyzed (Locke, 1996). Glaser (1999) counters that grounded theory intends to generate novel theory rather than (as he believes the Straussian approach tends to) corroborate the researcher’s preconceived understandings of the phenomenon. Ultimately, these methodological divergences by Glaser and Strauss allowed for the creation of more constructivist views of grounded theory in the 1990s (e.g., Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2014).

**Constructivist Grounded Theory Explained**

Constructivist grounded theory “highlight[s] the flexibility of the method and resist[s] mechanical applications of it” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). Accepting the belief that multiple realities exist, constructivist grounded theory stays true to the mission of developing a theory about a process without relying on claims of objectivity (Charmaz, 2000, 2008a, 2008b, 2014). Charmaz (2014) stated that constructivist grounded theory accomplishes the following:

> The constructivist approach perspective shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert. Not only does that mean that researchers must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis, but it also means that their values shape the very facts that they can identify. (p. 13)
Additionally, constructivist grounded theory requires researchers to focus on context and situations, exploring the influence they both have on the process under investigation (Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2014). In her discussion of grounded theory’s evolution, Clarke (2003) stated that the shift away from objectivity allows scholars to identify characteristics such as “the usually invisible and inchoate social features of a situation…. all the key elements in the situation and their interrelations; the social worlds and arenas in which the phenomena of interest are embedded” (p. 572). The consideration of context expands the concept of identity beyond the individual, critically investigating the collegiate environment and social structures present within the data collection timeline. It is important to discuss the evolution of grounded theory in the context of this study because it helps situate the work within a larger methodological tradition. This historical view of grounded theory explains how the methodology has grown to allow for significant examination of ideas pertaining to social construction and context. These constructs are at the heart of this study and examined from this perspective. Furthermore, showing the evolution of the methodology explains the applicability of grounded theory to a critical research design.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory and Critical Inquiry**

Charmaz (2011, 2014, 2017) emphasized the possibilities of using constructivist grounded theory to analyze issues of inequity. Because constructivist grounded theory has roots in pragmatist philosophy and critical theory is compatible with this school of thought, constructivist grounded theory and critical inquiry can work hand in hand by offering “a systematic approach to social justice inquiry that fosters integrating subjective experience with social conditions” (p. 326). Still interested in illuminating a process with the goal of producing a theory, constructivist grounded theory adds a layer of identifying the way in
which social structures and power inevitably impact the process at the center of the research. Charmaz (2011) provided recommendations for researchers hoping to engage in the method. Among these suggestions, an explicit focus on constructs such as “power, agency, structural constraints, [and] resources” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 362) when coding for actions and meanings in data. Furthermore, pairing grounded theory with critical inquiry requires that individuals “see how powerful cultural scripts are acted upon, and become attune to possibilities for change” (p. 372). Higher education researchers have employed grounded theory with the ultimate goal of creating equitable environments for all in these institutions (Edwards & Jones, 2009; LePeau, 2015; Robbins, 2012; Robbins & Jones, 2016). Constructivist grounded theory allows the ability to stay true to critical theory as an epistemological foundation for this study and ensures congruence with the theoretical framework and perspective of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), explained below.

**Pairing Constructivist Grounded Theory with Intersectionality**

This section articulates how the study’s epistemological foundations and chosen methodology will engage with the theoretical perspective of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). As seen above, due to explorations into social justice research (Charmaz, 2011, 2014), constructivist grounded theory works with, and not against, critical thought. Constructivist grounded theory helps investigate how social structures and power are at play in shaping the process of interest in a study (Charmaz, 2017). Still, since grounded theory inherently relies on relationships emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2011, 2014, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), researchers must integrate a theoretical perspective in a way that stays true to the process of creating theory. To delineate how this process of pairing theoretical frameworks with this methodology can
occur, Charmaz (2014, 2017) shared the idea of sensitizing concepts, a component of grounded theory. Sensitizing concepts are those that “give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and questions to raise about their topics. Grounded theorists use sensitizing concepts as tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30). In constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2011, 2014) noted that ideas of power and hegemony can function as sensitizing concepts for scholars. Since these macro-forces are at the heart of intersectional analyses (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and of constructivist grounded theory, it is evident that they can help guide the research process, as long as the researchers stay true to the data. Charmaz (2014) illustrated this as “treat[ing these] concepts as problematic and look[ing] for their characteristics as lived and understood, not as given in textbooks” (p. 327). Consequently, by centering power and hegemony in this study as sensitizing concepts, the epistemological foundations, methodology, and theoretical framework merged. To explain how these three essential research components worked with one another, the following sections describe the different methods planned for the study, beginning with the sample.

**Methods**

In qualitative research, a study should be designed in ways that align with the epistemological foundation, theoretical perspective, and methodology (Bhattacharya, 2017; Jones et al., 2014). The process of selecting participants, in addition to collecting and analyzing data, should complement the paradigmatic grounding and methodological tradition of the study. The subsequent sections discuss the different components of the study’s design – sampling, data collection, and data analysis - and explain how they were congruent with the foundations of the research.
Sample Criteria

In qualitative research, the different strategies a researcher uses to select individuals to participate in the study is known as sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Mertens, 2015). Jones et al. (2014) discussed the differences between sampling criteria and sampling strategies in qualitative studies. For Jones et al. (2014), a sampling strategy “is a method that implies a plan for identifying those who may shed light on a phenomenon of interest to the researcher” (p. 115). The steps a researcher takes to select the participants is a critical part of qualitative research, including grounded theory. In order to collect data that sufficiently answers one’s research questions, a grounded theorist must select “research participants who have firsthand experience that fits in the research topic” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 56). Therefore, this is the criteria to select participants.

Initial sampling criteria assisted in identifying student-athletes who detailed their process of identity exploration through an online identity course in 2020. For the purposes of this study, participants must have met the following criteria:

1. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in LAIS 309: Student-Athlete identity in the year 2020.
2. Participants must have identified as current or former collegiate student-athletes.
3. Participants must have completed each of the assignments throughout their course.
4. Participants must feel comfortable sharing their written experiences as submitted within the course.

These different sampling criteria offered important reasoning behind the decision to choose the appropriate sample size.
Sample

In qualitative research, one decision in a study design concerns determining the appropriate sample size. Patton (2015) explained this process by stating, “Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). As made evident here, a number of considerations exist when deciding on a sample size for the study. In constructivist grounded theory studies, an analytical strategy known as theoretical sampling (see Charmaz, 2014) greatly affects this decision-making once the research is underway. Charmaz (2014) encouraged grounded theory researchers to engage in both initial sampling and theoretical sampling, “Initial sampling in grounded theory gets you started; theoretical sampling guides where you go” (p. 197). Because of the nature of this study, I consider enrollment in the course initial sampling and the selection of the sample as theoretical sampling.

With ~20 student-athletes enrolled in eight-week courses throughout the year (five courses), I began with ~100 data sets. Once I verified who, of those 100 participants, completed all of the assignments and allowed me permission to use their assignments in this study, I ended up with 26 data sets. In addition to thinking critically about participants, I intentionally selected specific methods that helped answer the research questions.

Data Collection

Qualitative inquiry stresses the importance of choosing appropriate research methods (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Mertens, 2015; Patton, 2015). Mertens (2015) explained the significance of qualitative data collection methods by stating that they “allow a researcher to get a richer and more complex picture of the
phenomenon under study than do quantitative methods” (p.277). It is necessary that researchers select data collection methods that adhere to the various components of a research design. Jones et al. (2014) noted this when they wrote,

In qualitative research, the procedures themselves are not the criteria on which a study is deemed sound, but rather it is the congruency of the theoretical perspective, methodology, and method…Rather than purportedly being value free, the researcher must be clear about what values he or she [or they are] acting upon when collecting data and how the chosen methodology and method support those values. (p. 49)

Based on this call to make research designs explicit, the subsequent sections detail the data collection methods that are employed in this study and how they align with the epistemological foundations and theoretical perspective.

**Participant reflection writing.** As a component of their participation in the course, students were also asked to write bi-weekly, one-page reflection papers (See Appendix A: Reflection Paper Prompts), providing them with a way to reflect on the information being obtained on identity. This form of data collection aligns with constructivist grounded theory methodology, for as Charmaz (2014) stated, “Researchers often gather several types of data in grounded theory studies and may adopt varied data gathering strategies” (p. 23). Because the concepts within the course were new for some, and contextual for others, they required participants to think critically about the role of oppressive systems in their identity exploration, an act that is difficult to do alone. The reflection writing provided them the chance to start to process and identify these structures. The writing activity also created a space for them to share potentially sensitive information, “foster[ing] frank disclosure that a person avoids telling an interviewer” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 47). These reflection papers were
meant to be just that, moments of reflection that helped students to deepen their understanding of their place in the world. These, in conjunction with critical paper assignments, helped to understand the process of identity exploration and in the construction of theory.

**Critical writing.** Similar to intensive interviewing, the idea behind the critical paper writing is that the instructor (or researcher) has a specific focus on the process under investigation while also allowing the opportunity for participants to move the conversation based on their own thoughts and feelings (Charmaz, 2014, 2015). The open-ended nature of the critical writing prompts allowed participants to piece together information, consider socio-historical context, while also exploring their stance on the subject. Over the course of eight weeks, students submitted four critical writing papers (See Appendix C: Critical Writing Prompts). In accordance with the blending of constructivism and critical theory, each of the prompts built off the last, allowing first, the general thoughts of participants and then probed into themes intended to further develop the concept of identity within collegiate sports.

**Data Analysis Process**

Utilizing the critical writing and reflection papers, I engaged in a process of data analysis in a manner that is congruent with constructivist grounded theory research, as well as the epistemologies and theoretical perspective grounding the study. For example, to use both constructivism and critical theory as epistemologies in this study, I read through the data from both perspectives to acquire an in-depth view of the process of identity exploration. The analytic procedures that grounded theorists employ lead to a theory that can help explain the process of interest (Charmaz, 2000, 2011, 2014). Grounded theory data analysis implores that
researchers make “analytic sense of stories, statements, and observations” and “an interpretative rendering that begins with coding and illuminates studied life” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 111). To accomplish this, I adhered to three main components of grounded theory analysis, each explained below: constant comparative methods, coding, theoretical sampling, and memo-writing and diagramming.

**Constant comparative approach.** A defining characteristic of grounded theory research (Walker & Myrick, 2006), the constant comparative approach is “at the heart of data analysis and coding in grounded theory” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 79). Employing the constant comparative approach in this study required me to code the first set of papers, before I complete the second round of papers and to do the same before the third and fourth papers. In the process of analyzing this initial data set, I needed to compare codes that emerged from participant’s individual papers and across papers. Coding, which involves “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 111), revealed key insights about the experience that collegiate student-athletes encountered in 2020 when exploring their identities and the meaning they construct from this process. Engaging in this constant comparative approach allowed me to stay true to Charmaz’ (2014) conceptualization of constructivist grounded theory: “Assessing your initial codes involves comparing them with data and distinguishing those codes that have greater analytic power…Comparing codes with codes heightens your sense of the direction your analysis is going and clarifies the theoretical centrality of certain ideas” (p.140). Constant comparative analysis offers grounded theorists the opportunity to inductively see theoretical categories emerging from the data, serving as a crucial part in the data analysis process. To elaborate on the role that the constant comparative approach has in
data analysis, it is necessary to describe the coding procedures that I utilized in this grounded theory study.

**Coding procedures.** Various approaches to coding in grounded theory studies exist (Charmaz, 2014), I employed initial, focused, and theoretical coding to analyze the data. To begin, initial coding of both sets of papers moved me towards two integral components of a grounded theory study, fit and relevance:

Your study fits the empirical world when you have constructed codes and developed them into categories that crystallize participants’ experiences. It has relevance when you offer an incisive analytic framework that interprets what is happening and makes relationships between implicit processes and structures visible. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 133)

Initial coding allows researchers to start making sense of the data by forcing them to dissect it from a micro-level. I used initial coding by analyzing the students’ stories line-by-line (Charmaz, 2014). First, I read and coded the papers in accordance with a constructivist perspective before then participating in another round of coding from a critical worldview approach. I then compared both of these sets of codes as I moved toward focused coding.

Focused coding was the second step in the analytic process, since it involves moving from the data towards theoretical categories. Focused coding requires grounded theorists to compare their initial codes, trying to decipher which ideas have the most “analytical power” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 140). As Charmaz (2014) stated, coding in constructivist grounded theory allows researchers to “understand acts and accounts, scenes and sentiments, stories and silences from our research participants” (p. 114). Therefore, focused coding uplifts these patterns and specifically, the ones that emerge most prominently within and across
participants’ narratives. Weighing the constructivist and critical theory readings equally, I attempted to see how these different perspectives align with one another. The last step in the coding procedure involved moving into theoretical coding.

Theoretical coding is a complex process in the journey towards developing a grounded theory, yet one that is necessary in order to generate a theory that is rich and stays true to the participants’ narratives. Theoretical coding allows researchers to “conceptualize how [their] substantive codes are related, but also may move [their] analytic story in a theoretical direction” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 150). In theoretical coding, scholars account for the relationships that may exist between the focused codes previously constructed. The concept of theoretical coding families was key to Glaser’s (1978) procedure of theoretical coding; these coding families consisted of preexisting knowledge within his discipline that then challenged him to understand what was occurring in his data. Charmaz (2014) emphasized that theoretical coding should not be used to apply extant ideas to the data, but should instead help to explain the relationships that are emerging. Through theoretical coding, certain patterns and properties should start to surface that explain the process. Themes that appear across all of the students’ experiences signaled the creation of a grounded theory. As these theoretical categories began to emerge, I engaged in another crucial component of grounded theory: memo writing.

**Memo-writing.** Memo-writing is important to the process of data analysis in the methodological tradition of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1998). This action allows the researcher to think through ideas in an intentional and meaningful way, directing them towards theoretical accuracy: “When you write memos, you stop and analyze your ideas about the codes in any – and every – way that occurs to you during the moment”
(Charmaz, 2014, p. 162). To help guide me in the process of memo-writing, I followed Birks, Chapman, and Francis’ (2008) recommendation to compose “operational, coding, and analytical” memos (p. 72). Operational memos are those that keep track of the research process, explaining the decisions made along the way. Coding memos are those that explore the process of coding, specifically during initial and focused coding. The coding memos represent opportunities to summarize what is occurring in the critical writing and reflection papers. Finally, analytical memos are influential in developing theoretical categories, since they help reflect on the data in a more conceptual way. Analytical memos are particularly beneficial during theoretical coding, to make sense of the relationships between focused codes. In both the coding and analytical memos, I made sure to intentionally reflect on issues of power, privilege, and oppression in order to keep true to the use of intersectionality as a framework. By writing these memos, I tracked how consistent participants’ narratives were in relation to the emerging theoretical categories. These memos ultimately helped to hone in on a point of theoretical saturation, a place where “gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 345). As I analyzed the data, it was critical to keep in mind my positionality as a researcher and scholar.

**Researcher Statement**

The ability to reflect on one’s own subjectivities, understanding the ways that a researcher’s background, identities, and experiences impact the research process, is integral to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). To this point, Charmaz (2014) noted, “Just as the methods we choose influence what we see, what we bring to the study also influences what we can see” (p. 27). This attention to reflexivity prompts me to discuss the personal
connections that have guided me to this particular study. Furthermore, echoing Lather’s (2007) belief that qualitative researchers’ function “as witness giving testimony to the lives of others” (p. 41), I discussed how my previous personal experiences led me to the research in the introduction. In addition to my personal life, I highlight the professional experiences that have shaped the way that I make sense of this research project and my students’ stories.

I grew up as an athlete, spending all of my primary, middle and high school years in various sports, spanning the seasons. Coming to college on an academic scholarship, and under an immense sense of pressure as a first-generation student, I opted out of participating in sports personally but continued to coach at the high school level. Post bachelors, I transitioned out of coaching and began working for my alma mater as a student recruiter, traveling the state and country to bring students to the university. It was in this position that I first began my work with collegiate student-athletes, several coaches opting to work with me for all of their athletes’ application and admissions needs. After leaving this position, I moved to the Student Activities Center, overseeing the chartering process of all campus student organizations, outdoor space reservations, the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), and student recognition ceremonies. My interaction with athletes here was mainly through the MGC, advising students who had opted for a culturally-based fraternity or sorority. My third role at the university brought me into academic advising, and this is where I began my work with athletes in the academic setting. I requested oversight of athletic academic eligibility forms for all athletes in the College of Arts & Sciences. I met with athletes and their athletic advisors at least once a semester to ensure they were on track to earn the required credit hours per year to maintain their athletic eligibility. It was also during this time that I began my Masters in Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Studies. The two
worlds collided. I heard the stories of the athletes first hand while beginning research on the student-athlete experience.

After I transitioned to the business school, I started working with football players in the business school through a student organization called the Football Business Society (FBS). We met biweekly and brought in guest speakers monthly, with the intent of exposing this group of athletes to success outside of sport. We focused on males of color, many of whom had been athletes themselves. Over the years I saw so much growth and determination from the athletes to not only grow their own understanding but the desire to expose other athletes to opportunities and people they wouldn’t otherwise be. As part of my Masters’ thesis and in culmination of the student organization success, I developed a curriculum targeting student-athletes for the purpose of identity development. I worked with the College of Liberal Arts and Integrated Studies to offer the course as an upper division elective, required of almost all degree plans. It was also offered as an online, 8-week course, to create flexibility around travel and in-season demands of athletes. The course was piloted as LAIS 309 in the summer of 2019 and garnered positive reviews, from both advisors and students alike. The course is still offered today, now as a special topics course within the business school but still offering upper division credit as MGMT 490. I recognize that my personal and professional experiences inevitably influence the ways that I made sense of the data, therefore I utilized various trustworthiness strategies in the study.

Trustworthiness

A component of all research – both quantitative and qualitative – is the ability to show that the study is of high quality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Mertens, 2015). To show the strong quality of work, researchers must document the process that led to
their findings being credible and that their results have some sense of utility for readers
(Maxwell, 1992). In this study, the principles that were employed associated with
trustworthiness (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Jones et al., 2014; Morrow, 2005) to achieve this
objective, standards that include credibility and transferability. The following subsections
define each of these criteria, while detailing the ways that the researcher strived to address
them in this study.

Credibility

The researcher engaged in several actions in order to ensure credibility, one form of
trustworthiness. Jones et al. (2014) defined credibility as the “thorough prolonged
engagement in the field and the use of others to confirm findings” (p. 36). First, I focused on
matters of prolonged engagement through the various steps that are consistent with
constructivist grounded theory methodology. As an inductive methodology, grounded theory
research requires that scholars stay close to their data and spend a long period thinking about
the process at the center of the research questions (Charmaz, 2014). Following theoretical
sampling permitted me to adhere to credibility, since it requires researchers to “collect data
until there is more than sufficient coverage, where a point of saturation is reached, where no
additional data collection is useful” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). As seen in these examples,
various components of grounded theory pair nicely with the trustworthiness criteria of
credibility.

Second, the researcher included others in the research process to contribute to the
credibility of the work, using peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2007) as one
method of doing so. A peer debriefer “keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about
methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity
for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263). In particular, the peer debriefer holds different social identities than I do, identifying as a Black queer female individual who is also a former college athlete and athlete advisor in 2020. By asking a peer debriefer to review parts of the written papers and talk through their interpretations, I viewed the data from an entirely fresh perspective, which is important as I constructed my intersectional theory of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020.

**Transferability**

Another form of trustworthiness is that of transferability, which “refers to the extent to which the reader is able to generalize the findings of a study to her or his own context” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). A frequently utilized method for transferability involves including thick description (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and multiple cases (Mertens, 2015). Thick descriptions were achieved through the description of the contexts in which participants were situated, together with incorporating long quotes that provide detail to the readers so they could decide on its transferability to their own practice. Likewise, this study involves students experiencing events that everyone in the world felt several effects of, which also allows readers to think about how they could apply the findings to their own contexts.

**Ethical Considerations**

Engaging in qualitative research brings the responsibility to treat the participants well as well as the research process as a whole (Magolda & Weems, 2002). Jones et al. (2014) stressed this when they explained, “Doing good is more than simply ‘doing no harm’ in that striving for goodness suggests that the research works toward participant authority, fulfillment, and social change” (p. 184). In striving for this, every qualitative researcher
encounters ethical issues and considerations. The use of intersectionality as a theoretical perspective and critical theory as an epistemological foundation leads to a major ethical consideration.

Both intersectionality and critical theory require an examination of power structures that shape the lives of individuals (Collins, 2000/2009a; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Denzin, 2015, 2017; Fay, 1987; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). Because these perspectives require a macro-level analysis, my interpretation of the participants’ stories may vary from their own point of view. To represent narratives in a manner that is recognizable and true to the participants (Jones, 2002) is complicated by critical theory (Jones et al., 2014). Jones et al. (2014) stated this when they wrote that “a critical approach is more likely to yield narratives and interpretations that illuminate unstated sentiments or even stories that are not recognized by participants” (p. 190). This is a responsibility of researchers who use critical paradigmatic approaches in their studies, as scholars such as Mertens (2015) and Romm (2015) have described. Critical research can have an interventionist effect on participants, exposing them to new ways of knowing. To this point, Romm (2015) stated that “it is incumbent on us to try to consciously intervene in a justifiable and responsible way” (p. 418). I needed to be cognizant of the labor that participants exerted when I asked them about the structures of inequality that played a role in their identity exploration. This may have been one of the first times that they had the opportunity to articulate how these systems shaped their view of themselves. This is an ethical consideration that I needed to consider throughout the course of the study.
Conclusion

This chapter was used to articulate the different aspects of the research design that provided the necessary tools to investigate the process of identity exploration for student-athletes through identity curriculum in 2020. An explanation behind the use of constructivism and critical theory as epistemological foundations was first provided; then, I expanded upon the utilization of constructivist grounded theory methodology, and its potential for critical inquiry and intersectionality. By grounding this study in these traditions, I generated a research design and chose methods that were in-line with these perspectives. In particular, I discussed the decisions behind participant selection. Subsequently, I explained the methods of data collection and analysis that adhere to constructivist grounded theory. The chapter concluded with my positionality statement, trustworthiness criteria, and ethical considerations involved in this study.
Chapter 4
Course Section Profiles

As described in Chapter Three, twenty-six participants throughout five sections of the course were selected as participants in the research. All twenty-six completed each of the eight writing assignments in the course (four reflective, and four critical writing prompts) and provided consent forms for their work to be used. Eight were selected from the first eight-week section, spanning the timeline of January 20, 2020 through March 15, 2020. Four were selected from the second eight-week section, from March 23, 2020 through May 15, 2020. Only one participant met all requirements to be considered during the summer 2020 session, from June 1, 2020 through June 27, 2020. Six participants were enrolled in the first half of the fall semester, from August 17, 2020 through October 10, 2020. And rounding out the year were seven participants selected from the second half of the fall term, from October 12, 2020 through December 12, 2020. To honor the experiences of every eight-weeks section, this chapter introduces each time period.

This chapter honors intersectional research, centering the knowledge production of individuals from marginalized backgrounds (Carastathis, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; May, 2015; Nash, 2008), acting as a bridge between the study design and the results of the research. Integrating quotes from the participants, the introductions offer an overview of their experiences while also sharing the perceptions they had of their personal contexts. Quotes will be listed unnamed to allow the archetype of the student experience more specifically within the greater timeline to be highlighted before jumping to a more traditional sense of themes in the next chapter. This attention to student-athlete experiences is important considering the focus on context for which constructivist grounded theory
methodology champions (Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2014; Clarke, 2003). To construct the introductions, reflection and critical writing papers were revisited that served as the data for this study. Additionally, it was imperative to keep in mind and reference the timeline of worldly events that happened during the year 2020. These narratives contextualized the findings presented in Chapter 5.

**Spring 2020, First Half**

The first ten weeks of 2020 in the United States looked something like this: California sees their worst fire season ever recorded; travel notice is issued by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for Americans going to Wuhan, China; U.S. Presidential debates begin; the U.S. House votes to send articles of impeachment against President Trump; first case of coronavirus is reported in the U.S.; Kobe Bryant and daughter, Gianna, are killed in a helicopter crash; the World Health Organization declares the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency; Ahmad Arbery is shot and killed while jogging in Georgia; the Dow Jones industrial average plunges more than 2,000 points; the coronavirus outbreak is declared a pandemic; NBA, MLB, NHL, MLS and NFL suspend seasons indefinitely; the NCAA cancels its basketball championship tournaments; the Los Angeles Unified School District announces all schools will close; and Breonna Taylor is shot and killed in her home in Kentucky. Meanwhile, eight Division I student-athletes attempt to maintain normalcy while taking academic courses, maintaining practice schedules and ingesting speculation about what’s to come.

In the students’ reflection and critical writing papers, they seemed to stick to the curriculum, exploring ideas around reflexivity and intersectionality as prompted by the assignments. In most of the writings, students spoke to their athlete experiences, displaying
their ability to think of “student-athlete” as one pillar of their identity. Specifically, one student wrote, “If student athletes were able to spend more time away from their sport, they would be able to have time to explore themselves, find alternate interests, interact with a more diverse crowd, and, most importantly, be more successful outside of athletics.” However, students also spoke to the mentality of “sport over everything” as a means of understanding stating, “Some division one athletes grew up only knowing one thing and one thing only which is to only put your all into your sport.” Outside of student-athlete identity, students explored the evolution of student-athletes in America expressing, “student athletes have repeatedly shown that no obstacle is too strong for them nor will they be stopped from reaching their goals academically and athletically” and “past athletes have created a great opportunity for future generation athletes.” Students also discussed athletes who have been treated differently because of their athlete status (including idolizing athletes) with, “athletes have a major target on their backs and people are always looking to drag them down” and “Kobe Bryant is the reason for my mentality today because he inspired me to be great no matter what I do. He was more than his sport; he was a true figure to the public and the world. The most common distaste expressed amongst students was in regard to the overarching governing body of collegiate athletics, the NCAA.

Students explained, “Time after time the NCAA has proven untrustworthy and they will continue to do so until they live up to their purpose.” And, “If the NCAA and others are going to make a tremendous profit off of what my teammates and I go through, I feel entitled enough to demand a better service to set me up for success later on in life.” In conjunction with intersectionality, students were able to see that as student-athletes, they had an additional layer of systemic oppression that provided (or revoked) opportunity within
boundaries. Another student noted, “The sad truth about all of this is that the NCAA is drastically more business oriented than it is student athlete driven.” Only once during this session did a student mention the coronavirus (the course ended prior to spring break and the inevitable lockdown), and it was in relation to both the “sport over everything” mentality and the NCAA: “Imagine working your whole life at something all for it to get cut short your final season, that is devastating” and “Many seniors around the nation are begging the NCAA to give them another year of eligibility, if you ask me, I think it is the right thing to do. These seniors shouldn’t have to lose out on something that they have no control over.” The threading theme throughout all statements is the sense of being out of control. Little did students know how little control they would soon have.

**Spring 2020, Second Half**

The second half of the spring semester started the week after spring break, the first week that the university moved entirely to online classes. Faculty, who did not previously teach online, had to quickly transition to online formats and learn how to engage a student demographic who had to, just as quickly, relocate from on-campus classes or housing (or both) and find a place/way to focus on moving forward. Student-athletes left their teams, coaches, advisors, meal plans and technology, many returning to limited resources and competing personal responsibilities. Beyond their immediate surroundings, students also encountered the following during this eight-week period: the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo are suspended until 2021; the Senate and White House agree to a $2-trillion stimulus package to boost the economy; the Labor Department reports 3.28 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits in one week; the CDC recommends everyone consider wearing masks; the United States becomes first country to report 2,000 coronavirus deaths in a single
day; the U.S. coronavirus cases surpass 1 million; armed protesters enter the state Capitol in Michigan and demand end to the pandemic lockdown; the U.S. faces invasion of “murder hornets;” U.S. unemployment rate reaches 14.7%.

The four students in this section still leaned heavily into their critique of the NCAA, similar to their predecessors, “the NCAA is a business that looks at athletes as pawns on a chess board. You can move but only where they say you can.” But within this eight-week section, much more emphasis throughout the reflective and critical writing papers was on intersectionality, identities (both visible and hidden), and their personal experience as a student athlete. Interestingly, the only mention, at all, about Covid-19 during this section was in relation to the expectations of athletes, “With COVID-19 going around now I think many people are looking for athletes and famous celebrities to step forward and help all the people that are struggling out.”

The most prominent underlying theme throughout this section is pressure, as illustrated by communication like, “Being a student-athlete turns you into a robot;” or “We work out every day for about two to three hours, tearing our bodies down to win games and bring success to the school so it can have more recognition and want people to commit to this college and keep the program a successful program.” The students were not shy about sharing the cyclical nature of pressure and mental health: “Many athletes suffer from different types of mental health issues because they are always told to be tough and to push through things because that’s something that makes athletes great;” “Athletes don’t like to speak up about the things that they are dealing with because they know if they slack off on the field that the coaches will try to find their replacement;” “You want to please your family, coaches, and teammates and do whatever it takes in order to get good grades and do
well in your sport; “and “Nobody sees what someone is going through in the inside.” While the underrepresentation of Covid was surprising, the recognition of pressure and its side effects, particularly during this time period, is not.

**Summer 2020**

During this eight-week course, spanning the months of June and July many unprecedented sporting decisions were made, in addition to increased social unrest. Beginning June 1, 2020: President Trump threatens to deploy U.S. troops to quell protests across the country; the NBA votes to restart the season in a “bubble” in Florida; Covid-19 cases in the U.S. exceed 2 million; Protests in Atlanta start after the killing of Rayshard Brooks, while sitting in his vehicle, by a police officer; The Big Ten football conference says it will only play conference games in the fall; The Pac-12 follows suit, announcing the same; The NFL drops all preseason games and reaches an agreement with the players union on a coronavirus testing regimen; President Trump announces a “surge” of federal officers into Democratic-run cities, following a crackdown on protest in Portland, Oregon; MLB season begins, without fans; and the 2019-2020 NBA season resumes in the NBA “bubble.”

Meanwhile, enrollment in the student-athlete identity course drops drastically, from a traditional twenty-five students to ten, and of those ten only four were student-athletes. Of the four athletes enrolled in the course during this section, only one completed all required assignments to be included in this study. This one student, however, displayed an incredible amount of reflexivity, deep understanding of intersectionality and spoke directly to both the visible and invisible identities of student-athletes. There is only one mention of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is in reference to social justice protests, “It seems like we’ve been fighting for this moment all our lives and it took all sporting events and basically the world to stop
spinning before anyone paid attention.” What stands out most about this course session, versus those in the spring, is that the NCAA is mentioned significantly less as an adversary (though still as a system of power), and more autonomy is considered in relation to the students’ surroundings. For example,

The reading “I’m Running So You Can Be Happy And I Can Keep My Scholarship,” by Cooper & Cooper, gives examples of Black male athletes. One being an ‘Academically engaged black male athlete’ and the other being the ‘Academically disengaged black male athlete.’ The difference between the two happens to be motivation, what a surprise right? No, it’s obvious. If you want to be good at something you have to be willing to put in the work to be successful at whatever it is.

Not only was this student able to better understand reflexivity through the curriculum, but they were able to apply both their reflexivity and understanding on intersectionality to better evaluate their place in the world. They spoke directly to their own intersectional identity and how it has been impacted by those who came before them; in speaking of John Carlos and Tommie Smith in the 1968 Olympics they state, “during this time blacks were treated as nothing but when it came to the athletic ability we bestowed America wanted them to basically act as if nothing was going on while we represented the country that treated blacks as the step child. It’s been the events like these that have impacted not only the student-athlete but the whole sporting world.” During this period of social unrest, the student was able to look back on similar times and understand their ability to make their own impact. As described in results later, students found the actions of professional athletes as inspiring to do their own acts for change.
Fall 2020, First Half

In the first half of the fall semester of 2020 (August 17 through October 10), we experienced: Protests break out in Kenosha, Wisconsin after the shooting of 29-year-old Jacob Blake by a police officer; Professional athletes begin to boycott their sports in protest of the shooting of Jacob Blake; Oregon wildfires start amid severe drought and severe winds, buy the end of October, more than 1 million acres will burn, more than 4,000 homes destroyed, and at least 10 people will be killed; The Big Ten conference reverses course and announces it will play a 2020 football season beginning October 23rd; The death toll of the pandemic in the United States passes 200,000; A Kentucky grand jury brings no charges against Louisville police in the killing of Breonna Taylor; the Pac-12 conference announces it will play football in a shortened season, starting November 6th; the first presidential debate between Joe Biden and President Trump ensues; the NFL announces its first regular season game postponement resulting from the pandemic; and President Trump is rushed to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for the treatment of COVID-19. As clearly illustrated here, this eight-week span brought continued instability and new layers of sociopolitical undertones.

Six student-athletes enrolled and completed all assignments during this section of Student-Athlete Identity. Similar to the summer section, the athletes in the first half of the fall term expressed high levels of both understanding intersectionality and practicing reflexivity. Using their own life experiences, one student stated, “There will always be someone that thinks because your family has no money, that you are dumb. There will always be someone who thinks because you are a girl, that you are limited to what you can do in life. Lastly, there will always be someone who believes that just because you are black, that you are a trouble starter, and uneducated person. Once someone is taught a certain belief
it is almost impossible to change their mind.” The majority of students in this section also displayed increased levels of belief in being able to make change, drawing on the lessons of the past, “I think we as athletes should always take a look back at history and how athletes back in the day handled situations and felt. I think that this shapes our identity in a way because they paved the way for us.”

Last but not least, the mentality of “sport over everything” was a very common thread throughout this section, not from the perspective of the athletes, but those around them: “The worst part about it all is there are many things as an athlete you aren’t allowed to even pursue because it interferes with your sport, with that being said everyone on the team is basically the same major just so it’s easier for the advisors and coaches. Holding kids back from what they want to learn in school is yet another reason a lot of student-athletes don’t take it seriously because they aren’t interested in what they are learning.” Another student discussed the prioritizing of sport by citing, “I have seen it every at every single level I have played at and this isn’t only pro sports it starts with your young kids brainwashing them a certain way.” Students seemed to position themselves within the context of 2020 and were able to examine it through all of its layers.

**Fall 2020, Second Half**

In the final ten weeks of the 2020 year, the U.S. witnessed: The senate confirm Amy Coney Barrett as a Supreme Court associate justice, replacing Ruth Bader Ginsburg after her death; President Trump announces he has won the election and demands that all vote counting stop, alleging voter fraud; the U.S. becomes the first country in the world to exceed 100,000 daily cases of COVID-19; President Trump joins several lawsuits aiming at stopping vote counts in Pennsylvania, Georgia and Michigan; major news organizations declare Joe
Biden had enough electoral college votes to win the presidency; Pfizer announces early data on its coronavirus vaccine may be 90% effective at preventing the disease; Moderna announces that its COVID-19 vaccine appears to be 94.5% effective; President Trump escalates attempts to overturn election, pushing for judges and Republican state lawmakers and local officials in battleground states to ignore voters’ verdicts and award him the electoral votes he needs for a second term; After a two-week standoff, Emily Murphy, General Services Administration head, allows President-elect Biden’s team access to required federal resources to start the formal transition process; President Trump says he will leave the White House once Biden is officially declared the winner of the electoral college; Attorney General William Barr says the U.S. Justice Department has uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the 2020 election; Protests against COVID-19 safety rules continue, including restaurants ignoring outdoor dining mandates and closed playgrounds being used; the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorizes emergency use of the COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech; COVID-19 vaccinations begin, starting with front-line workers followed by other at-risk groups; the electoral college confirms Joe Biden’s victory over President Trump; More than 317,000 people in the U.S. had died from COVID-19; international death toll is 1.69 million.

Seven student-athletes enrolled and completed course requirements during the final, eight-week section of 2020. Many of the students presented as disengaged in their writing assignments, often turning in the bare minimum to receive credit for the assignment. Therefore, themes from this section were far fewer than those preceding it. This was the first section, however, where students spoke about the Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) vote that passed during this timeline. While it did not go into effect during this term, students were
inquisitive about what it would mean for future student-athletes and were hopeful about the impact,

The NCAA, in 2020, just passed a bylaw which would allow college athletes to make money off of their name and image. This new rule will not go into effect for at least a few more years, but it is a monumental step in the right direction, one that could change the identity of college athletics as we know it. It will be very interesting how it will all play out in the coming years, and I look forward to continuing to see positive change occurring in collegiate sports.

The state-specific law would later be passed in April of 2021 and states, “Enacting the student athlete endorsement act; prohibiting imposition of limitations against student athletes and certain other individuals earning compensation from the use of their name, image or likeness; allowing for the professional representation of a student athlete by an agent for matters arising from the use of student athlete’s name, image or likeness” (NM State Legislature page for SB94).

Another theme identified within this section was the reflexivity of student-athlete’s own student-athlete identities. One student shared,

We are constantly pushed to emphasize the “student” aspect of our identity, yet are not given everything that we need in order to make education our number one priority. This is my 4th year as a Division 1 college athlete and I have never felt a part of the student body. I feel like there are the students and us athletes are on the outskirts, like we are just here to represent the university in our respective sports.
This student shares the sentiment of many others, in that providing a “free” education without the time, energy or resources to obtain it is not enough. Another student explains their experience this way,

For instance, with my physical build, it is easily assumed that I am an athlete of some sort. With this comes both discrimination and privilege. The idea around athletes is that we are stuck up and intimidating. I have been told plenty of times that I am unapproachable simply because of the athlete tag. I think that this is discrimination because we are judged and labeled as something before anyone even gets the chance to know us. Ultimately restricting us from potential relationships that could actually be beneficial to our lives.

It is clear to see here that student-athletes understand what the term/label means for them and how it affects them.

One unique attribute to this section of the course, versus the others, is the mention of the President of the United States and the election that happened during this time. Students felt strongly about the former administration’s attack on professional athletes, for example:

He only sees these people as disobeying the American flag but there is a lot more to it. Athletes seen as excitement for the elder white people not knowing that most sports can be very harmful to the human brain. “They’re ruining the game of Football,” says Trump in “The Black Athlete in America,” not realizing that mostly 80% of those players are black people. It makes no sense to see Trump thinks when someone takes a knee that they are disrespecting the flag or disrespecting soldiers which is not the case. It is a lot deeper than just seeing it all one sided.
Most, if not all, of the student-athlete criticism of the former administration correlated to the social justice issues in 2020 (much more to be discussed in subsequent sections). Student-athletes during this time were able to evaluate their stance on issues and communicate them (or why they feel uncomfortable communicating them). Most intriguing to see is that they view their positions as part of their fabric/make-up, an indication that they fully understand and are able to practice intersectionality and reflexivity within their environments. This ability brings autonomy and validity of self-concept.

**Conclusion**

This chapter centered the experiences of participants by providing brief course section profiles of student-athlete identity exploration through curriculum. Furthermore, these narratives included vital information about how student-athletes perceived world events in 2020, the context for this study. These section profiles set a necessary foundation for the findings presented in the next chapter while also honoring the experiential knowledge and lived experiences of individuals in each section.
Chapter 5:
Results

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand how student-athletes explored and made meaning of their intersecting identities through identity-focused curriculum against the backdrop of 2020. The research was guided by the following research questions:

1. How did student-athletes explore and make meaning of their identities against the backdrop of 2020?
2. How did the loss of athletics play a role in the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?
3. How did systems of power influence the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?

To answer these questions, a constructivist grounded theory approach was used (Charmaz, 2014), paired with the theoretical framework and perspective of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). The methods for this research included the collection of four reflection papers and four critical writing papers from each participant. To analyze the data, initial, focused, theoretical and versus coding procedures were utilized (Charmaz, 2014). During the initial coding phase, a constructivist and critical theory reading of the data was constructed. These analytical approaches resulted in the theoretical categories that led to the creation of the emerging grounded theory, discussed later in this chapter.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the findings that emerged from the study. This chapter begins with an overview of the findings, providing synthesis of the themes that are included in the theory, followed by the introduction of The Reflexive and Intersectional
Approach to Identity Exploration for Student-Athletes. Following this portion, the themes that surfaced during data analysis will be detailed including: manifestations of overlapping systems of power; salient experiences of student-athletes during 2020; developing meaning-making capacity in relation to oppressive systems; and the goal/outcomes of exploring identities. These results will incorporate excerpts from the participants’ narratives to center the experiences of student-athletes, the aim of this research, and how they contributed to the emerging grounded theory.

**Overview of Findings and Emerging Grounded Theory**

The focus of this study was the identity exploration for student-athletes against the backdrop of 2020 and what meaning they made during the process. Participants explored their identities by engaging in a curriculum that exposed them to new perspectives on their identities through reflexivity and the concept of intersectionality. They were also encouraged to learn about the negative systemic influences that they previously internalized relating to their identities. During their time in college, overlapping axes of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, athlete-status) manifested in their higher education institutions, sociopolitical climates, interpersonal interactions and cultural dynamics. Their meaning-making capacities developed in ways that enabled them to gain autonomy and combat conditional self-worth.

The manifestations of overlapping systems of power informed the ways that student-athletes navigated their collegiate (and pre-college) experiences. Specifically, participants shared how collegiate experiences relating to academics, extracurricular, and off-campus involvement played a significant role in the exploration (or lack thereof) of their identities. These experiences represented opportunities for individuals to (un)learn about their identities.
in cognitive, behavioral, and social ways – though these spaces were also full of oppressive discourses.

This emerging grounded theory also exhibits how identities intersect in the process of exploration. Student-athletes discussed how other identities (e.g., gender, faith, sexuality, sport, socioeconomic status) shaped the exploration of their purpose in life. Finally, participants shared what goals of identity exploration should be, a core outcome of this theory. The student-athletes in the study stated that they hoped for organizations with oversight and rule-making ability to encourage athletes (and provide resources) to better develop themselves outside of their sport and, as a byproduct, ensure a more secure sense of self after leaving college. This concept of a secure sense of self involved being able to filter out systemic influences that oppressed their identities. These observations illustrated the desire for student-athletes to move toward a meaning-making structure that utilizes their personal experiences and place, rather than continue to adopt external, marginalizing messages. All of these themes are then represented in The Reflexive and Intersectional Approach to Identity Exploration for Student-Athletes. Developed through a grounded theory analytic approach, The Reflexive and Intersectional Approach to Identity Exploration for Student-Athletes brings to the forefront components that define the process. The following sections will discuss each of the components illustrated by the student-athlete experience.

**Manifestations of Overlapping Systems of Power**

This section discusses manifestations of power (e.g., racism, sexism, socioeconomic) that have shaped student experiences within their time as a collegiate student-athlete and how they have influenced their processing of identity and meaning making. The participants in this study described four main sites where inequality manifests: 1) NCAA; 2) local
contexts/cultural dynamics; 3) inequitable funding and representation; and 4) interpersonal interactions. Important to note is how student-athletes were able to articulate their experiences and how the systems have impacted their identity development over time. As articulated in a further section of this chapter, student-athletes were able to name how their meaning-making would support the growth and personal success of future student-athletes.

**National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)’s Influence in Identity Formation**

Student-athletes in the course noted the major influences that the NCAA has had on their process of identity exploration. Within one paper, a student writes,

The NCAA is a very flawed system that doesn’t give its athletes many benefits compared to the amount of money they generate for the universities. The NCAA should try to fix this but it most likely will not because for many sports, the NCAA is the only opportunity to play at the next level, so they are able to run as a monopoly.

A common sentiment around the NCAA, from the perspective of the student-athletes, is about the control of the association. Specifically, students discussed academic oversight and how it impacted their future trajectories, “I wanted to major in nursing, but I wasn’t able to because there are required days that you cannot miss and with my schedule I would miss. These are things where I would say the NCAA has taken my student identity.” Another student states,

The biggest impact NCAA has is in the way they evaluate academic progress of each team using the Academic Progress Rate (APR). If a team does not score at least a 925 out of 1000 then the NCAA can place sanctions on the team and decrease their scholarships. Because of this rule, it is common for sports such as men’s basketball
and football to place their athletes in “easy” majors to prevent too much attention from being taken away from athletic performance in their sport.

In both of these excerpts, students communicate how the NCAA plays a significant role in how student-athletes place value in their day-to-day endeavors.

The impact that the NCAA has on this process is not power-neutral. One student describes the power struggle through an analogy to chess, “Overall, the NCAA is a business that looks at athletes as pawns on a chess board. You can move but only where they say you can.” Students frequently discussed how the organization actively promotes values of student-athlete development but fails to enact them in their practices and policies. To this point, a student writes, “Time after time the NCAA has proven untrustworthy and they will continue to do so until they live up to their purpose.” While not all issues are attributed to the NCAA, students understand how broad the reach of the association is - students note that it isn’t just the rules in place but the overlooking of inequities that leaves them high and dry. Students cite the imbalance of funding and resources in their distaste of the oversight organization. The organization, however, is foundational to the college athletic culture.

**Cultural Dynamics: Marginalization by Surrounding Community**

Students detailed how an investment in whiteness and hegemony (in both the education and athletic institutions) drives the athletic culture. One student noted the separation of student-athletes from their peers,

Many if not all universities use separate study facilities for student athletes specifically. I think this deprives us from building connections with other students who attend the university. I think little things like this are what keep us with the
mindset of we’re athletes first, instead of understanding we have more to offer than just athletic entertainment.

The same student later indicates, “In most of the coaches’ eyes around the country our job as student athletes is to perform because if we don’t they get fired. So, we face the pressures of performing for not only our dreams but the coaches' desires too.” These statements illustrate the us versus them power structures put into place to ensure that student-athletes are athletes first and everything else second. The environment cultivated by universities and the NCAA has placed many student-athletes at a disadvantage, always working to prove their worth, in the classroom and in athletic competition. Another student writes,

The worst part about it all is there are many things as an athlete you aren’t allowed to even pursue because it interferes with your sport, with that being said everyone on the team is basically the same major just so it’s easier for the advisors and coaches. Holding kids back from what they want to learn in school is yet another reason a lot of student-athletes don’t take it seriously because they aren’t interested in what they are learning.

These examples also highlight the great degree of awareness the students have on the ways that oppressive discourses have molded their experiences. Another student explained, “It makes you feel as if you stuck in that notion that you are just an athlete because you are “supposed” to hang out with athletes, you eat with athletes, you room with athletes, you walk breath and sing; athlete.”

Student-athletes of color in this study described the influence that their local context had concerning the identity exploration process,
I’m a black student-athlete that witnessed racism first hand my freshman year in college. I went to a predominately white school. The education was high level, so a lot of the professors didn’t think I could do the work. There are assumptions made and stereotypes given to student-athletes, like being a “dumb athlete.” This experience is frustrating because I feel as if I am always having to prove myself and justify that I belong.

Another student offered a similar sentiment,

Outsiders seem to view athletes in negative ways, such as a professor who may judge one of their students because they are an athlete, coming to a false conclusion that that student will take advantage and not do any of their work, yet expect the professor to give them extensions, etc. The typical jock vibe that athletes may give off due to their physical features does not mean that they follow suit with the “classic stereotype.” In fact, in reality student athletes have it harder than the normal average college student.

Knowing the oppressive context that is embedded within higher education led student-athletes of color to carefully negotiate their identities and the exploration of them.

I am sure that when you are walking around campus and you see a guy who is six foot seven, you assumed he played a sport, most likely basketball. Most student athletes fit a “mold” that coaches are looking for when they are recruiting. But sometimes because of these stereotypes, student athletes can face undeserving scrutiny. Like myself, student athletes do not want to be labeled and identified as “stuck up jocks who think they are better than everyone else.” Student athletes are humans too, and sometimes I think that people do not realize that. Personally I find myself a victim of
this, as by habit I often wear my gear around campus, and sometimes when I am in
class and sitting next to someone, I can sense that they may be intimidated or nervous
to talk to me simply because I am a “football player”.

These realities emphasize how siloed identity spaces may not integrate an attention to
marginalized identities (Duran, 2017; Strayhorn, 2013). These spaces often lead to a
mentality of either/or, as indicated by this student:

I say this because [I] know these student athletes are thinking “forget school”, im just
going to focus on football, or basketball, ect. “A possible explanation for Hamiltons
lack of interest in his courses couldn’t be the fact that he was not enrolled in his
desire academic major” (Cooper). This stood out to me because a lot of the times,
athletic business alter your major to make sure you fit the schedule for practice,
weights, and meetings. Here we can see that the athletic business is creating barriers
between their athletic roles and academic roles. This is a huge problem because know
[now] these athletes are choosing between excelling at their sport or excelling in their
academics.

Previous literature have found similar findings that student-athletes, especially from
marginalized backgrounds experience greater stereotyping and discrimination from their
peers and educators (Douglas et al., 2015; Fuller, 2017; Melendez, 2008; Strehlow et al.,
2021). This study was able to also highlight the significant control that both coaches and
athletic advisors have over student-athletes in addition to their educators and peers. Another
way that campuses perpetuate systemic oppression is through fiscal decisions.
Inequitable Funding and Representation

In addition to observing issues pertaining to the student-athlete and overall athletic culture at their institution, student participants described their perceptions of how funding at colleges and universities keep them at a disadvantage. Funding was a common theme that came up, in the realm of student-athlete compensation, departmental resourcing, school revenue generation, etc. One student states,

The power in college sports seems to be distributed in all directions except the people who make it college sports, the athletes. In too many cases, the coaches are overpaid and granted an unruly amount of power, the administration seems to only be concerned with enforcing rules, and the athlete is expected to bring in money for an entity who is not on their side.

This example is indicative of the manner in which several participants commented on the university’s prioritization of dominant populations, thus affecting students’ feelings about their place on campus and how they felt they could explore their roles and/or futures.

Also, in support of previously published literature, students documented the fiscal pressures they experience from their families, “Some athletes that I know send money to their families so that they can help and provide for them in the best way possible.” Another student stated,

There is a lot of student-athletes out there playing a sport only to help their struggling families out with bills, or all kinds of payments such as myself. I been playing basketball for 5 years he sole purpose is to help my family get out the hood. We live in a bad neighborhood so I just want to be able to take stress off myself knowing they safe.

Another student shared similar observations,
A lot of student-athletes are called upon to support not only themselves, but their families back home. There are countless student-athletes working near full-time hours just to make ends meet while keeping up with the rigorous and demanding lifestyle that comes with being a student-athlete.

When discussing student-athletes, it is common for people to assume scholarship student-athletes. One student spoke to this directly,

Contrary to public belief a lot athletes are not awarded full scholarships. So now not only are students living the life as an athlete, but they also have to get jobs to pay for their cost of living. On top of the busy days athletes live, we are held to a higher standard.

Participants named the lack of representation (in both their communities and at the educational institution) as another way the higher education system and NCAA contribute to the limitation of their identity development. One student articulated,

A good bit of athletes can come from poverty or a family that isn’t always there and all they have is that sport that gives them comfort and ease. It’s pretty much all they know, and it’s always been around for them. Playing a sport is probably all they’re after because they might have ambitions to go to the professional level that they forget about the educational level that would be helpful in the long run.

This is a powerful illustration of the lack of representation of college-educated role models in the communities where some athletes come from. To this end, another student notes,

Majority of my teammates are first generation college students; some are first generation high school graduates. The sad part about this statistic is that the amount of adversity they face is set up for them to fail. Due to these athletes struggling in the
academic area, they are forced to find their identity in sports. Not only are socioeconomic and education levels attributed to the lack of representation, so is race. Another reason athletes choose the sports they are in is because of racial and cultural presence in different sports. People tend to want to be where they feel comfortable. This usually means being around others that come from similar backgrounds and have similar interests as you.

This feeling of having to pick and choose between what you know and what is foreign made it difficult for student-athletes to explore their identities in an interconnected manner, resulting in them focusing on one over the other. Navigating educational spaces proves to be taxing for many student-athletes, but this is most often not the first time they have encountered this difficulty. To this point, participants spoke about encountering manifestations of power involving interpersonal interactions.

**Interpersonal Interactions Impact Identity Development**

Interpersonal interactions capture the ways that power operates through the behavior and comments of peers, educators, coaches and society during student-athletes exploration of self. A number of participants disclosed instances where they encountered an enabling culture that further set them up for failure in the long run. For example, a student described their experience,

It starts in high school with being treated like royalty by coaches, teachers, and principal’s almost to the point where you pass just for showing up to school. Don’t get me started on gameday, you can literally just go to the locker room all day and have your coach send to teachers that you are with him getting ready for tonight’s big game.
It is unclear on the motive behind this type of behavior by staff/instructors, and while probably seen as helpful in the moment, it can later be understood by the student as a robbery of not only academic aptitudes but also soft skills. Multiple participants discussed constantly feeling the need to catch up in these areas upon entering the university,

Along with the subject of being behind the curve, as athletes in high school most of us never met with a teacher to talk about grades. If anything was going wrong in class, the coach would email that teacher and say he would handle it if his grade somehow magically jumped to passing for the next grading report. Now that same kid goes into college and isn’t that same king/queen in their school so now the coach can’t do anything about it and that student athlete has no idea how to email a professor.

As shared in the literature review, often athletes of color are found to have more buy-in to athletic futures by their communities, resulting both in the aforementioned behavior by community but also in more pressure to “make it” in sport. One student disclosed this pressure detailing,

Dealing with the stress of being a student athlete while managing familial demands also takes a toll on us. In our communities many people have high expectations and goals for us. While this is a sense of pride it is also more pressure, as you “have” to make it, not only for yourself but for all of the people that are counting on you.

It is easy to imagine the immense pressure on these student-athletes to make something of themselves. While not unique to student-athletes, this type of pressure paired with the student-athlete’s age and constant demand for flexibility is not the pristine picture painted for up-and-coming student athletes. One study participant shares their perspective,
I have been in college athletics for three years now and have experienced transferring between schools along with having to meet three different staffs. This isn’t easy on a twenty-year-old by any means and I was doing it at eighteen and nineteen with little help from family.

As illustrated here, there are instances where enabling can be sold as “opportunities” where student-athletes are, in the long run, taken advantage of, left to navigate their new reality and determine where to go from there.

**Summary**

This section explained the different ways that power operated and impacted the identity exploration process of collegiate student-athletes. As made evident by their comments, students articulated the ways in which systems of racism, elitism, classism, and other forms of oppression permeated their student-athlete experience, cultural dynamics, socio-cultural climate and interpersonal interactions. In the context of the study’s findings, flexed power serves as an overarching force that infiltrates every other component of the grounded theory. This is emphasized in the ensuing section that describes the salient experiences of student-athletes during 2020.

**Salient Experiences of Student-Athletes During 2020**

For many of the participants, college was sold as a time when they could realize their dreams, be supported by their coaches and institutions, earn a degree that may have never otherwise been a reality, and become a successful adult (however that was personally defined). In some cases, it would be an extension of what student-athletes had previously experienced, while for others, it was a whole new world. Little did these students know that their experience would be unlike any before them. As documented in the previous chapter,
people around the globe would experience unprecedented change, isolation, fear, loss and unrest. The following sections take a closer look at the 2020 experiences of student-athletes specifically. The first subsection examines the loss of sport and how it was processed. The second subsection describes their navigation through social unrest. Next, students share how athletes in particular engaged with the happenings of 2020. And finally, the last subsection details the experiences that student-athletes learned about and/or experienced physical and mental health. Collectively, these experiences represent the spaces in which the hypothetical (before 2020) became reality.

**Loss of Athletics**

In March of 2020, participants and their peers were sent home for spring break, under the impression that the university would be closed for one week, pending the developments around what was being called the “Corona Virus.” University leaders soon realized the severity of the situation and began to scramble for decision-making authority. After iterations of the U.S. President vs. State Governor vs. University President, it was determined that the university would extend the closure of campus, moving all academic courses online. In previous sections of this same course, student-athletes were questioned about the possibility of losing sport, at which time it was merely hypothetical. For example, a student in the first section of the course (January 2020) wrote,

However, as much as a hard truth it is to swallow, a lot of these athletes know that will be an inevitable situation. I know from my own personal experience in that is a day I dread most coming because when you have been focusing on something for over fifteen years and no longer can do it, it hurts. We lose ourselves in the process and that is something that can be difficult to deal with in due time.
For all course sections following this one, however, it was real. All collegiate sports came to a screeching halt following the shutdown, leaving many athletes to not only figure out how to navigate a global pandemic, but how to get home and utilize campus resources (study hall, technology, eating without a meal plan, etc.) without being on campus. Arguably worst of all, doing all of this without the one thing they knew to be constant, their sport. Participants shared, “Imagine working your whole life at something all for it to get cut short your final season, that is devastating” and “I think one of the most drastic events in NCAA history is happening right now. The cancellation of all spring and winter sports is something that has never happened before.” As the calendar year went on, student perspectives began to change.

As indicated in the sections before, it is not uncommon for student-athlete’s majors to be changed to accommodate practice/travel schedules. When the sport was removed, however, so was the academic hurdle, as one student communicated, “I know for me personally I want to be an FBI agent and that is something that I got blessed with only because of the virus otherwise I would be a communications major just like everyone else on my team.” This student was able to take an unfortunate event and capitalize on it to pursue the desired career. While these two narratives reflect bipolar sides of the experience, COVID-19 was only mentioned by name six times by participants during the entirety of 2020, bringing the realization of the number of things going on simultaneously throughout the year. In comparison, the social unrest that occurred during 2020 was spoken about at length by participants.
Social Unrest and the Athlete Voice

Participants explained how the current sociopolitical climate hindered or sparked exploration of their identities. Of those who shared that the state of politics and social issues hindered their exploration, they frequently argued that they worried about their physical and emotional safety. However, other students were sparked to explore their identities because of the role models that they were witnessing first-hand and discourses during that sociopolitical climate. One student noted the uptick in social justice activity,

We have seen a major shift in the role of athletes in the issues of the world. Like months ago when the Black Lives Matter movement came about, we saw many social media posts, protests, and fundraising that professional athletes contributed too.

Also referring to the same movement, another student wrote,

The Black Lives Matter movement brings together people from many different races, classes, and gender to support one great cause. Being an African American male this movement really hits home for me. This has also impacted sports and sports play a big part of my life.

As shown here, students were able to find allies during the unrest.

Some students had the opportunity to participate in social activism themselves and shared their experiences:

At the beginning of the semester there were some conflicts with the deaths of African Americans which were being killed by cops and in some cases, there was really no need for that much violence specially since what they had done was not as bad. In our Campus the student athletes held some sort of rally to show how united we were and showing that no matter your race, color, or, gender we were all together to the point where the Police department was there with us supporting us and uniting with us.
These type of things took place all over the nation and in most universities and colleges where students and student athletes came together and marched united holding each other to show the unity and the power of how united we were and not just because of your race you weren’t welcome or that we wouldn’t like you.

In these statements, student-athletes share experiences where opportunities were found to gather and support rather than divide and ridicule. Other experiences, however, were quite different. When faced with the decision to stand up for what they believed in, some students experienced the dark underbelly of American racism:

For example, a few of my teammates recently took a knee during the national anthem. After doing so they received a lot of backlash and hatred from the community with calling them disrespectful to the country. Taking a knee was an example of protesting for the excessive use of police brutality against black lives. The Flag stands for freedom and justice for all in the country while still to this day Black Lives are being discriminated against each day.

Unfortunately, in conjunction with the community backlash, student-athletes also got to see how their leadership responded to the use of voice as well, “Our head coach at the time was pacing up and down the sidelines worrying about the situation telling players to stand up and to link arms instead of kneeling.” Similarly, another student shared an instance where they felt unsupported by their coaches:

Another example, the George Floyd incident, all sport teams weeks later were called upon on Zoom to give our statements and things about how the world reacted saying all the things such as “All lives matter, Police live matters, and Black lives matter.” Everyone wanted us to talk about those things and what we thought of it, but it seems
like we weren’t getting backed up at all by the coaches when our thoughts were brought out. We as athletes are supposed to trust those guys and they couldn’t really say much about it or to the community when they all came for the athletes for speaking our thought's. I say this because most of the people they recruit are of color and made no sense how they couldn’t back us up on the thoughts that were poured out.

Students learned quickly when and where they were allowed to use their own voice (rarely) and when to use the institution's voice (more frequently). They also learned that utilizing their voice was often a double-edged sword. Specifically referring to the community, one student explained, “Athletes can’t win in these types of situations because when they do their best to help out, many people say that their help isn't good enough. It’s hard to satisfy people especially when they are complete strangers.” Students alluded to the use of social media throughout their documentation of social unrest and use of athlete’s voices, leading us into social influence during unrest.

From places of isolation, social media was used to communicate broadly and swiftly during 2020. One student’s perspective on the influence and power of social media, “In this era, using your social media platform is a great way to reach millions of people with just a click of a button and people who have a large following can easily benefit from this.”

Student’s also commented on the monitoring of social media with statements like,

Social media plays a big impact on how society is formed today and how athletes are impacted by society. With social media being so big, as a student-athlete or a professional athlete you’re constantly being monitored by your peers, coaches, and fans.
The overarching theme of social media is that it is another heavily monitored and controlled space for athletes:

Many people are proud that these athletes are using their rhetoric to make noise, make more people listen to the problem at hand; however, many people have voiced their utter disapproval of these public outcries. Many of the athletes have been slandered for their demonstrations. I see more often than not that when athletes, in particular, make public statements regarding the controversy, they simply amount to their athletic ability and nothing more. These players are instructed to stay quiet. So, they are stooped to a lesser podium than that of an American citizen who is entitled to an opinion and freedom of speech. They are instructed to “shut up and dribble.”

Growing accustomed to critique seems necessary in order to be an active user of both voice and social media. So, while social media is utilized as an outlet, its usage comes with this general understanding, “The public eye ridicules them for ever having a voice and this is something that has been going on for a very long time.” Thus far, the loss of sport, social unrest and the usage of social media has been discussed in relation to 2020. Each of these uniquely influenced the next salient experience for student athletes: mental and physical health concerns.

**Mental and Physical Health Concerns**

Concerns about this population’s mental health, especially during the pivotal time of meaning making and identity exploration, have been increasing in the last decade. Because identity development and mental health may have a strong relationship with one another (Hardy et al., 2013), the correlation must be addressed. While not all examples of mental and physical health are related specifically to 2020 in the ensuing section, the curriculum
explored during this time along with the absence of sport certainly allowed and fostered the space for discovery in this space.

Participants were instructed to watch a TedTalk where a former University of Southern California volleyball player shared her experiences with academic and athletic pressure, mental health, and how she portrayed a false reality on social media. One student’s response: “No one understands how overwhelming our lifestyles can be. At a certain point the sport becomes more of a job on top of everything else we have to take care of, rather than something fun to do.” Another student echoes the sentiment, but with more detail:

The “hidden” identity behind an athlete may shock most. A typical college athlete’s schedule is far more impacted and filled than your normal average joe’s. Coming from experience, you wake up at 530am to get to treatment and weight training at 6am, you have meetings from 8 to 10am, you practice until 1230pm, you barely get enough time to shower and change and then right off to class from 1 to 5pm, often time afterwards heading back to the facility to meet with your coach again about the upcoming game plan for another hour, so it’s now 6pm and you need to eat dinner. Not to mention it’s now 730pm and you have midterms next week and have to grind out some homework. It may now be around 8 to 9pm, and the day is basically over. You have already had an eventful day, and yet none of the mentioned activities above consist of “normal” activities humans like to do (social life, significant other time, etc). This typical schedule is in effect for at least five, sometimes six of the seven days in the week.
Anyone performing at this rate and level is destined for burnout. Returning to the topic of pressure, documented in previous sections, students also noted the change of mentality and performance under this amount of pressure,

Being a student athlete can take a toll on you and it can change you to someone you never knew, you can start to deal with depression, anxiety, random little panic attacks before games because you get yourself all worked up for no reason. That’s me, I would have random breakdowns during practice, before games and even after games because I would just overthink my performance or just needed to cry. I started seeing a psychiatrist and things gradually get better. I learned how to cope with my anxiety by meditating before games and one day I tried to play without meditating and I broke down at halftime balling my eyes out as I was just everywhere in my head.

In addition to the pressure, participants also cited the culture of athletics as a reason they hid their true emotions, “Athletes don’t like to speak up about the things that they are dealing with because they know if they slack off on the field that the coaches will try to find their replacement.” Masking issues and remaining “tough” has led to bigger issues, as indicated by another student:

On a personal note, I can vouch for the idea that many student athletes are afraid to admit when they are struggling. Instead, for whatever reasons, they try to hide and mask these issues, which ultimately lead to bigger problems later on down the road. The issue of depression and mental health has been an ongoing issue in college athletics, and thankfully has raised awareness that has led to the student athletes getting the proper care that they need.
Whether from physical injuries, mental capacity or athletic culture, student-athletes are experiencing mental and physical health issues at an increasing rate.

Summary

This section acknowledged student-athletes’ ability to contextualize their identities based on the availability of spaces (or lack thereof) in which to explore them. These findings highlight what allowed students to learn more about their identities. This includes their academics, activism, athletic demands and overall health. These environments ultimately influenced how students saw their identities as intersecting or separate and how they built their capacity for meaning making.

Developing Meaning-Making Capacity in Relation to Oppressive Systems

Within the process of identity exploration, student-athletes faced the task of unlearning oppressive messages and systems. For the participants, collegiate athletics should be a time to think critically about accepting external forces as truth, with several students stating their desire to make decisions using more internal mechanisms. Importantly, this move away from external meaning-making was complicatedly tied to the forms of marginalization that students encountered. By going through the cycle of unlearning, students’ meaning-making developed. Their meaning-making began to resist external forces, expanding their understanding to see their marginalized social identities as more than disadvantages. Respectively, these students’ comments about their process of identity exploration described a change from relying on oppressive external influences to direct their sense of self; instead, the student-athletes in this study began to question these influences. Consequently, they slowed their internalization of others’ ideas of themselves, specifically
those rooted in discrimination and hegemony, and started to progress towards a meaning-making structure where they embraced more empowering perceptions of their identities.

**Unlearning Internalized Narratives of Oppression**

To start, participants explored the ideas and thoughts that they held about their own social identities. Unlearning involved students moving away from stereotypes that had previously been internalized and, conversely, learning how their knowledge about social identities expanded as they continued learning about them. One way that the student-athletes unlearned concepts about their identities required moving away from stereotypes that they once believed, rooted deeply in systemic oppression. One student shared how readings in the course helped them challenge the ideas that they once held:

What I take away from learning about this topic is to not judge a book by its cover. Race and other traits are not as important as we make them seem as people can be highly educated, religious, and cultured different. There is not a certain standard that people must obey. Everyone can be different.

Instances of unlearning were particularly important for participants who had internalized these ideas, instead, they were able to explore what their identity meant to them outside of these stereotypes. For example, one student wrote, “We must recognize that all unique experiences of identity, and mainly ones that involve multiple overlapping oppressions, are true.” Students were able to navigate what this means for them personally and how they can embrace their identities outside of white dominant standards.

Another example of this can be seen when students specifically talked about how the curriculum allowed them to reevaluate the influences in their lives. One student’s perspective:
From my own experiences, I have been in that way of thinking where sports were above all, but college really only sealed the deal on that. In reality, it had been going on for years from my parents, younger coaches, teammates across my career, and society as a whole that had build me up in one direction, just baseball. However, with this reading, it is giving me pause and time to reflect on if these aspects are genuine and I do believe it is true like some people said. I do think that mentality has mess in how we see the world and that will have negative effects on us as we may not see our whole selves, but just our sports selves and only build up on that part of our identity while neglecting others despite what the NCAA claims they do.

By moving their own thoughts away from stereotyping oppression, students were able to evaluate their lives beyond sport as well. Students described how they learned new ideas tied to their identities and discussed how they began to see identity as fluid based on life experiences. One student stated the following powerful and true realization, “Also, realizing where your self-worth lies and not tying it to one thing or attribute.” Content in this course allowed participants to comprehend that stereotypes are not natural but created by colonialism.

Recognizing structures of dominations emboldened people to understand how (and by whom) they manifest. One example of the ways that participants unlearned behavior was understanding and evaluating how personal and societal influences taught them to assimilate to dominant norms, “In today’s age you see more kids speaking out against their parents’ views and this is a good thing because now they are speaking for themselves and not something they were just told.” Through exposure to new understandings, participants gained the knowledge necessary to unlearn submissive behaviors, including in the classroom and on
the field. These examples showcase the value that exploration had on student-athletes’ ability to speak up and refuse normative expectations that marginalize.

**Questioning Current Beliefs and Intent of Others**

The change from external to internal ways of making meaning was apparent in three main ways throughout the data: self, others, and systems. Participants were able to clearly articulate ways they began questioning what they once understood as true or things they had never considered before. For example, students learned that they must first understand their position in the world (and in relation to the curriculum) in order to start understanding the macro systems from within. One student created understanding around the term reflexivity by sharing, “Reflexivity requires you to critique yourself.” As illustrated in previous sections, students familiarize themselves with this process of critique throughout course topics. By doing this, students displayed confidence in how to share the importance of recognizing self in relation to others. For example, also on reflexivity a participant stated:

This is super important in being on a team as well, as you have people from all across the country who may not have the same skin color or speak the same language or may have different beliefs, and we all know that in order to be a successful team, the individuals must come together as one. If something negative occurs, before calling out a teammate, one should look at themselves first and really try to understand what went wrong (from multiple perspectives), instead of pointing fingers at others first. Students described how this way of thinking about their relation to topics allowed them to shift to an internal voice and subsequently grow in their identities.
When considering others, student-athletes who had not experienced specifically described oppression personally, were able to examine those around them to gain a more aware understanding. For example, a student-athlete detailed:

I play on a basketball team that is majority black women, and I always hear how they feel and how they wish they could say and do certain things. I physically don’t know how it is but knowing that my sisters are always being looked at differently just because of their skin colors irritates me more than anything in the world. I have seen and heard how they are treated and looked at because they are black, I remember we were playing Wyoming in Wyoming my sophomore year and the fans at the game were calling my teammates the full-on N word and they were doing it repeatedly. This past season we were playing in Wyoming again and they called my teammates “thugs” because of how aggressive they were playing, after my team heard they told my coach and those fans were escorted out the gymnasium. I never thought I would experience people calling my teammates harsh names or even categorizing them like they know them.

Rather than basing their views on their own experiences, reflexive and intersectional curriculum allowed student-athletes to weigh on the experience of their peers more heavily, resulting in a more complex form of meaning-making tied to the process of exploring. Additionally, they were able to look at the broader experience of student-athletes within systems and question the intentions. The following student spoke specifically about their experiences in 2020:

As we all know football and other sports were temporarily cancelled due to COVID-19 (in which they are now playing again), but part of me believes that these issues
regarding amateurism among the NCAA were key factors that played into the decisions to initially shut down. There were no answers, and the NCAA was and is in fact, still afraid of the power of the student athlete voice in todays society. This was a unique perspective amongst the group, but illustrates a critical thinking approach to systems of power. Rather than accepting one narrative provided to explain decision making, this student looked at all factors that could have impacted the circumstance. These examples show the micro to macro level analysis and critiquing skills students gained through self-conceptualization practices. Unlearning and questioning are foundational in the goals of identity exploration.

Summary
This section underscored the relationship between student’s meaning-making abilities and their process of identity exploration in context to their surroundings. Participants increasingly challenged the oppressive external forces that had guided their thoughts and actions previously, particularly concerning their social identities. They questioned the marginalizing discourse and began to expand their understandings to more of an empowered view of their and their peers' identities. Thus, unlearning and questioning led to more in-depth approaches to meaning making for student athletes. Meaning making relates directly to the outcomes in the next section, goals of exploring identities.

Goals of Exploring Identities
This final section conveys the purpose of the grounded theory study: goals of identity exploration. Specifically, student-athletes overwhelmingly expressed their desire to have more autonomy and a stronger sense of self. In order to do this, students were challenged to denounce previously held notions imparted by systems of oppression and better develop their
skills in claiming autonomy and self-definition. The following subsections further elaborate on how students shared their hopes and realizations around their identities, making connections to meaning making.

**Not Internalizing Systemic Influences**

One pattern that emerged in both the reflection and critical writing papers was the desire to move away from internalizing systemic influences that made them question their own identities. Rather than simply caring what others thought of them, they wanted to grow into a place where they could negotiate the external view of others. This particular student discusses the importance of branching out of the student-athlete box they are put into:

To claim to understand one’s experience by measuring them up to only one social characteristic, such as being a student-athlete, is to disregard the spider-web that is personal experience and identification. This idea can and should be dragged on to any human attempting to understand other humans’ actions or attitudes. To have empathy is to understand the inner workings of intersectionality, and to realize that you may never understand, but you will work to continually educate yourself on the matter.

This pattern was apparent in two contexts: 1) Like the one above, students began to see the importance of their identity outside of sport and learn the power of their influence as student athletes and 2) the participants learned how to navigate race relations with greater understanding of their place in the world.

To begin, here are a few examples of students looking at their identities outside of sport, the importance and the voice that came from the exploration:

The lack of exploration into other careers outside of their sport can lead to lack of development of other skills. The future earning potential of a person decreases in their
respective field when an athlete is forced into choosing their athletic career over their professional one.

This student began to see the implications of staying within the confines assigned to them. Another student shares how they use adversity as inspiration to maintain growth:

There has been a saying for a long time now. It is ‘If it was easy everyone would be doing.’ I tell myself this every day when facing a hardship. If only society knew what we go through out life it would be easier for us to adjust. This takes mental training and reflexivity gives athletes the tools they need to break through these mental barriers that limit their performance.

If all student-athletes were able to recognize systemic influences and pivot them into opportunities of growth, the outcome would be as described below. Another student shared, “Student athletes have more power than they know. They have the ability to change the landscape on how to view the world. Many of these student athletes have the power to engage in a higher purpose.” With resources, context and framing, students better understand how to utilize the system that is using them. Additionally, students can better understand the trials of those that came before them and truly lean into the narrative to claim influence for good as one student described:

However, after watching the video and reading this week’s reading I have a deeper understanding of the history behind the activism that we are seeing today. Many of the athletes that we look up to today are not scared to voice their opinions in our society, even when they have the President of the United States saying terrible things about them. As a student athlete I am proud to follow behind these great athletes and
recognize that because of my athletic abilities I have greater benefits, perks, and expectations than a normal student.

Feelings of not being pre-defined and not being alone are displayed throughout these statements. It was commonly found that when students were able to mentally break out of one box, they were able to continue doing the same from within others. Specifically, students were able to negotiate the racial systems ascribed to them.

One student in particular was able to view the social unrest and define her own interaction with it:

I think that for me as a Black African American woman running track and field, I have been shaped by all of these incidents because I know that although I am an athlete, I am also a citizen of America. If I feel that the country I am from is not performing at a morally ethical level, I know that I have the right to stand up for not only me, other athletes, my family, and my community.

Importantly, this student saw herself as something bigger than her gender, color of skin, or role as an athlete. Two other students shared their experiences as athletes of color as well, but in the larger context of life and trajectory. One student writes, “When you are a man of color you don’t get the same opportunities as say someone of white decent. This is the main reason that people of color go so hard in everything they do because they know it could be over in a blink of an eye.” The second student states:

When it was the white man with a lot of money-making decisions, it was his way, or the highway and we still deal with that issue today in most cases. All they care about is what have you done for me recently and if it isn’t up to par it’s the next man up.
The participants' understanding of systemic oppression allowed them to navigate accordingly. Conversely, another student shares:

I am white, so predisposed with privilege. Privilege to be given the benefit of the doubt, the privilege to feel safe around law enforcement, and the privilege to use my voice without being accused of being a partisan of some radical anti-America group. Rather than denying the presence of racism, these individuals learned to develop the internal mechanisms necessary to not internalize harmful messages about what it means to live within their intersectional identities (and in the case of the last student, how to understand their own privilege). When looked at from a perspective of meaning making (Kegan, 1982, 1984), this goal represents a transition to better developed meaning making structures and relying on one’s internal voice to see themselves and their worth within an oppressive society. From here, students are able to utilize a new critical tool kit to pave their path toward their own life definition.

**Taking Ownership and Claiming Autonomy**

In their course submissions, individuals stated they had an active desire to find methods to push against the manifestations of power and toward autonomy of their own lives. For these students, having a secure sense of self helped to do this work of ownership more easily. One student shares, in detail, their journey to finding a voice,

Nothing has shaped the identity of an athlete more than the issues that we are facing as a country right now. The obvious issue is the racism that exists in our country, and athletes all over the country have taken a stand. From the Milwaukee Bucks, an NBA team who boycotted a playoff game after the death of Jacob Blake, to Collin Kaepernick, an NFL quarterback who lost everything he had when he stood up for
what he believed in about racial issues in our country, to more specifically college
student athletes taking a stance and uniting as one in order to achieve a goal. This
movement has impacted myself on a personal note, as many of my fellow teammates
joined a group labeled “The Mountain West United,” which consisted of many
players from each team in the conference, with the goal of coming together as an
entire conference to establish appropriate and safe COVID guidelines for all student
athletes as well as issues regarding amateurism in the NCAA, voicing our opinions
that athletes should be compensated for their hard work on and off the field in a fair
manner. Nearly every conference in the football joined together with similar groups,
showing unity across college football, and at one point threatened to boycott football
all together if the said agreements were not met by the Universities, conferences and
the NCAA. The power of the student athletes who rose up and spoke out for what
they believed in was incredible and quite frankly blew away the NCAA, which has
primarily been run in a ways that have not given student athletes a fair voice. This
goes to show the evolution of the student athletes over time, as we are now way more
than just great athletes on a field, we have voices that are now being heard, and a
platform that is being utilized for positive change in society.
Student-athletes engaged in this manner throughout 2020 and the course topics, finding
themselves in the curriculum and their voice in the narratives. They felt empowered to not
only make their personal situations better, but also the future for those who follow. One
student encourages, “We have to be the ones to fight for what we deserve, but we have to
teach athletes first that education is an important thing they need in their life, because sports
don’t last forever.” Being able to first understand one’s reality and then shift to using it for the benefit of others shows another intersectional identity skill set.

Students shared several more “a-ha” moments within their writings, making statements like, “When you develop the person outside of being an athlete you give them a better chance to be successful outside of sports instead of the person having to find themselves after their time in college athletics has ended.” As well as, “Now I know that it’s okay to be selfish and take care of yourself because if you aren’t in order with yourself then you will not be able to perform at your best ability.” Through conversations like these, participants displayed a more secure sense of self and a resiliency necessary to resist and educate others about systems of power and oppression. By taking the educator role, participants in this study foresaw the benefits for others who identified similarly.

**Summary**

This section illustrates the goal that emerged from the participants’ stories. Student-athletes mentioned the benefits of making correlations between their understanding of self and systems of oppression, leading to a more secure sense of self. For some, this meant they were better equipped to shift away from internalized oppressive influences. For others, the process allowed them to better their own lives and the lives of others by taking ownership and claiming autonomy. Although this shift began during 2020, students articulated the desire to live consciously and prepared for oppression on a consistent basis.

**Conclusion**

The results presented in this chapter included the approach developed from the findings, show the different components that comprised the identity expiration process for student-athletes in 2020 and conveys the role of meaning making in exploration. The
information in this chapter has the opportunity to contribute to practice and policy in the field of higher education and collegiate athletics. As described in the findings, student-athletes were forced to explore their identities through systems of power, salient events in 2020, and the process of unlearning and questioning. These participants provided examples of their social identities that they were encouraged to further understand and influenced their current reality. Ultimately, student-athletes were engaged in a cycle of learning and unlearning influences in relation to power. Specifically, participants pointed out the NCAA, local contexts, social unrest and interpersonal interactions as sites in which systems of power manifested.

The narratives offered by the student-athletes showcased how their meaning-making structures developed, moving away from external oppressive influences and toward an internally directed voice. Lastly, participants shared outcomes and goals of this type of work. Students hoped to achieve a secure sense of self where they were better equipped to filter negative messages and resist oppressive structures. To actualize the potential that this emerging theory has for higher education and college athletics, chapter six presents a discussion of the findings in conjunction with implication for research and practice.
Chapter 6:
Discussion and Implications

The previous chapter presented the results that led to the grounded theory of Reflexive and Intersectional Approach to Identity Exploration of Student-Athletes. This chapter explains how the grounded theory relates to the research questions that guided the study. Next the findings will be situated within the current literature landscape, sharing both how this research speaks to the existing scholarship and how this study contributes to knowledge of student-athlete identity. Following the discussion, implications for practice, theory development and research will be proposed. Lastly, limitations and strengths of this study will be shared before concluding with a brief explanation of how the researcher’s own perception developed throughout the data analysis process.

Emerging Theory in Relation to Research Questions/Strengths of the Study

This section positions the emergent grounded theory in connection to the three research questions that framed the study. As a reminder, the purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand how student-athletes explored and made meaning of their intersecting identities through identity-focused curriculum against the backdrop of 2020. The research questions included:

1. How did student-athletes explore and make meaning of their identities against the backdrop of 2020?

2. How did the loss of athletics play a role in the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?

3. How did systems of power influence the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?
The following subsections expand on how the emerging grounded theory served as a response to the individual research questions.

**RQ1: How did student-athletes explore and make meaning of their identities against the backdrop of 2020?**

Results from the emerging grounded theory suggest that identity is a complex process for student-athletes; the year 2020 was uniquely rare in the amount of shared experiences through global and national unrest, which demanded the consideration of environmental effects on identity construction and development. During this time, individuals engaged in a cycle of learning and unlearning in relation to their intersecting identities (race, gender, class, sport, etc.). Yet, it is important to echo Rodgers’ (2009) argument that learning is related, but distinct, from development; even though participants were explicit in naming what they were learning and unlearning, it is crucial to acknowledge that these were tasks they navigated in order to develop in their understandings of identity.

Data from this research indicates that exploration involved four dimensions, two of which (cognitive and behavioral) have been prominently studied in past scholarship around identity (Marcia & Archer, 1993). In their study, Marcia & Archer (1993) explain cognitive and behavioral dimensions are where people evaluate their identity through internal thinking and also by searching for experiences that help them learn more. To that note, participants in this study first indicated that exploring one’s identities includes expanding their ideas about what it means to be a student-athlete with intersecting identities (cognitive). This dimension included learning about systemic oppression that influenced how they perceived their identities and others viewed them. Additionally, participants gained knowledge about language pertaining to their identities that developed an understanding that identity was fluid.
This led to new ways that they understood their own selves. Student-athletes in this study saw the potential to understand and shape their identities in more fluid manners. While learning new ways of thinking, students also unlearned the stereotypes they had previously accepted about their identity groups. These findings resemble the research on identity exploration (Phinney, 1993) and identity (Helms, 1995) that communicate an affective layer to processing. This unlearning encouraged students to move away from norms that were ultimately rooted in dominant systems of oppression.

Next, identity exploration for student-athletes involved a behavioral dimension which included acknowledging and learning from people who held similar identities and experiences. For example, participants shared how they followed professional athletes on social media who could provide them perspective on their own identity and voice. Students in this study shared how acting on and/or making sense of interpersonal interactions allowed them to reflect on their intersecting identities and unlearn their previously accepted marginalized assignments (e.g. dumb jock) (Wininger & White, 2015; Stone et.al, 2012).

Finally, participants commented on how the process of exploration allowed them to unlearn dominant conceptualizations of how/what they should become with their athlete identity. Beyond the cognitive and behavioral dimensions in the identity literature (Marcia & Archer, 1993), data from this study indicates that this process entails an affective dimension supporting the works on identity such as Phinney (1993) and Helms (1995). This dimension was illustrated by student-athletes naming the feelings and emotions they experienced during the exploration of their identities. For example, participants shared their sentiments on how they were able to find autonomy and pride in their existing identities, coming out from the shadows of the oppressive systems.
The final dimension that surfaced in the study showed how student-athletes developed a connection to a larger social group and began to historicize their identities. Not only were participants thinking about their identities in an individual way but also as a member of a social identity group as members of teams, but also the student-athlete population as a whole. This pattern illustrates how early conceptualization of social identity theory still holds true for student-athletes (Tajfel, 1978, 1982). By researching athletes who experienced times of turmoil much like their own experiences, participants were able to learn from and uphold standards previously set for them. Ultimately, in exploring their identities, student-athletes in this study learned that they were not alone.

The intersectional approach that guided this dissertation emphasized the need to understand within-group differences that exist in individual and group identities (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Through their papers, participants expressed that other social identities influenced how they thought about their intersecting identities. Students named gender, race, sport, sexuality and socioeconomic status as identities that were tied to systems of oppression. Additionally, the results revealed that having access to learning spaces where active critical thinking about intersections of identities greatly informed whether participants explored their identities separately or in intersectional ways.

RQ2: How did the loss of athletics play a role in the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?

The previous section describes how identity exploration occurs for student-athletes, this section will answer what contributed to this process. Reflected in the emergent grounded theory, data showed that 2020 played a major role as student-athletes explored their intersectional identities. Participants documented the changes they endured during this time
and were able to draw correlations to their developing identities. For students, the role of 2020 was critical because it provided real experiences in place of what were once hypothetical circumstances. For example, losing athletic and academic support systems, stopping interactions with sports, teams and coaches, witnessing social unrest, and having unscheduled time to explore alternative interests were unprecedented experiences for student-athletes prior to 2020. Students were able to engage each of their identities throughout the happenings of 2020. Because of this, they were able to see opportunities for identity growth in spaces they had not before considered. Perhaps, the loss of athlete-specific systems and resources was not actually a “loss,” as student-athletes were allowed the space and opportunity to explore identities without oversight.

Student-athletes described ways that extracurricular activities would assist them as they explored identities outside of sport, echoing the scholarship that examined the role of student organizations in the lives of marginalized college students (Carter, 2013; Duran, 2018b; Goode-Cross, 2009; Goode-Cross, 2008; Narui, 2011a, 2011b) finding that students who were supported by small groups of peers who understood their marginalized identities felt a strong sense of belonging. Connected to the idea of extracurricular, students also cited student resource centers as spaces for additional developmental opportunities. It was in these spaces that students most frequently mentioned the availability of mentor relationships with similarly-identified professionals. In addition to extracurriculars, participants underscored the value of being taken seriously in, and given the same opportunities in, academics. Student-athletes cited discussions within classrooms with both faculty and peers as another way to explore identities. These spaces provided language and insights into understanding who they
are and/or who they want to become. These findings provide vital information about how academic spaces influence the process of identity exploration.

**RQ3: How did systems of power influence the process of identity exploration for student-athletes in 2020?**

This constructivist grounded theory study sought out to understand not only how student-athletes explored their identities in 2020, but also how systems of power influenced the process. The theoretical framework of intersectionality lent itself to this study with power as a sensitizing concept (Charmaz, 2014). In their reflections, participants articulated the different manifestations of power they encountered while exploring their intersectional identities.

In particular, students named the NCAA as grounded in oppressive ideology, calling the organization deceitful and only interested in profit. As the overarching oversight association for collegiate athletics, students in the study had little faith in the organization's ability to develop them as humans. Most of the comments from students regarding the NCAA included lack of development and unequal distribution of revenue. This led participants to consider what it would look like for student-athletes to be paid in relation to their earnings for the school (something that did not come to fruition until 2021 with the Name, Image and Likeness ruling mentioned in a previous section). Beyond this space, students detailed how the current sociopolitical climate hindered or sparked exploration of their identities. Those that argued that their exploration was hindered, stated that they worried about their physical and emotional safety. On the other hand, students who were encouraged to explore their identities during this time attributed the attention given to oppressive discourses. They were able to find community in those that fought the discourses.
together. Realities during this time highlighted how siloed identity spaces may not integrate an attention to other marginalized identities (Duran, 2017; Strayhorn, 2013).

Finally, students addressed the role of meaning making (Kegan, 1982, 1984) within systems of power. The findings emerged related to the existing literature on meaning making for those with marginalized identities (Abes, 2012; Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Hernández, 2012; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Torres, 2009; Torres & Hernandez, 2007) that stated more developed meaning-making structures supported students in challenging the marginalizing societal discourses that positioned their multiple oppressed identities as less than. In unlearning oppressive ideas, student-athletes began to shift away from relying on external forces and unpacked internalized oppression. One way that participants started to develop more complex meaning-making structures was by relying less on parental/familial influences, this was sparked most for those student-athletes that moved away from home to pursue their athletic careers. With their new-found autonomy, students increasingly questioned ideologies of oppressive systems at play. These themes pertaining to meaning making have vital implications for how scholars understand individuals with multiple marginalized identities, as highlighted in the next sections.

**Relationship of Grounded Theory to Existing Literature**

In addition to explaining how the findings answered the original research questions guiding the study, it is also important to understand how the theory ties into and extends the existing literature. By taking an intersectional approach to this study, the analysis provides key insights about the possibility of third wave perspectives. For the discussion, references to the bodies of scholarship offered in chapter two, including research on how systems of power manifest at historically white institutions (NCAA), perspectives on identity, and an overview
of literature on student-athlete identity is provided. These areas of research served as key concepts in this study (Charmaz, 2014).

This section will first begin by articulating how this research fills important gaps in the study of identity exploration and the notion of a sense of self. Next, description of how the study presents an intricate relationship between collegiate environments (or lack thereof) and identity exploration is detailed. To conclude, connections are drawn between manifestations of power, meaning making, and college student identity (often robbed from student-athletes). By revisiting these areas of literature, contributions are shared on how this grounded theory adds to the existing research.

**Identity Exploration Contextualized by Power**

Results from this study provide a needed perspective on college student identity, especially for student-athletes. By examining the existing research within the area of student development, insight into the multiple identities that individuals hold have grown in the last twenty years (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Wijeyesinghe, 2012), transitioning away from examining a person’s journey to understand a singular social identity. This space in literature argues that scholars and practitioners need to understand the complexity that exists at the intersections of identities. However, when it comes to social identity development, there is a shortage of research that examines identity intersections, especially for those who navigate college as a student-athlete (Patton et al., 2016). Thus, this study fills gaps in research by bringing attention to how student-athletes explore their personal intersecting identities against the backdrop of 2020.

To begin, one way this study adds to existing literature is its contribution to research on the process of identity exploration. Specifically, this dissertation used the concept first
shared by developmental psychologist James Marcia (Kroger & Marcia, 2001; Marcia, 1966, 1994; Marcia & Archer, 1993). Marcia’s work (1966, 1994) focused primarily on the development of ego identity, building on the work of Erik Erikson (1963, 1964, 1968, 1994) through empirical research, this research investigated how exploration happens in context to the realm of social identities. While Phinney (1993) Dillon et al. (2011) used Marcia’s (1966, 1994) identity exploration in their own research, this study is one of the first to examine the exploration of multiple social identities. This approach resulted in the idea that social identities regularly inform how participants explored their intersecting identities. This means, specifically for those with multiple marginalized identities, that identity exploration is fluid and takes different forms at different times, depending on context.

Looking specifically at the process of exploration, required of people to develop their identities (Marcia & Archer, 1993), allowed for new perspectives on the dimensions of identity exploration. For example, previous research on identity revealed the role that affect plays in exploration and development (Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1993), this study highlights the ways that internalized oppression manifests during the process. Participants shared that the negative dispositions resulted from oppressive ideologies perpetuated throughout their experiences as student-athletes (Harper, 2018; Hawkins, 2010; Nocera & Strauss, 2015). These researchers documented the ongoing social, political, and economic oppression of student-athletes. Oppressive mindsets are difficult to unlearn because of their pervasiveness within higher education spaces. Second, students in this study started to make sense of where their places are in larger social groups. Previous research on identity exploration largely overlooked the influence that social group membership has on the process ((Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This finding included connection to people in present time as
well as historical figures who shared similar experiences. This result showcases that social identity exploration does not only encapsulate a person’s personal identity but also how they fit within a community. This research can inform future directions on identity exploration by opening up the possibilities of what transpires during the process.

Finally, another way this study expands current understandings of identity exploration and identity broadly is in understanding the goals of the process that emerged in the findings. Across their narratives, student-athletes shared how they hoped to grow a secure sense of self as a result of their exploratory work. High-level, the “secure sense of self” can relate to Erikson’s (1966) formative conceptualization of the ego identity. As noted by Erikson (1966), ego identity explains that people act consistently based on an awareness of how they see themselves and how others see them. Early theories state that one’s sense of self is a component of ego identity (Côté & Levine, 2002), referring to a person’s personal subjectivities. Participants in the study sought to define their identities based on this sense of self, meaning that they would be able to filter negative influences out of their development. Student-athletes in this study who worked to resist oppressive forces replaced them with agency, typical of the third wave (Jones & Stewart, 2016). For this population, a secure sense of self meant actively working to be defined by their own expectations and ideas of self as opposed to society’s notion of who they are. Some participants expressed the idea that having a secure sense of self allowed them to transform the contexts and way they navigated their world. Connected to context, the following section will convey findings in relation to the intricate role of 2020 experiences in identity exploration.
The Intricate Role of Salient 2020 Experiences in Identity Exploration

Participants’ reflections revealed the 2020 experiences that shaped their identity exploration, insights that will benefit staff and faculty in higher education. The findings directly respond to the call made by Patton et al. (2016) to further research how institutional environments influence identity and development. More specifically, these students wished to explore their identities through academics, extracurricular activities, resource centers and mentors in addition to athletics. Important to note, however, these resources only positively assisted in student development when constructed intentionally to do so. Each of these resources should work to affirm people who identify within marginalized communities. This present study and emerging grounded theory shows why this is the case. As mentioned by one student in a previous section, conversations in courses had created the space they needed to think about possibilities of identity beyond those that had been previously supported/encouraged.

Second, student-athletes discussed extracurricular activities that would help them explore the possibilities of what to be outside of a student-athlete. Participants stated that they could meet mentors in the form of staff/alumni, who were valuable in a role modeling sense. Additionally, student-athletes in this study described how club involvement would contribute to their exploration. While some mentioned identity-based organizations, others referenced non-identity based organizations as formative. This result mimics studies like Carter (2013), Chan (2017), Duran (2018a), and Harper et al. (2011) that highlighted the role that non-identity based organizations can play in the lives of marginalized students. Specifically, participants spoke about poetry clubs, fraternities/sororities and honor societies where they found affirmation of their expanding identities. Additionally, students named local and national organizations as serving a formative role in their exploration. Namely, one
student mentioned being a part of a larger student-athlete organization that served as an advisory board to the NCAA on behalf of the conference. This finding is an important reminder that students can also find vital connections off campus that help shape their identities. Beyond the extracurricular experiences, students shared how they experienced instances of oppression, a focus of the next section.

Inextricable Ties Between Power and Identity

This section showcases the relationship that exists between overlapping axes of power and identity. Employing intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) in this study made the researcher more aware of the issues of power and oppression in student’s reflection and critical writing papers. This is important to note, given criticism by feminist scholar communities regarding the misappropriation of intersectionality with people focusing more on intersecting identities, rather than a structural analysis of power (Carastathis, 2013; Collins, 2015; Davis, 2008; May, 2015; Nash, 2011). The following discussion articulates how attention to systems of power transpired in the current study and how it relates to the existing literature. The researcher will continue to relate the participants’ insights to Collins’ (2000/2009) domains of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal), in effort to explicitly name how researchers use the term power (Nunez, 2014).

The data from this study first revealed the ways that the disciplinary and structural forms of power manifested in the lives of student-athletes. The structural domain of power explains how policies within social institutions disenfranchise certain populations, while disciplinary power makes it more difficult for people to access resources (Collins, 2000/2009). Relevant here, participants articulated how disproportionate funding affected student-athlete’s resources and oversight on campus. The disregard for resources and access
to funding made participants feel less valued by their coaches and campus and as though their development was less important than those with unrestricted access. This research also illustrates how the hegemonic domain of power exists in the lives of student-athletes. Hegemonic power is the way that dominant groups in society maintain control over others by perpetuating certain ideologies and cultures (Collins, 2000, 2009). This domain was most pervasive as it manifested for participants through their institutional environments, sociopolitical climate, and cultural dynamics.

To begin, participants shared how they saw their campuses as unwelcoming to individuals who identified as both student-athletes and as People of Color. This aligns with the research that exists on negative climates for Students of Color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Museus et al., 2008; Radloff & Evans, 2003; Rankin & Reason, 2005). This study shows how those with multiple marginalized identities encounter athletic and campus climates that are oppressive towards more than one part of their identity. Furthermore, this research extends the understanding of how the climate of local contexts similarly oppresses those with multiple identities, affecting their ability to explore their identities.

Another manifestation of hegemonic power appeared in the ways that the sociopolitical climate resulted in a hyperawareness of racist and marginalizing discourses for student-athletes. Though little scholarship exists that seeks to understand how this population of students understands the state of politics and social unrest in society, scholars have begun to examine what the sociopolitical climate present in President Trump’s term means for higher education (Scheurich, 2017). This present study adds to this literature by showing that sociopolitical issues that were visible during this time inevitably shaped how people explored
their identities. Notably, student-athletes oftentimes cited physical and emotional safety as one reason why they would not feel comfortable exploring their identities. This study brings attention to the need to comprehend how student-athletes are making sense of the sociopolitical climate on college campuses and how this could impact their identities. Cultural norms and dynamics were the final way that participants recognized the hegemonic domain of power. Participants described how they encountered racism in their athletic and academic worlds. However, some participants had the awareness that these cultural norms frequently resulted from proximity to whiteness. Nevertheless, student-athletes negotiated their identities during their process of exploration within these cultures.

The final type of power that shaped the process of identity exploration in the lives of student-athletes involved the interpersonal domain. The interpersonal domain of power concerns the ways that people are marginalized through everyday interactions (Collins, 2000, 2009). One way in which participants encountered racism and marginalization on an interpersonal level was through microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Previous research has communicated that microaggressions can have a harmful impact on psychological well-being for marginalized populations like Students of Color (Sue et al., 2009). This research adds to this area of scholarship by highlighting the negative effects that microaggressions can have on a person’s ability to explore their identities in higher education. Student-athletes in this study communicated that both faculty and students were capable of committing these interpersonal forms of oppression. The microaggressions that they encountered in the classroom made them less likely to want to explore their academic identities, a significant consequence of this manifestation of power. By experiencing microaggressions from different directions, students may find themselves conforming to an internalized oppressed
view of self, instead of exploring other possibilities. However, one concept that assists in understanding why student-athletes move beyond adopting marginalizing influences is that of meaning making.

**Critical Perspectives on Meaning Making**

Findings from this research showcase the role that meaning making (Kegan, 1982, 1984) plays in the process of identity exploration for student-athletes. As previous scholarship states, college is often a time in a person’s life where they develop more complex forms of knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2009). Rather than relying on external authorities to dictate how they make sense of knowledge, relationships, and their view of self, students move toward constructing meaning from a more internal space when they encounter moments that challenge their previously held ideas. However, as Perez (2019) argued, many researchers who have examined concepts of meaning making in relationship to self-authorship theory have overlooked the ways that privilege and systems of power impact the construct of meaning making. This study makes an intervention by specifically examining the ways that interlocking systems of oppression influence the meaning making of student-athletes. Participants in this study alluded to the fact that meaning making during the process of identity exploration is intractably connected to, and complicated by, overlapping axes of oppression.

This research adds to the still-limited body of literature that uses the construct of meaning making with marginalized populations (Abes, 2012; Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Hernández, 2012; Linder & Rodríguez, 2012; Torres, 2009; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Previous research has often failed to name how systemic oppression informs meaning making (Abes, 2012; Torres, 2009; Hérnandez, 2012). The student-athletes
in this research study provided important perspectives, including how they began to disinvest from systems of whiteness, hegemony, and other forms of marginalization. Unique to the findings from this research, relative to meaning making, is that multiple axes of oppression targeted student-athletes and these individuals needed to consider their relationship to norms within dominant cultures and those of marginalized communities.

The findings in this present study suggest that student-athletes may grow in their meaning making as a result of their identity exploration. Specifically, exploring in the intrapersonal dimension led to cognitive development. As Barber, King, and Baxter Magolda (2013) found, more developed meaning-making structures can emerge as a result of experiences that demand an internal voice and that cause dissonance. Specific to marginalized populations, research shows this development occurs when individuals begin to recognize the oppressive thoughts pertaining to one of their identities (Salazar & Abrams, 2018). For those with multiple oppressed identities, acknowledging systems tied to their identities is complicated when they navigate spaces that cater toward one identity more than, or not at all to, the other. Because the participants constantly face marginalization, the exploration of their identities came with a need for more developed meaning making. While participants were engaging in learning and unlearning, they engaged in an increasingly intricate form of meaning making to resist the internalization of multiple systems of oppression.

In the realm of interlocking systems of power, this study provides proof of connection between complex meaning and the ability to filter out systemic influences. Even though participants could only hypothesize that this would occur, their sentiments suggested that a potential outcome of identity exploration would be a secure sense of self. Student-athletes
described how this secure sense of self would enable them to resist the internalization of discourses in systems like racism and marginalization. This finding correlates to scholarship such as Abes (2012), Jones and Abes (2013), and Torres (2009) which argued that there is a developmental relationship between meaning making and structural inequalities. As Student-athletes are constantly encountering interlocking systems of oppression in their process of learning and unlearning, they are actively looking for support to aid in the development of structures that can filter out these influences. Their search for a secure sense of self indicates that student-athletes seek a means to deal with the affective realities that come with holding marginalized identities. As Okello (2018) shared, understandings of self-authorship (and meaning making) are limited by an inattention to the emotional, physiological, and historical experiences that marginalized people encounter. To this point, student-athletes communicated their hopes in exploring identities were to grow their identities such that they are able to find peace and success in bodies that inherently leave them behind the curve. Moreover, some of the student-athletes sought to actualize their agency in moving toward a more secure sense of self by actively working against systemic oppression (for both themselves and their teammates).

**Implications for Higher Education Practice and Policy**

This section outlines implications for higher education practice, influencing how faculty, staff, and institutions view their responsibility in helping student-athletes explore and make meaning of their identities. One of the core theoretical interventions that intersectionality makes is the promotion of social justice and social action goals (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). In the context of higher education, promoting social action must involve reimagining the approach in which institutional policies, practices, and structures
disenfranchise those with multiple marginalized identities, including student-athletes. Aligning with the belief that those with marginalized identities have the knowledge necessary to advance visions of social justice (Nash, 2008), participants were asked to include in their final paper how their understanding of student-athlete identity had changed and what they would like to see happen differently in their experiences as one. Students shared the recommendations that they have for faculty, staff (including coaches), the NCAA and higher education institutions themselves. The researcher acknowledged how these recommendations attend to Collins’ (2000/2009) domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The participants’ narratives and this analysis of power are integrated into the following subsections in order to honor the students’ knowledge, which scholars and practitioners must consider in order to advocate for student-athletes.

**Faculty and Staff**

When asked about what faculty and staff could do to better help student-athletes explore their identities, participants described the need for faculty to be more intentional about how they engage with student-athletes and their athletic demands. This recommendation supports the literature that shows that classroom environments perpetuate oppressive messages about who is worthy to produce knowledge (Basile & Lopez, 2015; Gurin et al., 2002; Linley & Nguyen, 2015). Doing so ultimately maintains a hegemonic form of power (Collins, 2000/2009). One student shares their experience in trying to make it all work in spite of faculty disinterest:

I can bring up times that sports have got in the way of my education because I have spent so much time practicing and preparing for competition. It can be stressful because I take school seriously and missing class or not getting an assignment done
took a toll on me mentally because it was never like me to miss class or miss an assignment. I had to prepare myself better for my education by understanding my class schedule and being able to make the right schedule for me that works with me being an athlete. It was stressful for me at first because it felt as if I had such little time and it felt like I couldn’t get anything done. It took a lot of time and effort, but I finally figured out a way of balancing my student-athlete life.

By not considering the additional demands on, or perspectives of, marginalized communities, faculty support structures of oppression by not addressing how struggles are intersectional. Based on the participants’ recommendations, faculty should diversify their approaches (i.e., their syllabi, assignments, and activities), which could then assist student-athletes exploring and making meaning of their identities. Beyond courses that already touch upon ideas about identity (e.g., women’s studies, gender/sexuality studies, ethnic studies), students also stated that they would encourage all courses to consider how identity may also play a role in students’ ability to engage in the classroom. Faculty could make a more intentional effort to disrupt the racialized and marginalizing assumptions and acknowledge how concepts such as stereotype threat (Steele, 2010) may occur for those who identify with marginalized communities in these courses.

On another note, participants in this research also requested on-campus counseling centers (or student-athlete specific resources) to reflect upon how they are providing identity-conscious support to student-athletes. This is particularly relevant based on the comments that individuals offered about wrestling with feelings of anxiety, depression, and fear of failure connected to their student and athlete identities. This recommendation to provide and train counselors that are focused on students’ identities is
imperative, because student-athletes regularly encounter minority stress due to racist and hegemonic structures (see Cyrus, 2017; Datta et al., 2017). Counseling centers at universities could hire counselors who specialize in student-athlete experiences and are qualified on issues of minority stress for those with multiple marginalized identities. Larger institutions may also consider funding group counseling sessions specific to this population, allowing students the chance to engage in community conversations about mental health.

Finally, for faculty and staff, participants asked members at their institution to simply listen and care for them. Students provided these comments in hopes that faculty, staff and administration would see them as holistic beings. One student specifically offered, “I am positive that athletes can achieve and get more out of their collegiate career by forming other identities other than being an athlete with the support of their leaders in the classroom and on the field.” Several other participants echoed similar points when they reflected on faculty and staff who took the time to get to know them, their concerns and hopes. For example, one student wrote, “One thing that I can say that has helped me along my path is reaching out and finding resources/mentors to help guide me along who can relate to what I am dealing with as a student-athlete.” This final request to staff and faculty challenges those of us who work at higher education institutions to accept their individual responsibility to create environments where students feel they can both express and explore their identities, and in doing so, being attentive to the interpersonal domain of power (Collins, 2000/2009). Student participants also offered implications for the institutions themselves.

**Higher Education and the NCAA**

These implications target more widespread oppressive environments and structural forms of power (Collins, 2000/2009) within higher education institutions and historically
white institutions (NCAA). One of the most profound statements made by a student in the study addressed each of the ways that student-athletes are often expected to behave. As mentioned in previous sections, when students are recruited by coaches, staff and peers, they are often sold a dream. This student, however, calls for the release of expectations of student athletes as a way of supporting their true desires and self:

Something that stays present throughout all aspects of defining the student-athlete are expectations. Expectations to speak up, to succeed, to do well in school, to be more than an athlete, to be a more balanced individual. Expectations are perhaps the most damning piece of subconscious, scholastic, familial, and athletic pressure that any human feels. It is the very act of expecting something to turn out a certain way, or someone to be a certain person, that leaves one feeling unfulfilled and unsatisfied with one's life. For student athletes, the same holds true. It is absolutely essential for student-athletes, and anyone alike, to release oneself from the pressures of expectation. Release black athletes from the expectation of being civil-rights activists. Release star collegiate athletes from the expectation of making it to the league. Release anyone from the expectation of being the person that everyone thinks they should be, and understand that, every other individual embodies a life that is just as complex, intersectioned, difficult, happy, or unique as the next.

The following are suggestions made by the participants on ways to address the expectations of student-athletes within their institutions. One student stated that colleges and universities rarely discuss student-athlete identity outside of sport:
All in all I think that this was a great article that should help shine light on the importance of student athletes and their lack of identity outside of their sport. Not too many schools are willing to even discuss these things.

This recommendation suggests that holistic identity development for student-athletes should occur less on an individual basis and instead be integrated institutionally. This recommendation also reflected what their institution could be doing to better support them in their identity exploration. As one student noted, “Institutions should enable and inspire athletes to know they can accomplish anything. Putting them down not only hurts them but hurts they’re identity.” Additionally, academic and student affairs departments could integrate specifically-trained staff to assist student-athletes with multiple marginalized identities. Specific to the NCAA, students also reasoned that higher-level decision makers (e.g., Athletic Directors or Head Coaches) should receive some facet of training as well. These recommendations highlight a need for institutions to require people at all levels to engage in education around marginalized identities and systemic oppression. Because these individuals control policy, undergoing training about these populations may better guide their decision-making.

Another implication that targets the structural domain of power, Collins (2000/2009), involves how funding operates at colleges and in the NCAA. Conveyed in the findings of this study, students recognized disproportionate funding for coaches and administration versus the student-athletes themselves. As a result of minimal funding for resources dedicated to marginalized communities (i.e., specifically resources outside of athletic-development focused resources), student-athletes felt less valued on their campuses, influencing their
ability to explore their identities. One student summarized this recommendation in their final paper:

I believe that the D1 institutions and the NCCA should create [an] athletic environment where academics can fit in that serve an athlete in the best way possible. The same way they give resources to athletes for sport, they should give the same amount of resources for academics. Too many times, we as athletes are forced to sacrifice academics to ensure that our athletic performance is top tier. This should not happen.

Comments like these emphasize that institutions and associations claiming to support the development of student-athletes must enact their support through their funding practices. The practice of centering the voices of student-athletes in these implications is another example of how to develop theory and engage in identity support alongside student athletes.

**Limitations of the Study/Future Research**

While several limitations exist that should be considered when interpreting results of this study, readers should view these limitations as opportunities to further refine the growing research on student-athlete identity. To begin, this study intentionally sought participants who self-identified as student-athletes, completed all of the assignments and provided consent to include their papers in the data. Doing so allowed the researcher to see commonalities that existed among student-athletes exploring the same topics in 2020. However, Vaccaro and Mena (2011) emphasized that investigating a broad demographic like student-athletes can lead to amplification of these individuals’ experiences. Therefore, the emerging grounded theory presented in chapter five provides readers with a beneficial framework to comprehend the identity exploration process of student-athletes; some subtle
distinctions may be missing. For example, the approach itself does not discuss the distinction in exploring one’s identity as a Black student-athlete versus an Asian American student-athlete. While qualitative research does not seek to be generalizable (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Mertens, 2015; Patton, 2015), it is the hope that the findings are rich enough in description that practitioners are able to consider how the results can be transferable to their own spaces.

Another limitation is the retrospective nature of the research; as described in the data collection section above, students were asked to submit reflection papers documenting their understanding of concepts and relate them back to their own processing of identity development. By doing this, the study may have been limited in its capacity to fully comprehend the participants' approach to meaning making (Kegan, 1982, 1994). As a reminder, meaning making describes not what people know, but how they know. This relied on students’ retroactive memories of their meaning making. It is possible that student responses could have come from a more developed meaning-making structure, limiting the researcher’s ability to understand their past forms of meaning making. This limitation could suggest a need for a more longitudinal perspective on identity for student-athletes.

In utilizing intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the researcher built a study design that was believed to accomplish the following: reveal the within-group differences that exist within a population that then in turn, differentially positions individuals and groups within a matrix of oppression (Collins, 2000/2009a); however, this study may have fallen short of this by centering only the student-athlete voices from 2020 and only those who completed all assignments. The attention to within-group dynamics is a characteristic of intersectionality and intersectional research (Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana,
Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) original work sought to reveal the shortcomings of understanding oppression based on a singular axis (i.e., racism or sexism). However, intersectional theorists like May (2015) have also warned against approaching scholarship from a standpoint where scholars choose to narrow their focus on two forms of oppression (e.g., racism and hegemony). To account for this, the researcher ensured that questions asked about students’ other identities influenced their process of exploration. Nevertheless, by asking a majority of questions that centered their student-athlete identity, this could have led participants to thinking about identities from a double-axis perspective. This attention to within-group differences illustrates another challenge that occurs when utilizing intersectionality in research (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Researcher Reflections
On May 15, 2020 I took to Twitter to share my absolute pride in what I was seeing coming out of the student-athlete identity class: “Today I’m going to share some of my favorite quotes from student papers, I hope you enjoy them as much as I do!” I document them here because it was at this time that I knew their voices had to be shared:

- “...situations where black student athletes become outcomes of their (often racist) environments… they become part of a system that profits off of their athletic performance, image, reputation and so on but tents to do little to ensure the quality of their education”
- “When we were getting off the bus…the parents were there waiting for us to talk a lot of trash just about us being Mexican. They would say that we do not deserve to play on the same field as their kids, to go back across the board (sic), and to go make them a burrito.”
• “I wanted to give up, cry, anything that would help relieve the stress that I was carrying. I am successful in my sport but anytime when I was not winning or competing, I felt like I was sinking.”

• “It (the class) got me to research more about college athletes and I taught myself out of class about how the NCAA uses student athletes and takes away the athletes power only to have it for themselves.”

• “I’m having a hard time finding something about myself other than football. I can see it on other players that have already graduated ahead of me, they are having a hard time fitting in society, and just living day to day not knowing what’s going to happen in their life.”

I entered this project knowing that this study would challenge me as a scholar and push me as a person. I had to find my own ways of meaning-making in order to present these students’ voices in an authentic and meaningful way.

The process of data analysis made me question my own thinking; considering I had already been in contact with the data previously, I had to ensure that I was remaining true to the data and not my previously conceived notions. There were many sentiments from students that I remembered vividly (like those above) that did not appear in the data set (from students who had not met the criteria for participation). At some levels, I was disappointed by the narratives that would be excluded, but ended up considering the unused data as an opportunity for future research. For example, the non-athletes in the class seemed to have much stronger, negative opinions on student-athletes and the idea of compensating them. The interaction between student-athletes and non-athletes made for rich dialogue on discussion boards and comment sections. I hope to showcase the narratives in the future.
And finally, as an outsider of college athletics, and of many of the marginalized identities, I needed to make sense of how I advocate for intersectional justice in my current and future institutional environments. As a long-time advocate for student-athletes, it was difficult to process detailed experiences at the hands of the institutions that oppress them. I consistently questioned how I could inspire colleagues to care the way that I do, a hope that I have this study is able to support.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to articulate how the study and emerging grounded theory responded to the guiding research questions and how the findings fit within the current academic work on student-athletes, student identity, and intersectional theory. This chapter provided recommendations for faculty, staff, higher education institutions and the NCAA looking to support student-athletes explore and expand their identities. Implications for theory development and research were also included. And finally, this chapter offered potential limitations of this study and a short researcher reflection.

The emerging grounded theory that came from this research honors the stories of student-athletes who are frequently kept silent. As noted in previous chapters, theorizing can serve as a liberatory practice (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1991), especially when the centered voices are those of marginalized populations and it brings to vision a socially just future. Participants in this study shared their processing of identity exploration, in addition to identifying how meaning making played a role in the process. Using intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) to shape the study led to a strong understanding of how overlapping systems of power guided the identity exploration for student-athletes. Student-athlete identity must be understood in relation to the power systems in society. The hope is that the twenty-
six voices shared here inspire readers to move forward with the responsibility that colleges, universities and organizations have to support student-athletes in making meaning and exploring identity.
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Appendix A: 2020 World Events

The following timeline illuminates the most significant world events in 2020, in chronological order:

- Jan. 1: Climate disruptions continue with record fire seasons in Australian and Californian history
- Jan. 7: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issues a travel notice for Americans going to Wuhan, China
- Jan. 14: U.S. Presidential debates begin
- Jan. 15: The U.S. House votes to send articles of impeachment against President Trump to U.S. Senate
- Jan. 20: First case of coronavirus infection is reported in the United States
- Jan. 26: Kobe Bryant and his daughter, Gianna, are killed in helicopter crash
- Jan. 30: The World Health Organization declares the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency
- Feb. 23: Ahmaud Arbery is shot and killed while jogging in Georgia
- Mar. 9: The Dow Jones industrial average plunges more than 2,000 points
- Mar. 11: The World Health Organization declares the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic
- Mar. 11-12: NBA, MLB, NHL, MLS and NFL suspend seasons indefinitely
- Mar. 12: The NCAA cancels its basketball championship tournaments
- Mar. 13: The Los Angeles Unified School District announces all schools will close
- Mar. 13: Breonna Taylor is shot and killed in her home in Kentucky
- Mar. 24: 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo are suspended until 2021
- Mar. 25: The Senate and the White House agree to a $2-trillion stimulus package to boost the economy
- Mar. 26: The Labor Department reports 3.28 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits in the previous week
- Apr. 3: The CDC recommends everyone consider wearing masks
- Apr. 10: The United States becomes first country to report 2,000 coronavirus deaths in a single day
- Apr. 27: The U.S. coronavirus cases surpass 1 million
- Apr. 30: Armed protesters enter the state Capitol in Michigan, demanding end to the pandemic lockdown
- May 3: The U.S. faces invasion of “murder hornets”
- May 8: U.S. unemployment rate reaches 14.7%
- May 19: The U.S. passes 1.5 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and 90,000 deaths
May 25: Minneapolis police officer is filmed pressing his knee on the neck of George Floyd for about 8 minutes, killing him, as three other officers stand by; video goes viral

May 28: A state of emergency is declared in Minneapolis-St. Paul as protests over the death of George Floyd and racial injustice spread nationwide

May 29: Police Officer Derek Chauvin is fired and charged with third-degree murder and manslaughter in the killing of George Floyd; charges against three other fired officers are filed

May 30: A state of emergency is declared in Los Angeles County due to protests over the death of George Floyd and racial injustice; curfews are declared in Philadelphia and Atlanta

June 1: President Trump threatens to deploy U.S. troops to quell protests across country

June 5: NBA votes to restart season in a “bubble” in Florida

June 10: COVID-19 cases in the U.S. exceed 2 million

June 12: Protests in Atlanta start after the killing of Rayshard Brooks, while sitting in his vehicle, by a police officer

July 9: The Big Ten football conference says it will only play conference games in the fall

July 10: The Pac-12 follows suit, announcing the same

July 20: The NFL drops all preseason games and reaches an agreement with the players union on a coronavirus testing regimen

July 22: President Trump announces a “surge” of federal officers into Democratic-run cities, following a crackdown on protests in Portland, Oregon

July 23: MLB season begins, without fans

July 30: The 2019-2020 NBA season resumes in the NBA “bubble”

Aug. 11: Joe Biden announces Sen. Kamala Harris of California as his vice presidential running mate

Aug. 11: The Pac-12 and Big Ten conferences announce the cancellation of fall sports; the ACC and SEC conferences say they still plan on playing football

Aug. 12: The Big-12 announces it will play fall sports

Aug. 16: The August Complex fire starts in Northern California; by Sept. 9 it becomes the largest fire in California history, burning more than 1 million acres

Aug 23: Protests break out in Kenosha, Wisconsin after the shooting of 29-year-old Jacob Blake by a police officer

Aug. 25: Professional athletes begin to boycott their sports in protest of the shooting of Jacob Blake
• Sept. 7: Oregon wildfires start amid severe drought and severe winds; by the end of October, more than 1 million acres will burn, more than 4,000 homes destroyed, and at least 10 people will be killed
• Sept. 16: The Big Ten conference reverses course and announces it will play a 2020 football season beginning Oct. 23-24
• Sept. 22: The death toll of the pandemic in the United States passes 200,000
• Sept. 23: A Kentucky grand jury brings no charges against Louisville police in the killing of Breonna Taylor
• Sept. 24: The Pac-12 conference announces it will play football in a shortened season starting Nov. 6
• Sept. 29: First presidential debate between Joe Biden and President Trump
• Sept. 30: The NFL announces its first regular season game postponement resulting from the pandemic
• Oct. 2: President Trump is rushed to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for the treatment of COVID-19
• Oct. 26: The Senate confirms Amy Coney Barrett as a Supreme Court associate justice, replacing Ruth Bader Ginsburg after her death
• Nov. 3: President Trump announces he has won the election and demands that all vote counting stop, alleging voter fraud
• Nov. 4: The U.S. becomes the first country in the world to exceed 100,000 daily cases of COVID-19
• Nov. 4: President Trump joins several lawsuits aiming at stopping vote counts in Pennsylvania, Georgia and Michigan
• Nov. 7: Major news organizations declare Joe Biden has enough electoral college votes to win the presidency
• Nov. 9: Pfizer announces early data on its coronavirus vaccine may be 90% effective at preventing the disease
• Nov. 16: Moderna announces that its COVID-19 vaccine appears to be 94.5% effective
• Nov. 19: President Trump escalates attempts to overturn election, pushing for judges and Republican state lawmakers and local officials in battleground states to ignore voters’ verdicts and award him the electoral votes he needs for a second term
• Nov. 23: After a two-week standoff, Emily Murphy, General Services Administration head, allows President-elect Biden’s team access to required federal resources to start the formal transition process
• Nov. 26: President Trump says he will leave the White House once Biden is officially declared the winner of the electoral college
• Dec. 1: Attorney General William Barr says the U.S. Justice Department has uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the 2020 election
• Dec. 4: Protests against COVID-19 safety rules continue, including restaurants ignoring outdoor dining mandates and closed playgrounds being used
• Dec. 11: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration authorizes emergency use of the COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech
• Dec. 14: COVID-19 vaccinations begin, starting with front-line workers followed by other at-risk groups
• Dec. 14: the Electoral college confirms Joe Biden’s victory over President Trump
• Dec. 18: FDA authorizes the emergency use of COVID-19 vaccine developed by Moderna and the National Institutes of Health
• Dec. 20: More than 317,000 people in the U.S. have died from COVID-19; international death toll is 1.69 million
Appendix B: Reflection Paper Prompts

Reflection Paper 1: Write a 1-page, double spaced, reflection paper on what you were able to find regarding reflexivity? What is it? How is it used? Why would this be an important concept as we move forward in this course? Do you consider your introduction to your classmates reflexive? Give examples of what it means to use reflexivity.

Reflection Paper 2: Write a 1-page, double spaced, reflection paper giving historical examples of when athletes in America experienced cultural/societal issues differently because of their athlete status. How did the athletes react? Do you think they would've done things differently had they not been athletes? How do you think you would handle a similar situation and why?

Reflection Paper 3: Write a 1-page, double spaced, reflection paper on intersectionality. What is it? How do you experience it? How does (or doesn't) intersectionality relate to reflexivity?

Reflection Paper 4: Write your final 1-page, double spaced, reflection paper on the three short readings about the NCAA attached. What are your thoughts? Is any of the information new to you? Are you surprised?
Appendix C: Critical Writing Prompts

Critical writing prompt 1: This is intended to be the first two pages of your final paper. I would like for you to take what you learned about reflexivity and apply it to your thoughts on the Harrison paper. He clearly provides his opinions on a keynote address, what are your opinions on the piece? Be sure to include your knowledge on the topic, examples that support your thoughts, and your position.

Critical writing prompt 2: This is intended to be the second portion (pages 3 and 4) of your final paper. I would like for you to take what you learned between the video and reading this week and use your reflexivity to discuss your view of student-athletes in America. How has history shaped the identities of student-athletes? Be sure to include your knowledge on the topic, examples that support your thoughts, and your position.

Critical writing prompt 3: This is intended to be the third portion (pages 5 and 6) of your final paper. I would like for you to take what you learned between the video and reading this week and use your reflexivity to discuss your view of student-athlete identity. What hidden and visible identities impact that of a student-athlete? Be sure to include your knowledge on the topic, examples that support your thoughts, and your position.

Critical writing prompt 4: This is intended to be the final portion (pages 7 and 8) of your final paper. I would like for you to take what you have learned over the last seven weeks and use your reflexivity to complete your student-athlete identity paper. Read through what you’ve already written and adjust your thoughts based on new or evolved understandings. Include this week's information on the NCAA to conclude your paper: how does the NCAA impact the student-athlete identity? Be sure to include your knowledge on the topic, examples that support your thoughts, and your position.