



Athletes From Racialized Communities in Canada: Sport as a Space for Identity Formation, Community Connection, and Belonging

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Abstract

Background: Sport is widely recognized as a space for identity development and social connection, offering opportunities for self-expression and confidence-building through skill, performance, and group belonging (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 2019). However, for racialized athletes, these identity processes are often shaped by racial-ethnic dynamics, cultural expectations, and inequitable opportunities for representation and inclusion (Ash & Cranmer, 2020). In Canada, limited research has examined how racialized athletes navigate sport environments through social and cultural lenses. This study addresses this gap by exploring how athletes from racialized communities in Canadian post-secondary institutions experience sport as a space for identity formation, community connection, and belonging.

Objectives: This research is guided by two questions: (1) How do racialized athletes interpret and negotiate the role of sport in shaping their personal and cultural identities through an intersectional lens? (2) In what ways do sport environments facilitate or constrain belonging across intersecting dimensions of race, culture, and other social identities?

Methods: Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2022) approach informed by an equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility framework, this study examines the lived experiences of 12 racialized student-athletes (18+) involved in varsity or intramural sport at a Canadian post-secondary institution. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' reflections on identity, belonging, and sport participation, supported by field notes to enhance contextual understanding. Data are being analyzed thematically using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns related to identity construction and social relationships within systems of privilege and marginalization.

Results & Conclusions: *Sport as a Space for Identity Formation and Community Connection:* Participants described sport as central to identity, friendship, and belonging across varsity and intramural contexts. *Sport as a Harmful Space:* Competitive sport environments were more commonly associated with stereotyping, hypervisibility, and reduced belonging through both overt and subtle forms of racialization. *Competitive Nature May Intensify Negative Experiences:* Participants described more racialized experiences in competitive sport, while intramural environments were perceived as more inclusive. *Intersectional Factors Play a Role:* Experiences were further shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, culture, disability, and socioeconomic barriers. Findings highlight how sport can simultaneously foster belonging while reproducing inequities for racialized student-athletes. This work contributes to physical and health education research by centering these athletes' voices and illuminating how structural and cultural dynamics within post-secondary sport shape identity, participation, and belonging. Findings have implications for inclusive coaching practices, equitable institutional policy, and initiatives that strengthen student well-being and representation in sport.

Keywords: Racialized; Identity Formation; Belonging in Sport; Intersectionality



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