

University of Nevada, Reno

**Understanding NCAA Basketball, College Recruitment, and Factors that Influence
College Decisions for Basketball Student-Athletes**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Communication Studies

by

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May, 2020



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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prepared under our supervision by

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entitled

**Understanding NCAA Basketball, College Recruitment, and Factors that
Influence College Decisions for Basketball Student Athletes**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

Using five semi-structured interviews, this study sought to better understand the lived experiences and college decision process for NCAA Division I basketball student-athletes. The findings from a thematic analysis retrieved the themes of *Family & Brotherhood, Commodification & Compensation, Student-Athlete Lived Experiences and Challenges*, and *Student-Athlete Programs and Services*. Conclusively, the thesis project illuminated a need to better understand what student-athletes go through on-and-off the court and how stakeholders involved in the student-athletes college choice can be better educated about the inner workings of college basketball and basketball recruiting. Limitations, strengths, and future directions for research are discussed.

Keywords: NCAA, student-athletes, recruiting, lived experiences, commodification, compensation, college decision

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis study to my family. While you all were not physically present beside me as I took on this project, I knew you were supporting me from afar through consistent check-ins, text messages, and calls. To my parents, I thank you for providing me the opportunity to pursue a graduate degree in the United States. One of my dreams has always been to study in the US and I appreciate you for sharing this vision and journey. To my Mom, I thank you for your unconditional love and understanding. You help me with more than I can imagine and have taught me enormously about discipline and proactivity. To my Dad, I thank you for showing me the work ethic that is needed to succeed in many aspects of life. You have been instrumental in making my transition to graduate school and to the US a successful one. To my sister, Cheryl, I hope my pursuits inspire you to think big and aspire you to chase your own personal goals as well. I appreciate you making me laugh and sending funny messages from time-to-time. To my puppy, Kobie, I thank you for brightening the mood and always being cheerful. To all my family members and friends, this is a great moment to celebrate not only the work at hand, but also the journey. I love you, I appreciate you, and I would like to dedicate this work to all of you!

Acknowledgments

I have several people I would like to take the time to acknowledge. I would like to sincerely thank my advisor, Dr. Shawn Marsh, for his support and guidance throughout this graduate journey at the University of Nevada, Reno. I appreciate our time working together as well as the insight I gained from attending one of your courses and throughout the thesis project. Shawn, I thank you for the hours you put into this study and for providing me thoughtful, straightforward, and constructive comments and feedback. Your encouragement and positive attitude towards the study and my ideas has helped make this a gratifying experience to undertake. To my fellow committee member, Tennley, I thank you for being such a passionate professor. I appreciate your enthusiasm and truly enjoyed taking your course on interpersonal communication as well as your assistance in this study. To my fellow committee member, Sam, I thank you for your work and support in this inquiry. My thesis project would not be possible without the three of you. I am also extremely grateful for all of the student-athletes who participated in this study and shared their experiences and perspectives with me. I thank you for the time you provided amidst busy schedules and deadlines and hope that this project contributes to student-athlete literature and enhances both the academic and athletic experience in the future. To my academic colleagues – Jillian, Madi, Jaymi, Reeham, Annette, Mackenna, and Michael – feels like we were just at orientation and figuring out how to navigate graduate school. It was a blessing to share this experience with all of you. To the Nevada Basketball staff, I appreciated the opportunity to be a part of a first-class program. I thank you for your support in my academic journey and checking in on me constantly. Thank you to everyone! Truly blessed!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In my thesis, I attempted to better understand the push and pull factors that affect the process of making college decisions for National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball athletes while learning about their lived experiences and the NCAA institution that oversees and regulates the sport of college basketball in the United States (U.S.).

Defining the Issues for Basketball Student-Athletes

Student-athletes are direct drivers of billions of dollars in revenue for the NCAA, a nonprofit organization governing collegiate sports. Specifically, men's basketball and football in Division I, the highest tier of NCAA competition, comprise a majority of the revenue via marketing and television rights. However, collegiate athletes are considered amateurs in their respective sports and do not receive salaries for their performance even if college basketball like the March Madness tournament serves entertainment purposes. Further, they must comply with strict sets of rules and regulations imposed by the NCAA on issues involving bribes and under-the-table compensations among others. These rules include the inability to accept any money from fans, boosters, sports agents, and sneaker companies while they are attending college. College boosters are "representatives of the institution's athletic interests" who can supply monetary donations to the athletic department and its teams but cannot assist in any recruitment matters nor provide any gifts, services, or material benefits for recruits and their families (NCAA, 2013).

Focus on these topics is compounded by the FBI's involvement in investigating pay-for-play scandals that have shaken college basketball and affected multiple college basketball programs as well as the subversive tangible benefits that are funneled by multi-billion-dollar global sportswear brands (Schlabach, 2017). Chiefly, the integrity of the game was damaged. Moreover, the current events in U.S. college basketball illuminate flaws in the NCAA governing system that pose restrictions and limit autonomy for the student-athletes while creating a division between NCAA executives and student-athletes.

Introducing the Implications of the College Decision

This problem is further compounded by the fact that there is a need to carefully evaluate the processes and influences in adolescent athletes' college decisions. Every decision has huge ramifications as a misguided one could be the difference between career longevity and long-term earnings in the National Basketball Association (NBA) or occupational and professional basketball joblessness following college graduation. There are various people who want to get involved with a student-athlete who has professional potential. This involvement could lead to gaining various benefits both indirectly and directly down the line for stakeholders. For instance, sports agencies, marketing teams, and financial advisors are hoping to represent the student-athlete and make them their client once they turn pro. Additionally, personal trainers and coaches want to take credit for the student-athletes on court successes and mold them into the prospect they envision. Finally, family members, friends, and entourages seek to be continually associated with the player and to reap the celebrity experience that comes with being a part of the athlete's inner circle. Altogether, there are numerous voices who want to be heard and

claim to have the student-athletes' best interests on their minds. This is troubling for a student-athlete who has yet to be of legal age and may lack the cognitive, emotional, and psychological maturity to make sound decisions as a young adult between 17- to 23-years old. In an era of an increasingly number of one-and-done prospects who could possibly become teenage millionaires (players who are required by the NBA to attend a year of post-high school institution prior to entering the NBA draft), this issue is linked to high relevancy.

Many people can have a stake in the college decision of collegiate athletes. The 2016 NCAA Goals Study found that parents played significant roles in helping student-athletes with their college choice. The implications of these choices can impact future outcomes for the student-athlete as well as their social and psychological well-being. These student-athletes are at a transition period between adolescent and adulthood and often times, this period of human development is ambiguous. As a result, it is unclear whether these student-athletes have the full capacity to sensibly make decisions such as choosing a suitable college to attend and the question of whether they should have or *need* decision makers like parents or guardians to sign off or help them arises.

Motivations for Engaging in this Research

As a student worker in college athletics, I have had the opportunity to work closely with student-athletes, which has facilitated a curiosity for learning more about this unique population. I am interested in studying this topic as there are wide implications connected with mentorship and advising of young student-athletes who have the potential to become multi-million-dollar superstars. Mentorship is evident in an athlete's inner circle and irresponsible guidance could lead to student-athletes choosing

wrong schools, transferring to different schools, de-committing from schools (as high schoolers), and even dismissal from schools. I seek to discover what factors student-athletes take into account when making their college choice as well as which voices form the athletes' inner circles. Additionally, this research is motivated by the ever-changing landscape of college basketball and ongoing discussions regarding alternative options for high school prospects and progress in policy change for student-athlete compensation.

Introducing Commodification of Racial Bodies

Commodification in collegiate sports comes from the NCAA and universities profiting off of the personal branding of NCAA student-athletes without returning a share of the profit to the athletes themselves. Additionally, the finding that student-athletes of color represent 61% of men's basketball and 53% of men's football amalgams this issue (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018). Black college student-athletes have expressed being used as a commodity via ethnographic interviews (Beamon, 2008). Consequently, black male student-athletes are often racially marginalized and reduced solely to their physical prowess (Yearwood, 2018). They typically perceive racism and report experiencing society's denial of racial experiences and differences, which is known as colorblind racism (Bimper, 2015; Singer, 2016). In turn, these individuals' lived experiences are complicated and greatly impacted by social and institutional surroundings.

Research Questions

The research questions of this thesis are:

- What is the student-athlete experience like as a Division I basketball player?

- How are college basketball players inherently commodified and oppressed as student-athletes?
- What are the push and pull factors that affect the decision-making processes as well as the college recruitment procedure?

Purpose and Goal of this Scholarship

Social media is a huge part of the college commitment process as platforms like Twitter and Instagram are used by high schoolers to break the news to their followers and sports journalists. Studying the effects of both media and social media shapes the way we see college decisions as commodities and how the school and the NCAA inherently commodify college basketball student-athletes. Finally, this thesis is concerned with looking at how the push and pull factors alter the perception of the future outcomes of collegiate basketball players. Since this study deals with the perspective of viewing college basketball and its players as commodities, it was ideal to incorporate Marxist theory into the theoretical frameworks. In a similar vein, I am interested in better comprehending the decision-making process of student-athletes. Accordingly, social cognitive theory helps to explain how individuals obtain knowledge and learn through observation. Through a study guided by Marxist theory and sociopsychological traditions, the purpose of this research inquiry was to analyze the influences affecting student-athlete's college choice and the implications of these factors.

This is a communication studies research because of the dialectic tension weighing upon a student-athlete's college decision in a push-and-pull fashion. By engaging in this scholarship, I hope to highlight the unique and disregarded lived experiences of basketball student-athletes, specifically the tensions that arise not only

prior to college commitment, but also as another student-athlete governed by the NCAA institution. Within this study, the voices of college basketball players will be accentuated, and the findings will be able to benefit and educate multiple parties involved in the student-athletes' development including parents/guardians, academic advisors, faculty and professors, and NCAA executives among others. In this sense, we can generate dialogue in plaguing issues that influence today's student-athletes and put this population on a path of growth and development simultaneously in sports competitions and in the classrooms.

Chapter 2: Review Of Literature

Student-Athlete Identity, Experience, and Stereotypes

Student-athletes are a unique population as they contrast both the typical undergraduate student and the professional athlete personas. The NCAA athlete is different than it was a decade ago in part due to influx of numerous eligibility rules and regulations that impact student-athletes on and off the playing surfaces (Gayles, 2009). As a special group, they must balance the rigors of both studying, training, competing and recovery while making up for missed class time due to travels and attend study hall sessions (Watt & Moore, 2001). The NCAA has attempted to promote the student development of student-athletes via programs, research, and data analysis involving academic progress report (APR), Association for Institutional Research (AIR), and Basic Academic Skills Survey (BASS) among others (Gayles, 2009). Further, the NCAA and institutions aim to support student-athletes in areas of academia, career and financial planning with life skills programs, but the benefits for student-athletes have been vague, projecting a lack of maximization of resources (NCAA, 2016). This challenging and complex student-athlete experience involves balancing the dual demands of school and athletics, which can make student-athletes feel stressed (Bell, 2009). As a result, there is no surprise that sometimes the negative perception of missed classes due to travel and away competitions has perpetuated a student-athlete stigma (Parson, 2013).

The student-athlete identity has usually been tied to amateurism and a necessity of balancing academics with athletics even for individuals who have professional aspirations. They are represented as a prized commodity such that any illegal or grey-ish activities off the playing surfaces could jeopardize their NCAA athletic career and

possibly damage their projected professional outlook. Hummer, LaBrie, and Lac (2009) found that normative influences on risky behavior attitudes and alcohol consumption were present among NCAA student-athletes. Additionally, NCAA student-athletes experience many stressors related to campus life adjustment. Melendez (2009) found that student-athletes who more closely associated with their athletic identity found it more difficult to emotionally adjust to college. Erikson (1994) and Hawkins (2010) further explicate the confusion of identity that student-athletes can experience at this stage of their adolescent development. Hwang and Choi (2016) employed data from the NCAA to explore relationships between various conjunctive variables with perceived stress. The results demonstrated that variables such as academics, physical well-being, and social contexts were related to stressors. Similarly, Egan (2019) discovered that it was common for student-athletes to experience mental health concerns and asserted that treatment and stigma reduction should be a priority for both university and athletic departments.

While student-athletes also have similar emotions and circumstances to their peers, previous literature has suggested that student-athletes have distinct career maturity levels and psychosocial development compared to their non-athlete equals (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Smallman & Sowa, 1996). By understanding potential stressors among NCAA student athletes, stakeholders can better understand the lived experiences of these collegiate athletes in a way that can help maximize their sports performance and promote positive psychological well-being. These challenges also indicate that proper counseling and advising of Black student-athletes, a racial minority, is necessary to facilitate personal and holistic development (Bimper, 2015; Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Sato, Eckert, & Turner, 2018).

Thirty-six percent of NCAA student-athletes are athletes of color compared to only 15% of Athletic Directors across the country (NCAA, 2018). For Black male student-athletes, which consisted of 11% of the overall racial minority group, there has been much research investigating their athletic superiority relative to other racial groups (Boyd, 2003; Comeaux, 2008; Cooper, 2009; Smith, 2014). They have been often characterized as elite players in their respective sports (Hodge et al., 2013).

Meanwhile, there are also negative propagations of connections between violence and race. Harris (2013) found rape and violence instances associated with football players at a Power 5 school, a sport that is predominantly played by African American males. As a result, the idea of race is also connected to campus violence. This is a problem concerning the student-athlete representation as violence may be embedded with racial stereotypes (Enck-Wanzer, 2009). As a result, Black collegiate athletes may possess a heroic identity in their respective sports with victory, but paradoxically live within a stereotypical culture of violence, drugs, and unintelligence. While some may complex identities and a motivation for academic achievement, there are student-athletes who struggle to reconfigure their identities outside of their respective sports identity (Beamon, 2012; Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2013). Further, the negative stereotype of the student-athlete is salient in regard to academic success (Dee, 2009).

From a broadcasting perspective, racial stereotypes are used by sportscasters to highlight Black college basketball players about their physical prowess whereas their White counterparts tend to be described by their work ethic and sports IQ (Eastman & Billings, 2010). Meanwhile the Black identity of student-athletes is distinct from both the White student-athlete and student-athlete personas. Peers believe that student-athletes

have a lack of intelligence compared to undergraduate students and that African American student-athletes are not ready for college academics, have poor IQ, and achieve lower school grades compared to White student-athletes (Sailes, 1993). Previous studies have also underlined the academic inferiority of Black male student-athletes – a perpetuating stereotype for this population (Cooper, 2009). Sailes (1993) investigated beliefs about black student-athletes and found that these beliefs correlated with racial stereotypes and assumptions that attune to intelligence. Similarly, African American athletes performed worse when primed for student-athlete identity as opposed to just their athlete identity (Stone, Harrison, & Mottley, 2012).

Academic motivations for intellectual Black student-athletes arose from needing to show they belong in the classroom and addressing their alleged threat of contradicting racial stereotypes (Martin et al., 2010). Moreover, successful Black male student-athletes emphasized their complex identities, the need for community, and the fight for liberation while attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) (Bimper et al., 2013). Consistent with racial stereotypes, Black student-athletes were recommended to focus less on academics than White student-athletes among males based on guidance from a perceived career counselor (Czopp, 2010). To enrich the academic experience for African American student-athletes, Cooper (2016) proposed the Excellence Beyond Athletics (EBA) approach that focused on providing a more positive psychosocial learning environment. Further Moore et al. (2015) suggested a challenge to prepare Black male student-athletes in college and career skills that can be combatted through empowerment by school counselors. Harper et al. (2013) discovered ten collegiate institutions who had high academic achieving Black male student-athletes.

Intersection of Race and Sport

The themes of exploitation, racism, and commodification persist on Black athletes' bodies (Beamon, 2014; Griffin, 2011; Hodge et al., 2013; Singer, 2002; Smith, 2014). Commodification can be defined as a process of packaging a product of sport and race that is buyable and shaped by societal norms (Balaji, 2009).

Beamon (2008) utilized ethnographic interviews with former Division I African American student-athletes and ex-student-athletes recount being exploited as “used goods” by universities and found difficulties when it came to choose academic majors and courses. Bimper (2015)'s findings promoted the idea that Black student-athletes are aware of both racial beliefs and inequities against them, which have undoubtedly indirectly affected their experiences on the playing field and in the classroom. Access discrimination and perceived racism were apparent in focus groups and interviews with African American male college athletes (Singer, 2016). Discrimination is also present in college basketball polls against Black college coaches (Nutting, 2019). Also, Yearwood (2018) analyzed the experiences of Black male collegiate athletes with structural racism. Through an ethnographic study and interviews, the athletes reported feeling objectification and commodification and responded by engaging in perpetuating structural violence.

In White college/university campuses, race and sport are intersected upon the educational experience for Black student-athletes (Armstrong & Jennings, 2008). In other words, they are an inseparable entity when perceiving Black student-athletes. While Black student-athletes often garner value and popularity due to their athletic prowess, they can also experience prejudice from others including White students, non-student-

athlete population, and school faculty on PWIs (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Melendez, 2008). A majority coming from low socioeconomic statuses, Black male student-athletes face commercialization, stereotypes and profiling, and economic and academic exploitation (Murty, Roebuck, & McCamey Jr., 2014). Thus, Black student-athletes face a unique situation in which their minority status and athletic identity can interact together (Rhoden, 2006). Hill (1993) characterized this unique identity as “a special population within a special population.”

For Black student-athletes, athletic identity was positively correlated with racial identities, suggesting a contextual specificity for these variables (Anthony Jr. & Swank, 2018). Previous research has used a mixed-methods approach to better comprehend the experience of African American student-athletes at historically Black colleges/universities (HBCUs) (Cooper & Hall, 2014). Black male student-athletes are exploited in different ways including through economic, academic, and career development means (Murty & Roebuck, 2014). They face problems related to academics, realities of professional prospects, well-being, and identity among others (Moore, Bennett, & Graham, 2015).

College Choice for High School Students

High schoolers reported naming family, friends, and college information material as top sources of consultation for choosing a college (Galotti & Mark, 1994). Chatfield, Lee, and Chatfield (2012) found that career support and net cost were the top factors influencing choice of college. According to the US Department of Education, students rated academic quality/reputation, desired program of study, and job placement as the main features of choosing a college in a longitudinal survey study (NCES, 2019). There

have also been numerous literature looking at the college decision for African American high school students in regards to SES, HBCUs, and familial influence (Contreras et al., 2018; Freeman, 1999; Freeman, 2005; Smith, 2008; Smith & Fleming, 2006; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). Dixon and Martin (1991) developed the College Choice Influences Scale for high schoolers to help them make informed college decisions. In surveys from popular press, students cite geography, financial, and academic reputation factors that have a significant influence on their college choice (McFadden, 2015; Morse, 2014).

Influence and Persuasion

The three goals that individuals have in compliance and conformity are to develop sensible perceptions of reality, to form deep social relationships, and to hold a positive self-concept (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Language also serves as an important factor in producing power and influence (Ng & Bradac, 1993). Also, mothers who serve a provision role in the family have a great influence in decision-making that involves their children and family (Lee & Beatty, 2002). A statistical evidence-based message is more effective than a narrative evidence-based one (Allen & Preiss, 2009). Moreover, Allen et al. (2009) discovered that messages containing both narrative and statistical evidence had greater persuasiveness compared to narrative or statistical evidence by itself. Further, two-sided messages with refutation are persuasively stronger compared to one-sided messages while a one-sided message is more convincing than a non-refuted two-side message (Allen, 2009).

College Basketball Recruiting

Recruiting is at the forefront of this life-changing process for student-athletes and the recruiting process in which coaches evaluate prospective student-athletes can function as commodification. College coaches make recruits feel wanted and basketball programs use their athletic scholarships to fill their roster needs and move on to the next prospect if they fail to land their initial target. Previous literature has taken an economic approach to evaluating the value of players and recruits (Brown, 1994). Magnusen et al. (2014) suggested that coaches who recruited well had used influence tactics as a method to convince a prospective student athlete about the fit perceptions of a particular school. It seemed that recruiting high level freshmen at the guard position has correlated with winning as opposed to other basketball positions (Treme, Burrus, & Sherrick, 2011). Recruiting success has sometimes been tied to employing package deals strategy to obtain multiple high-level prospects (Lee, 2010). Further, since football and basketball are the most popular collegiate sports, winning in one sport can be used as a recruiting chip in another (Evans & Pitts, 2017).

In NCAA basketball recruiting, Evans and Pitts (2017) realized variables such as team's on-court success, stadium size, conference prestige, and NBA player pedigree were correlated to recruiting outcomes of high school prospects. Meanwhile, Czekanski and Barnhill (2015) developed an instrument of 28 items to explain college choice factors that influence student-athletes. The competition for recruiting high-level collegiate athletes in the NCAA has amplified as schools look for innovative ways to lure prospective student-athletes.

Judson, James, and Aurand (2004) conducted a survey study about academic characteristics of a school on recruiting and noticed that academic characteristics influenced college decisions. Conversely, male student-athletes placed a greater emphasis on athletic characteristics compared to female student-athletes. It is important to note that this article was written in 2004 and the landscape of college athletic recruiting has drastically changed since then. Athletic apparel are complimentary goods that are often appreciated by student-athletes. Davies and Burakowski (2015) aimed to analyze how apparel sponsorships influence athletic recruitment in the NCAA. Through semi-structured interviews, the researchers used an inductive approach to identify that the athletic brand name of a school did not act as a deciding factor for football players commitment to a particular college. Further, it appears that non-athletic related factors such as academic support services, degree program options, and campus community are just as significant in influencing the college choice for student-athletes as athletic related factors including coaching staff and school sports culture (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003). Conversely, athletic facilities were not significantly related to recruiting ranking success at power five football and basketball schools (Huml, Pifer, Towle, & Rode; 2018). The revenue generating sports of football and basketball do have a significant impact on undergraduate applications and freshmen enrollment following championship seasons, indicating the effect college sports can have in the college choice for both student-athletes and students (Toma & Cross, 1998).

The recruiting process involves interpersonal communication between multiple parties and the modes of communication can include text, email, and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Decourcy & Veltrop, 2006; Lipka, 2006). This was

an evolutionary change that differed from the traditional usage of hand-written mail to recruits and their families since it is more personal and can overstep into privacy boundaries (Maher, 2007).

NCAA Recruiting Procedures

The NCAA has produced handbooks and manuals on recruiting for college sports with recruiting specific terminology (NCAA, 2019). Recruiting is when a coach is engaging with a prospective student-athlete and bidding for the PSA's commitment to represent that collegiate sports team. A recruit is an interchangeable term to prospective student-athlete. Contact occurs when coaches are involved with a PSA or his/her parents/guardians beyond a simple greeting. During listed evaluation periods, coaches are allowed to observe and watch the student-athlete compete or practice in his/her respective sport. These evaluations periods occur year long and can include high school games and tournaments as well as AAU events such as Nike Elite Youth Basketball League (EYBL), Under Armour Association (UAA), and Adidas' Three Stripe Select Basketball (3SSB) circuit. These AAU competitions are sponsored by sneaker brands to allow high schoolers to gain increased exposure in front of college coaches and media members. The teams participating in these circuits also receive branded gear and funding for their program.

The recruiting calendar is divided into contact periods, evaluation periods, quiet periods, and dead periods. Once a recruit chooses a certain college, he/she makes a verbal commitment, which is non-binding. The commitment is only made official when the recruit signs a National Letter of Intention (NLI). In this scenario, the recruit cannot back out of this pledge unless provided a waiver by the school.

While college coaches are actively recruiting PSAs, campus visits are a common norm for the college basketball program to showcase their campus and entice the recruit. These visits are characterized by official versus unofficial – official visits are fully paid by the school whereas unofficial visits' expenses come from the recruits and their families' pockets. The NCAA has also mandated the type of interactions and contact recruits can receive based on their high school class. Specifically, this is done to limit the amount of recruiting initiated on adolescents who are high school underclassmen.

Corruption and Compensation in the NCAA

The strict NCAA rules have affected not only American youth, but also international adolescents who have dreams to play college basketball. The term “student-athlete” was originally coined to blur the lines between a student and an athlete, which refuted them employee status (McCormick & McCormick, 2006). Stewart (2013) investigated the implications of foreign student-athletes competition in the NCAA and applied former Kentucky Wildcat basketball player Enes Kanter's story of being deemed ineligible to play scholastic sports. Due to his previous experiences in the club and governmental model of basketball and the possibility of receiving monetary benefits in his home country of Turkey, Kanter could not accept an athletic scholarship and play college basketball.

Previously, NCAA football and basketball videos games were made by EA Sports and 2K Sports which used the names and images of student-athletes. The games were discontinued because of legal issues brought forward by players for the uncompensated usage of their likeness (Berkowitz, 2013). Kaburakis et al. (2012) learned that student-athletes commonly did not comprehend the rules and regulations about endorsements and

scholarships from the NCAA. At the same time, the NCAA had previously been restricting student-athletes' rights by disallowing them to seek compensation through the usage of their name, skill, image, and likeness from a publicity standpoint (Gerrie, 2018). Conversely, Zema's (2019) essay argued against NCAA policy and contended that student-athletes should be able to pursue economic related activities even if colleges and universities do not directly pay them as a student-athlete.

In 2014, ex-UCLA basketball player Ed O'Bannon filed a lawsuit against the NCAA disputing the institution's use of a student-athlete's image and the negation of compensation for this action (O'Bannon & McCann, 2018). The outcome from the trial ruled that the NCAA's dismissal of paying athletes breached antitrust laws while the NCAA subsequently appealed this verdict (O'Bannon & McCann, 2018). Previously, Sanderson and Siegfried (2015) argued for a need to pay student-athletes analyzed through an economic model of market demand of athletes and the NCAA monopoly. This has been a major debatable topic of decades and recent progress suggests that changes are on the horizon as the NCAA had a unanimous vote to permit college athletes to profit off their names, likenesses, and images by January 2021 (Murphy, 2019). A recent study conducted by AthleticDirectorU in collaboration with Navigate Research attempted to uncover the value of name, likeness, and image (NLI) for student-athletes (Maestas & Belzer, 2020). By looking at licensing and endorsement deals while comparing the social media following for different athletes and student-athletes, an estimated endorsement potential was able to be generated. From this analysis, high school basketball stars who has amassed over 600k followers on Instagram are capable of producing an estimated yearly endorsement revenue of over \$500,000.

Generally, the marginal revenue product (MRP) of men's college basketball players is higher than athletic scholarship caps for 60% of all players, which otherwise indicates that the value generated by student-athletes is more than their scholarship worth (Lane, Nagel, & Netz, 2014). While corruption in NCAA basketball has been exhibited in bribing and impermissible benefits in prospective student-athlete recruiting, point shaving appears to be a prevalent issue as well (Wolfers, 2006). Point shaving is a type of sports betting corruption to intentionally minimize the point spread margin without jeopardizing the outcome of the game (Wolfers, 2006). From a strategic angle, Balsdon, Fong, and Thayer (2007) uncovered that intentional under-performance for regular season conference champions at the season-ending conference tournament has occurred in a corruptive effort to save fitness for the NCAA tournament, in which the team has already qualified. Therefore, it is evident there is corruption on-and-off the court whether it relates to cheating involving recruiting tactics or fixing games.

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was first called the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States as a non-profit entity formed in 1906 (Bowen & Levin, 2003). It had "the responsibility of regulating college sports and minimizing the dangers they entailed" (Bowen & Levin, 2003, p. 26). The US differs from many other countries just such that academics and athletics are uniquely intertwined (Suggs, 2009). Furthermore, student-athletes are considered amateurs in their respective sports, so competitions are predicated on passion for the game as opposed to a job with compensation. Contrastingly, athletes who aspire to become professionals play on club teams as oppose to school programs in Europe.

The NCAA is made up of three tiers or divisions labelled as Division I, Division II, Division III. The undergraduate student body population and revenue generated by the school are factors that help separate schools into different divisions. While Division III consists of the highest percentage of schools, NCAA funding is chiefly produced by Division I sports in basketball and football.

The varying divisions also utilize different policies on administering athletic scholarships for student-athletes. Division I institutions are permitted to provide multi-year full-ride cost-of-attendance scholarships. However, Division II colleges can also grant partial athletic scholarships while Division III schools cannot offer athletic scholarships but can present academic scholarships for eligible student-athletes. Division III institutions have the highest rate of graduation among student-athletes while Division I schools have the biggest athletic budgets.

The NCAA Divisions are further broken down into athletic conferences are bounded geographically and through regional competition. The Power Five conferences consist of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten (B1G), Big 12, Pac-12, and Southeastern Conference (SEC). These conferences tend to have higher athletic budgets, facilities, and overall conference depth.

FBI/NCAA Basketball Investigation

The FBI/NCAA basketball investigation, which began in September 2017, was an examination of pay-for-play scandals that have distressed college basketball and multiple college basketball programs due to the violation NCAA rules and regulations. Handlers, agents, and other decision-makers in the athlete's inner circle allegedly provided impermissible benefits to recruits or prospective student-athletes. Moreover, many

prominent college basketball coaches have been in dialogue with these decision-makers, aiding the funneling of monetary benefits to the families of high-level basketball recruits that initially steer players to particular NCAA basketball programs and later to sportswear brands for endorsements and agencies for client representation.

This probe began to unravel when ASM Sports, a sports management agency, was raided by the FBI. Christian Dawkins represented the middleman of the operation and epicenter of the federal investigation and he was arrested at a Manhattan hotel along with Munish Sood, Merl Code, and James Gatto at various locations. During this search, the FBI uncovered expense reports and balance sheets that indicated an underground recruiting scheme that infringed upon numerous NCAA rules. Loans and cash payments involving tens of thousands of dollars from ASM Sports were given to well-known players who are have now turned professional and did not face any consequences (Forde & Thamel, 2018).

This was then followed by coaches from Arizona, Auburn, Louisville, Miami, Oklahoma State, South Carolina, and USC fired or placed on administrative leave due to their alleged involvements. The official charges included bribery conspiracy, solicitation of bribes and gratuities, conspiracy to commit honest services fraud, honest services wire fraud, conspiracy to commit wire fraud, travel act conspiracy, conspiracy to commit bribery, and wire fraud conspiracy, and money laundering conspiracy among others (Wetzel, 2017).

Financial planner Louis Martin “Marty” Blazer III was an FBI informant who is assisting the NCAA in its investigations with full cooperation. In a letter obtained by Sports Illustrated, Blazer routinely complied with the NCAA by disclosing information

through interviews about the rule violations in college men's basketball (Forde, 2020). As an undercover character, he was able to listen in on discussions and negotiations about deals and meetings. Jeff DeAngelo was a covert FBI agent who developed a relationship by becoming a financial investor with Dawkins and later taking him down and exposing the criminal operations (Fischer & Werthheim, 2018). Wiretaps captured high profile coaches and runners from agencies discuss under-the-table offers made to recruits in conspiracies between coaches and agency representatives about paying players' families for them to commit to a certain school (Forde, Thamel, & Wetzell, 2019).

While Adidas was at the forefront of the college basketball scandal, it appeared that Nike was also was funneling money to blue chip prospects' inner circles and to AAU coaches (Schlabach, 2019). ESPN reported that a Nike EYBL coach voice uneasiness towards Nike executives of the worst-kept secret in paying players. Carlton DeBose, a Nike youth basketball director, emphasized in an email that \$100,000 was the amount that was used to bid and steer top players.

Overall, ten individuals were arrested with connection to bribery, money laundering, and wire fraud. This event shook the scene of college basketball as it was the first publicized reporting that magnified the underbelly of college basketball recruiting and the concealed immorality of the sport. The outcomes from the FBI college basketball probe brought prison sentences to James Gatto (Adidas executive), Merl Code (Adidas consultant), and Christian Dawkins (aspiring agent for ASM) for conspiracy and fraud charges. Meanwhile, four assistant coaches in Tony Bland, Emanuel "Book" Richardson, Lamont Evans, and Chuck Person from storied NCAA basketball programs involved pled guilty to bribe charges with Person receiving a plea deal. Numerous student-athletes have

been affected by these events forcing them to relinquish their amateur status and turn professional early, sit out college basketball seasons, and figure out eligibility concerns with administration and the NCAA. This unprecedented investigation demonstrated that deals are done underground, and rules are often broken in the basketball industry.

In response to misguidance and tampering by sports agents, the NCAA released novel protocol in August 2019 for sports agents wishing to represent clients of NBA hopefuls (Borzello, 2019). The mandatory criteria included completion of a bachelor's degree, National Basketball Player's Association (NBPA) certification, liability insurance, background checks and examination issued by the NCAA. These stringent measures were made to prevent rules violations and have NCAA-certified agents help student-athletes gain sound advice. This rule received some backlash as there are reps who have gained trust and relationships with student-athletes at a young age, but do not have an undergraduate degree.

The ramifications of this FBI/NCAA investigation represent a significant point of inquiry as the combination of social psychological aspects in the decision-making and unknowing handling of adolescent athletes is a relevant justice issue. During this time in a student-athlete's career, there are many voices in their ears about choosing a college. Moreover, some of these voices use the adolescent as a launch pad to attain personal benefits as an indirect result of the athlete's recruitment decision. Thus, greediness and large amounts of money are involved in bribes that attempt to sway basketball players to pick a particular school. Often, colleges have apparel partnerships with global sportswear outfitters (i.e., Adidas and Nike) and money is channeled from those executives to decision-makers close to the student-athlete. The consequences of breaking NCAA rules

impact both the school and the student-athlete. Thus, schools have taken precautions by self-imposed suspensions and/or dismissals of players/coaches tied to any media reports or controversy related to pay-for-play scandals. As a result, student-athletes are denied opportunities to play college sports due to the regulations set by the NCAA as well as the choices made by those near them. This also affects their projections and draft stock as a prospect in the future as they aspire to become professional athletes.

This thesis illuminates and uncovers the FBI probe and the exploitation that occurs in collegiate sports such as basketball. Specifically, it brings awareness to both the public and sports community of the behind-the-scene operations that are articulated by sports decision-makers and the consequences that alter student-athletes' collegiate experiences and future professional careers.

Sports Agencies and Shoe Companies

Sports agencies and footwear brands are directly and indirectly involved in basketball student-athletes beginning as early as middle school. Typically, high schools and AAU teams have endorsement and apparel partnerships with these sportswear companies in which the team receives branded gear and funding. Likewise, colleges are also associated with these global brand names and being endorsed by the same brand serves as a pipeline in recruiting. This is a lucrative multi-billion partnership for schools involved. For instance, UCLA has the highest contract in collegiate athletics with Under Armour, creating almost \$13 million per year in funds and products (Kish, 2016). For student-athletes, they receive a plethora of apparel throughout the season supplied by the athletic brand. However, NCAA policies prevent them from selling gear or memorabilia as a way to generate personal profit while they are still amateur student-athletes

(Newberry, 2003). This issue was initially brought up when a group of University of Georgia football players sold their bowl championship rings on eBay.

On the other hand, sports agencies have representatives who attend basketball events and showcases to scout for potential clients for the future. Hundreds of agents vie for the chance to rep future superstars. While many have passed the mandatory exam from the NBPA to become a certified agent, more than half of these agents do not have NBA clients on their roster (Draper, 2018).

NBA Draft and the One-and-Done Rule

The NBA Draft is an annual event where NBA teams have the opportunity to select prospects from a pool from two rounds, in which team is assigned a pick in each round. Typically, the teams with the fewest victories in that season have greater odds to gain a higher draft pick via a draft lottery. The remaining picks are ordered based on regular season win-loss records. The One-And-Done rule was instilled in 2006 by the late NBA Commissioner, David Stern as a policy to deter undeveloped players from entering their name into the NBA Draft and forgoing their college eligibility to finish their degrees (NBA/NBPA, 2017). As a result, the draft age was increased from 18 years old to 19 years old, preventing high schoolers from directly entering the pro ranks. Players were required to go to college for a year in order to be eligible for the NBA Draft the following year. By enacting this rule, the NBA hoped that players and their circle would make sound decisions when considering relinquishing their amateur status and pursuing the professional route.

In 2006, Tyrus Thomas from Louisiana State University (LSU) was the first “one-and-done” player to be drafted as the fourth overall pick. Recently, the NBA G League

and playing overseas as become an intriguing option for those looking to bypass college. The ability to make a paycheck immediately while gaining exposure in front of talent evaluators has made it a possible alternative path to the NBA, which is typically the dream of every high school baller.

Juravich and Mills (2017) looked at how the transitioning of players declaring for the NBA Draft affected the competitive balance of different conferences in NCAA men's basketball.

On the other hand, Evans (2018) evaluated that older players can bring value similar to or even greater than younger players for an NBA team, indicating that one-and-done players should not be the only ones coveted at the top of the draft. Additionally, Berri, Brook, and Fenn (2010) found that there is a positive correlation with NBA draft position and college point scoring. Groothuis, Hill, and Perri (2007) suggested that the NBA functions as a labor market, in which there was an increasing amount of early entry players as teams attempt to economically maximize human capital. Similarly, McCann (2004) argued that these early entry players are exceptionally talented and would benefit gaining incentives from the economic system of the NBA as opposed to college basketball.

Relevant Film and Documentary in College Basketball

Digital media has provided an insider perspective of the recruitment of student-athletes as high schoolers and the business of the complex and profitable basketball industry. *Fast Break* (2012) uncovers the shady nature of recruiting that occurs at the AAU and high school level of basketball in Canada. Young men in Canada have hopes of achieve athletic scholarships and making it to the NBA. The documentary advances the implications of who benefits and who suffers from the commodification of prospects and

the negation of compliance in attaining a proper education that meets NCAA regulations to attend college.

Meanwhile, *One & Done* (2016) takes viewers into the daily student-athlete experience of a then high-profile NBA draft prospect in Ben Simmons at Louisiana State University (LSU), who is critical of the NCAA's treatment of student-athletes. It chronicles the branding of NCAA student-athletes and the billions made from using the likeness of these players while frowning upon those who desire to be "one-and-done" – to go to obligatory college for a year in order to be eligible to enter the NBA draft the following year. While student-athletes obtain coaching, training, and an education, they do not make any money off the usage of their image or name by the school and the NCAA.

The Nike Peach Jam reported in *The Athletic's* documentary showcases the premier recruiting event that can change high schoolers forever when they receive exposure and get the opportunity to play in front of hundreds of college coaches for a chance at a full-ride athletic scholarship (*The Athletic*, 2019). As soon as college basketball players finish their senior season or have feedback from NBA teams and agents of their potential in an upcoming NBA draft, the commercialization and commodification of their identities and brand is manifested when they have to perform in front of talent evaluators at a shot at a professional contract from a team (*The Athletic*, 2019). This is a rapid life transition as these athletes quickly leave behind the books and start training regiments and lifestyles that mirror professional players.

Finally, HBO's *The Scheme* (2020) focused on Christian Dawkins and the unprecedented FBI/NCAA investigation into college basketball pay-for-play schemes by

providing accounts of video and audio files from the case. Dawkins gave a candid reflection of his experiences growing up and how he first got into the basketball industry. He described how “people came into Saginaw, [Michigan] to get something – it’s the [basketball] talent” (The Scheme, 2020). These “people” were usually wealthy White people, White coaches, White agents, White business managers, and White sneaker executives. It was this moment where he recognized the “value of the African American athlete” and this is how commodification plays a role (The Scheme, 2020). When ex-agent Andy Miller brought Dawkins onto his sports agency firm, Dawkins was able to build relationships with prospects and players as a Black man – something that Miller was “too White and too old to do” (The Scheme, 2020). It is inevitable that race becomes a significant factor for any commodification occurring inside the basketball industry. This thesis study was motivated by the scope of the FBI/NCAA corruption scandal.

Consequently and again, the important research questions are:

- What is the student-athlete experience like as a Division I basketball player?
- How are college basketball players inherently commodified and oppressed as student-athletes?
- What are the push and pull factors that affect the decision-making processes as well as the college recruitment procedure?

Chapter 3: Method

Purpose and Design

Through a research inquiry in the form of semi-structured interviews, the push and pull factors influencing college commitment decisions for collegiate basketball players were intended to be enlightened. Since this study is viewed through a qualitative lens, we could infer whether there are specific independent variables that will affect the dependent variable of the perceived outcomes of student-athletes. However, I hypothesized that my semi-structured interviews with collegiate basketball players will yield various themes that relate to objectification and commodification of bodies, corruption and lack of compliance in recruiting, and structural racism in a sport that is consumed by White American culture yet employs a large majority of racial minorities.

Theoretical Framework

NCAA student-athletes and high-level NCAA executives represent both power and largely racial differentials between the laborer and the employer. Investigating these differences in the NCAA parallels Karl Marx's concept of class struggle (Marx & Engels, 1998). Marx's work is predicated on the idea of alienation from workers. In this context of collegiate sports, student-athletes are the drivers of revenue for the NCAA, yet they are treated as outsiders and alienated from the NCAA, its rulings and regulations, and the profit generated from sports. Correspondingly, the dissimilarities between NCAA executives and its student-athletes vividly mirror the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeois. Thus, Marxist theory serves as a vital component of better comprehending class relations and social conflict.

At the same time, it is important to be cognizant that student-athletes comprise of multiple identities with race being a salient one. Besides an issue of differences in social class, race and color are also at the forefront in this situation. From a standpoint of college basketball, which is comprised of 61% of student-athletes of color, colonialism in the form of exploitation is especially relevant to this intersectionality (NCAA, 2018; Ono, 2009). Consequently, Iris Young's theory on the concepts of commodification underlines the scope of exploitation and objectification of a student-athlete (Young, 1990). The notion of commodification extends beyond a student-athlete's college experience as it begins when they are routinely and systematically recruited at amateur and high school competitions by recruiters and college coaches. Their bodies are at the site of both dynamic performances and strenuous labor that benefit the NCAA, coaches, administrators and other institutions without arguably comparable compensation.

Thinking in the lens of an adolescent/young adult population in student-athletes, it is imperative to consider their social and cognitive development. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is predicated on learned behaviors through observation and engaging in learned behaviors can be affected by a trifecta of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Deriving from this framework, the college decision for student-athletes is applicable to the impact of these factors.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) is posited on the concept of contrasting tensions or discourses that are neither necessarily negatives but help create meaning and social reality (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015). The premise of this theory arose from Mikhail Bakhtin's of dialogism, which is a simultaneous collision of perspectives or

discourses (Bakhtin, 1984). This is relevant to how college coaches function paradoxically as opposing forces when attempting to recruit a prospective student-athlete.

One of the main methods used in this thesis is the thematic analysis of interviews. The thematic analysis is a qualitative instrument that involves identifying, interpreting, and informing patterns or themes in data or responses that are collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes have high recurring significance among the data set and provide further meaning to the analysis of the research. They can be broken down into semantic and latent themes – themes that are explicit and at the surface versus themes that are implicit and interpretative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, both semantic and latent themes will be coded and analyzed. As a flexible research tool, the outcomes and exact methodological procedures can vary from researcher to researcher.

Additionally, this research utilized a grounded theory approach during the coding stage. Grounded theory is applying both inductive and deductive means in an attempt to produce theory from data (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). This theory is suitable for a dataset of responses from semi-structured interviews.

Hypothesis

In these semi-structured interviews, I predicted that college basketball student-athletes will describe push and pull factors influencing their college decision-making process including people such as family, friends, coaches, trainers, and agents as well as characteristics like individual characteristic traits, family socioeconomic status (SES), social/physical school environment, school's educational prestige, and school's proximity to home. These factors could subjectively function as dialectical tensions or discourses for when a student-athlete makes a decision (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). I believe that

these variables and their prevalence will vary from participant to participant, since this qualitative work is interpretive. Consequently, this means that responses will come from a participant's point of view and be explained by contextual factors.

Additionally, I expect the variables that might arise could produce both positive and/or negative valences on the perceived outcomes for these student-athletes, which are dependent on the student-athlete and the situation(s) they decide to discuss in the interviews. Finally, I believe a student-athlete's perception of their future outcomes from both career and professional basketball perspectives will change over time. I contend that obtaining objective feedback from individuals including sports agencies, NBA personnel, and school advisors will provide student-athletes the capability to recognize their career development and trajectory. However, I believe these sources along with coaches who have worked with the student-athlete do not always operate from an unbiased stance.

Since this was not a longitudinal or quantitative study, the intention was not to measure the change in responses at different time points. However, it was possible for participants to recall and recollect their thoughts at distinctive times in their lives (i.e., when I was in high school... versus when I am in college...). As a qualitative work engaged in grounded theory, I expected to use inductive reasoning to develop the push and pull factors. Push and pull factors are anticipated to arise from the semi-structured interviews and could include individual characteristics, school fit, environmental factors, and human influences among others. However, I cannot foresee whether these factors will speak more thematically to a certain research question.

Chiefly, I hope the semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis of transcripts reflect the complex lived experiences and challenges for student-athletes, engage in

dialogue about commodification and compensation, and education about the recruitment and decision process. I controlled the variables by interviewing only NCAA collegiate student-athletes who currently play basketball and have current eligibility at their institution, have fluency in English, and attend a Division I institution – this is the selection criteria. By specifically targeting this population of athletes, the project can attempt to generalize these findings and help researchers and stakeholders better understand the lived experiences from an NCAA Division I college basketball standpoint.

Participants and Demographics

The sample of participants will include college basketball players at a Western U.S. college who have current college athletics eligibility. Chiefly, this sample will be obtained through a convenience sample of personal connections and then through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is when an initial participant refers or recommends other participants who met the study criteria (Goodman, 1961). Participants' eligibility as a student-athlete will be confirmed by the researcher through the institution's athletic website. The participants that agreed to take part in this study were five male basketball players age 18 to age 24 ($M= 20.2$) (Figure 1).

What is your age?

5 responses

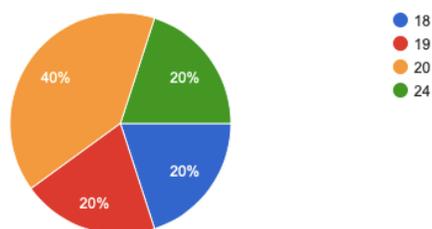


Figure 1.

In this sample, two participants identified as White or Caucasian. One student-athlete recognized himself as Black or African American. Another student-athlete selected Hispanic or Latino as race. Finally, one participant distinguished himself as both Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino. Overall, 60% of the study sample size consisted of student-athletes of color. One student-athlete grew up overseas and was an international student-athlete. The rest of the participants' origins were largely dispersed across the United States including the Western, Midwestern, and Southern states.

All participants were on full ride scholarships at a Western U.S. college and ranged from freshman to graduate student class. Broken down, there were two freshmen, two sophomores, and one graduate student (Figure 2). Academically, two of the student-athletes were in communication studies, one was in business while two were undecided. It is not uncommon for student-athletes to be undecided in their academic major as they focus on general academic pre-requisites and discover their curricular interests in later years. The graduate student had remaining playing eligibility because he finished his undergraduate degree in three years, which allowed him the opportunity to begin a master's degree under NCAA rules. Three student-athletes had GPAs that ranged from 2.6-3.0. Two student-athletes had GPAs that ranged from 3.6-4.0.

What is your academic class?

5 responses

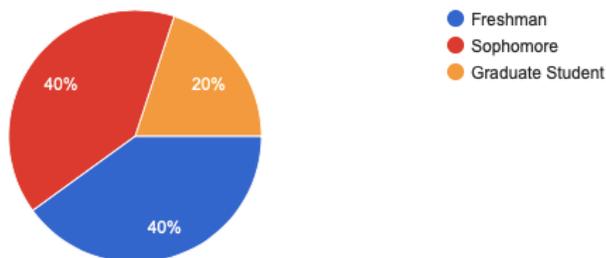


Figure 2.

The student-athletes self-reported socioeconomic status via highest level of education obtained by parents, size of household, primary caretaker(s), and extracurricular opportunities. For parent's education, three of the students-athletes' parents both had bachelor degrees (Figure 3). One of the parent's had a bachelor's for one of the student-athlete (Figure 3). For another student-athlete, both parents had a high school diploma (Figure 3). Three of the participants had 5-6 members in their household while two participants had a household size of 3-4 (Figure 4). All of the participants had both parents as their primary caretakers. Four participants experienced extracurricular activities outside of school when they grew up – one participant did not (Figure 5).

What is the highest level of education obtained by your parents?

5 responses

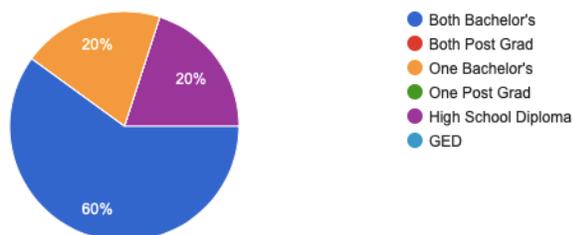


Figure 3.

What was your household size?

5 responses

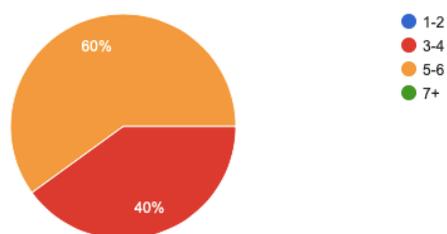


Figure 4.

Did you have opportunities outside of school (i.e., summer camps, clubs (sports/educational))?

5 responses

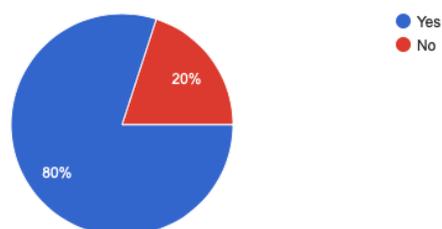


Figure 5.

One of the student-athlete's parents were both former collegiate basketball players (Figure 6). Another one had a father who played college basketball (Figure 6). This was valuable information as a parent who was an ex-student-athlete would have a better understanding of the recruiting process and the lived experiences of his/her son. All student-athletes had 10+ years of basketball experience.

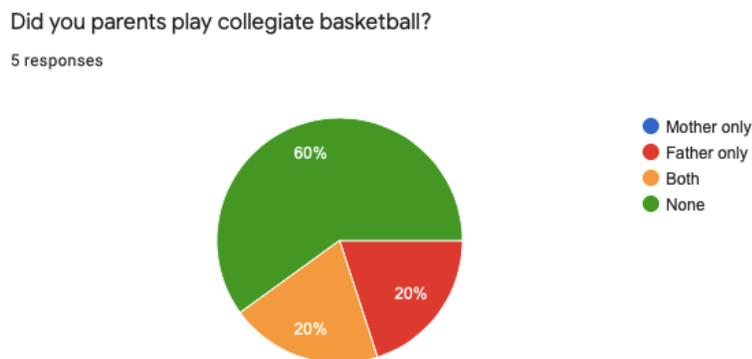


Figure 6.

Potential participants who were deemed ineligible for the study were thanked for their interest and time. I believe that a convenience sample would not necessarily invalidate generalizability to the larger collegiate basketball population because of many perceived shared experiences between these athletes. Consequently, this sample size could be representative of the entire NCAA basketball student-athlete population of 18,646 players from all divisions (NCAA, 2019). The NCAA survey noted that in NCAA men's basketball, 7206 student-athletes identified as White while 11,440 were part of the Black or people of color (PoC) category (NCAA, 2019). Moreover, the anticipated sample of participants was representative of the targeted study population in variables including gender, age, race, ethnicity, familial socioeconomic status (SES), family structure, group membership, years of education, and years of college basketball experience.

Participant Recruitment

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempt status and approval from the institution's athletic compliance department for this thesis study, I recruited participants using purposive sampling or judgement sampling by intentionally finding

student-athletes who could provide knowledge and experiential input regarding the goals and purpose of the research topic and questions (Etikan, 2016). This nonrandom technique is not concerned about the number of participants, but rather a targeted population who can thoroughly deliver well-informed reflections, opinions, and experiences on the research topic.

Specifically, this project also utilized convenience sampling to maximize recruitment of an easy accessibility and geographical proximity (Etikan, 2016). Snowball sampling was used, but not effective in attracting participants via referral. As a staff member with the institution's athletic department, I was able to gain access and develop rapport with the targeted population. This allowed me to be regularly put in contact with student-athletes and naturally approach them with the rationale of the study, which helped foster participation.

The participant recruitment stage began in early March 2020, which was right at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. This was an unanticipated crisis that involved a quick adjustment to a new norm from a global standpoint. Moreover, this situation occurred the week before the institution's spring break, so the participants were permitted to travel back home and stay home for an indefinite period that has lasted past the end of the academic semester.

Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2006) discussed the hardships of communication and navigation during a crisis highlighting uncertainty as the prime challenge. For many of the student-athletes, they experienced initial disbelief and distress from this rapid change of events. Many had envisioned playing in a post-season tournament, which ended up being cancelled along with other sports. During times of crisis, the needs of

individuals shift in complex and dynamic society (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019). As a result, participation in research became of low priority in comparison to the health and safety of close ones and society.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Four face-to-face interviews and one virtual interview with different collegiate basketball players were conducted lasting approximately between 15-45 minutes. Phone/Zoom interviews served as the fallback option if face-to-face interviews were not feasible at the time. Due to the consequences of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak during this research, only four semi-structured interviews were completed on campus before the termination of regular operations by the institution. As the result, I still contacted prospective participants about the possibility of conducting the interview virtually at their authority as a distraction from our current events. In the end, one participant was available to do a virtual interview.

During in-season period, I understood that student-athletes are more preoccupied with responsibilities and school in addition to competition and training. These interviews were carried out post-season of the sport to accommodate for student-athletes' increased availability. Each interview session was located in a confined room on the university campus or on a private call/meeting.

Participants were asked to sign a consent to be audio and video recorded for transcription and observation purposes. In the case of online/phone interviews, participants were sent a copy of the consent form to their email and asked to sign and forward back. Also, they were required to provide a verbal consent before commencement of the interview. Audio and video recording equipment was signed out

from the university library to facilitate the interviews. While focus groups have been utilized to understand the Black male student-athlete experience in Cooper and Hall (2016), it is more advantageous to implement semi-structured interviews through a one-on-one situation to generate equal and longer response times for each participant as well as minimize peer pressure statements. Semi-structured interviews are an interview method that facilitate the exploration of opinions and reflection while allowing the possibility of probing and clarifying of responses (Barriball & While, 1994). I postulated that incorporating one-on-one semi-structured interviews will also encourage more quiet participants the ability to disclose information, which might be minimized in group settings.

The interview questions followed a straightforward template with adjustment possibilities depending on responses from initial questions. Consequently, I attempted to tailor follow-up questions to each participant and use necessary probing when clarification or more detailed explanations help make sense of the initial responses. As a researcher, I employed necessary probing with additional questions that attempt to emphasize the feelings felt during lived experiences (i.e., “You mentioned that many people tried to influence your college decision, how did that make you feel?”) as well as to gain a better understanding of the characters and their specific influence to the student-athlete (i.e., “You mentioned some of your previous coaches were involved during the recruiting process, when did they coach you and how did they impact your college decision?”). At the end of the interview, demographic information including age, race and ethnicity, GPA, academic class, major, socioeconomic variables and years of basketball experience were collected via a secured Google Form on the researcher’s

computer. The link to the demographics form was sent to the participant who took part in the virtual interview.

Confidentiality and Consent

All names of individuals on files were changed to numeric student-athlete numbers (i.e., student-athlete 1). Audio files, video files, and transcripts were kept on an encrypted cloud storage system. Audio files and video files will be destroyed five years after analysis is completed. Since the study sample is not a vulnerable population, de-identified transcripts will be kept for future research inquiry by the principal investigator.

A signed informed and verbal consent was secured from all participants at the beginning of each session prior to the interview process (Appendix B). The consent form included permission to utilize audio and/or video recording. If participants are no longer consenting to this study, I thanked the prospective participants for their time and ended the session. The interviews and all questions are completely voluntary. Thus, participants were free to voluntarily answer and skip questions if they feel uncomfortable. Participants were also permitted to request termination of the interview at any time. No monetary incentive or payment was given for participation. The researcher contends that there was minimal risk involved in this research study and the general benefits included reflection about the student-athlete experience and the college basketball season.

Interview Guide

The interview guide (Appendix A) was piloted on two student-athletes from the women's basketball team of an NCAA Division I institution as well as a former collegiate basketball player who attended an NCAA Division I school and went through a similar college recruiting process. The objective of this pilot segment is to receive

feedback on the quality of questions of the first version of the interview guide and identify possible lived experiences and questions that could be focused or enhanced in the primary study.

Audio Equipment

The audio recordings obtained from the semi-structured interviews were logged through an Edirol Roland R-09 WAV/MP3 recorder, which was checked out from the institution's media and technology lab. I ensured that the audio files were deleted from the recorder before the device was returned to the institution's media and technology lab. These audio files were all collected and then transcribed via the transcription application Otter for a thematic analysis to be conducted afterwards.

Description of Data

I conducted semi-structured interviews with five basketball student-athletes focusing on exploring the student-athlete experience and college recruiting process. In contrast to listening to media engineered interviews or administering surveys, the avenue of interviews allowed the opportunity to tailor and adjust questions fitting discourses surrounding the research questions. A unit of response can be depicted as a continuous answer from the participant of a specific question asked by the researcher before another question is introduced or the topic is modified. In the 1st interview, there were 18 units of response. 17 units of response in the 2nd interview. 24 units of response in the 3rd interview. 20 units of response in the 4th interview. 26 units of response in the 5th interview. Overall, 104 units of response in five interviews were obtained.

Transcription

Using a transcription service in Otter as opposed to a manual verbatim approach helped maximize efficiency. The Otter service provided 600 minutes of free transcription per month, so this tool was a cost friendly option as well. It was also useful in identifying unfinished and fragmented sentences, ums, and repeated words and thoughts. However, a reliability check which involved cross-referencing the audio and the Otter transcripts was conducted to verify the accuracy of each transcription.

Open Coding

The transcripts from Otter were exported and copied into Microsoft Word documents for the coding process. The documents were assigned and saved as transcript numbers (i.e., 01 Transcript) to continue to maintain anonymity of the participants. I inserted the research question(s) at the top of each document to maintain focus while coding. Interviews were coded for detecting similarities and differences between responses for each participant and were only conducted by myself. The first step was open coding, which helped locate main concepts within the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was a tedious process that involved reading line-by-line each transcript and inserting annotations at appropriate quotes to indicate a code. After that, I went through every annotation to account for the number of distinctive codes. The variables that impacted identifying themes involved looking at the frequency, detailedness, and intensity of the responses. By rereading the transcripts, I was able to fine-tune themes that captured the student-athlete discourse more holistically.

Axial Coding

Subsequently, I utilized axial coding in the end, which brought forward connective patterns in both an inductive and deductive fashion. This method of coding allowed me to better group different codes together and produce subcategories within my main themes (Allen, 2017). After the 3rd interview, it seemed that there was no new information gained. However, the 5th interview was different in length, doubling almost the average time of the other interviews, and provided sufficient information to disrupt the saturation point. This interview was also conducted with a graduate student-athlete, so the depth and complexity of responses differed from the other interviews.

Thematic Analysis and Interpretation

Overall, I found 68 distinctive codes from the 105 units of response in five interviews and derived four main themes from these codes. These four themes were: *Family & Brotherhood*, *Commodification & Compensation*, *Student-Athlete Lived Experiences and Challenges*, and *Student-Athlete Programs and Services*. The analytical plan of this investigation followed a thematic analysis, an appropriate method for evaluating qualitative data. Once again, the quotes and themes in the transcripts were attached to numeric student-athlete numbers (i.e., student-athlete 1) in an effort to protect human subjects and their associated responses for coding purposes and later de-identified in this paper.

The themes identified speak to ramifications related to the micro level in research of student-athletes from a communication perspective and the macro level in society that involves policy about student-athletes and a fight for fair compensation. Specifically, these themes project to contribute to the existing literature on the objectification and

commodification of racialized bodies. Themes that appear frequently signal common experiences and positions across different student-athletes. Broadly, this study utilizes sociopsychological thinking to further explicate the college choice of student-athletes. These implications will help researchers, NCAA policymakers, families, and other stakeholders better understand NCAA athletes' decision-making as well as the processes in college recruitment and commitment for a student-athlete. Additionally, the results obtained through identifying the push and pull factors could support NCAA policy changes, assist universities and faculties in tailoring courses and programs for this population, and develop recommendations for student-athletes and their families to make the most advantageous choice for their well-being and career outcomes.

Researcher Positionality

It is important to consider my position as a researcher in this research inquiry of studying student-athletes. As a graduate student who is also involved with working in the basketball industry and with multiple networks, I have an insider viewpoint of collegiate basketball at the NCAA Division I level. I do not have a typical collegiate player athletic build, but I think I am more acquainted with collegiate basketball and its players than the average college basketball fan. I am an Asian-born Canadian who has had over 15 years of playing and studying the game of basketball. During my time as a graduate student, I was able to develop relationships and trust with the targeted population inherently because of my job role. This allowed me to gain easier access for data collection. Additionally, I am not a coach so my findings will not be impactful towards treating/mentoring these student-athletes differently nor attempting to enter into the inner decision-making circles of these individuals and benefit from their potential. I do not

intend to gain anything nor make disclosures about associations between the student-athletes and their individual responses made during the interviews. Thus, I took the precaution to avoid using the student-athletes names during interview sessions while recording as well as just referring to specific schools and coaches by “an institution” or “a coach” to supply ambiguity and anonymity. While conducting previous research as well as aspiring to work full-time in the basketball industry, I understood the importance of sensitive information as well as confidentiality so I will work to the fullest to fulfill these researcher duties and protect participants.

Chapter 4: Results

Qualitative Themes Findings

Qualitative themes were obtained via a thematic analysis from the five semi-structured interviews conducted involving basketball student-athletes at a U.S. Western institution. All participants and quotes were initially assigned a numerical alias and then de-identified after transcription for confidentiality purposes. The theoretical lens of Marxism, social cognitive theory, and dialectal tensions along with the three research questions aided the data collection process and helped produce thematical material for further analysis. The themes derived from the interviews were: *Family & Brotherhood*, *Commodification & Compensation*, *Student-Athlete Lived Experiences and Challenges*, and *Student-Athlete Programs and Services*.

Family & Brotherhood

The idea of family was apparent in all the interviews. For the student-athletes who were interviewed, all of them responded that both of their parents were involved as their caregivers. Familial ties were manifested as an important reason for choosing a particular college during the recruitment and decision processes. It was also a refuge of support for any college decision that the student-athlete desired to make. Family also seemed to be important for student-athletes in initially trying out the sport of basketball and falling in love with the game over time. Whether it was due to tall genetics or having the game passed down from former college basketball players in their parents, the student-athletes shared many common narratives on their passion for basketball.

[S]tarted at a young age, my dad knew I was going to be tall, my mom is six feet, my dad is six [feet] three [inches], and just, you know, as a child, he saw I was going to

be tall and I was always told that when I was a kid so he kind of introduced me to basketball and gave me a decision to love it or not, and I ever since I've loved it.

Additionally, the concept of brotherhood emerged as a memorable recollection of the student-athletes' time at the institution. Student-athletes are socially proximate to one another due to using shared facilities for weight training and academic study halls. As a result, they tend to gravitate to other athletes, particularly those who play their respective sports and form camaraderie with one another. The brotherhood resonates as a unique fraternity of young men who come from similar upbringing backgrounds and share a common athletic goal. Famously, Duke University's men's basketball program has coined the term "brotherhood" as one of their own, highlighting its culture of treating each member of the team as a brother by bond and unity (Casey, 2018). Moreover, brotherhood can be traced back to brothers in arms from a military standpoint. In this sense, basketball seemingly functions as a "fight" between two opponents with "brothers" who seemingly have each other's backs and lift each other up. Here one of the participants reflected on feeling grateful because of the opportunity to play with his teammates, whom he calls "[his] brothers" as well as to be on a scholarship.

My favorite moment at this institution is just uh... being able to come and work with... with my brothers every day on the basketball court and get a good education off the court. Um, a lot of people don't have opportunity to have scholarships and be able to have the opportunity to play for school like this. So that's a blessing for sure.

Another student-athlete echoed a similar sentiment of calling his teammates "brothers", which was a popular frame. Brothers are family too so it was apparent that players had close bonds with their teammates.

Part of the Brotherhood, you know, we build the Brotherhood on the court and that carries on off the court. You know, if I ever need something, I can call my teammates are often in a bind, they can help me out. So that's one of the biggest parts I enjoy.

Commodification & Compensation

Overall, the participants noted that their recruitment was primarily their own decision and that they were happy with their college choice in retrospect. However, recruiting at the U.S. level could be characterized as a form of commodifying a prospective student-athlete and participants described having to navigate a lot of internal noise from high school and AAU coaches as well as hearing similar pitches from college coaches. The recruitment process consisted of college coaches attending NCAA sanctioned high school and AAU events, showing interest in PSAs, and maintaining courtship and dialogue with a recruit until he makes a decision. Typically, the participants noted that the first scholarship is significant as it is essentially a domino that opens the door for several offers from other schools. From this perspective, this action suggested that the college recruitment process is commodified into a supply and demand model. Furthermore, when college coaches essentially tell the recruit what they want to hear as opposed to a more personalized and humane approach, the product or vision that they try to sell recruits is pervasively similar and mass produced, acting like a culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944).

I just want what's best for me. And I, you know, I had a lot of schools, you know, like my four years of high school before I did my prep year, I had like probably 20 something [Division I offers] that increased to 30 up to my fifth year. But I learned to realize that not everybody has like a good intention. So, I went to go to a prep school and

there was a coach that was particularly pushing me towards this one particular school. And this is also the same guy who was talking to other coaches. They have to talk to him to come to practices and come to everything, so they had to talk to him. And I was naive at the time and I didn't fully see but suspected that like schools were stopped talking to me even schools that were like, hitting me up every day.

With many voices in their lives, the student-athletes noted that there is often a need to make the decision that is best for themselves even if it is not aligned with high school or AAU coaches' interests. This comes at the heels of coaches who may have selfish intentions in the college decision process.

Student-Athlete Lived Experiences and Challenges

The student-athlete daily routine is hectic and more complex than what most people can imagine. Apart from attending lectures, going to study hall, watching basketball film, practicing at least five days a week, and playing in games, student-athletes have to deal with the perception of stereotypes that arise from both their professors and peers. Besides time management between basketball and school, a sense of oppression can be suggested when the participants elaborated about possible stereotypes, they feel regarding their academic work ethic and personalities. A student-athlete describes that while some of these traits or labels can have truth, they should not be strictly directed to *all* athletes.

[U]m, I mean, growing up, you know, last school I was at it was kind of a stigma, like athletes are just all about themselves, you know, kind of cocky and think they're better than everybody but even here now, some people might think that but I don't really

believe in that, you know, everyone's their own person. If some people are like that, that's where it is. But I don't think that should just be the label across all athletes.

Another individual echoed this sentiment and shared his honest thoughts and opinion on the type of stigma attached to a student-athlete.

Everyone thinks we're spoiled. A lot of people think we just have everything given to us... we're lazy when it comes to school, but I mean, there's definitely a few athletes who are just like, just like the normal, you know, just about normal students too. I mean, some of them don't work hard. So, I mean, there's stereotypes for everything, but yeah, that's what I really mean.

Student-Athlete Programs and Services

Participants gave insight into the rigors of the student-athlete experience and noted possible solutions to improving the wellness, academic achievement, and social circles of student-athletes. In particular, the stress and busyness of balancing academics and athletics simultaneously was compounded by the need for faculty and professors to better comprehend the daily schedules of a student-athlete. It seems that the institution has provided more services and programs for student-athletes compared to the NCAA entity. Further, the interviews with student-athletes hinted that not all student-athletes are aware of the services, programs, and resources that the NCAA has provided for student-athletes.

A lot of newcomers, a lot of freshmen come into a Division I institution. I would probably say, you know, kind of a lot of group activities, you know, try to get yourself out of your shell, like be social, meet new people, don't just stay to yourself because you're in a different environment. So I'll say probably just do group assignments, group meetings

group, as much as group things, you can meet different people and you might have different interests and then so I'll probably say that.

Participants also seemed to value their education even though they may not be able to simultaneously balance the rigors of academics and athletics at all times. Support and understanding in their academic pursuits for some student-athletes is something they wish to gain.

We're mentally and physically tired all the time. Like they... I just want like, the academic perspective of it. I just want people to like to understand that what we go through is not normal life. We don't have a lot of time. And if we, if we can give more time or just like, easier like, like, like levels or things for classes I feel like it would help us. It's more for like professors and academic advisors like to really understand like, what what we do on a daily basis, like we dedicate our lives to basketball, but we also have to have to do good in school and sometimes both at the same time can be very hard, especially while we're traveling. Like we're missing school all the time - like during season, so like we miss a lot and it's just not like helping us.

One participant mentioned that effort in academics also should be garnered even with the limitations of how teachers can assist student-athletes who have to frequently miss classes and travel to competitions.

I mean, the perfect world, they just give us student-athlete classes and have the teachers travel with us wherever we go. I know that's not gonna happen. But, you know, for us, it's just, you got to do the best you can really you've talked to your instructors and most you can, you know, let them know weeks in advance or months in advance when you're going to miss. Try to actually do the homework. I'm someone that will try to do,

you know, a lot of math homework, you just type in a computer and give it to you. But, you know, just try to do the homework and you know, just deal with it, man. That's all you can do.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This investigation enabled the possibilities of visiting the lived experiences of basketball student-athletes who simultaneously handle dual roles of both student and athlete in the U.S. college system. Additionally, the factors that influence their college choice were illuminated. Using grounded theory via semi-structured interviews, the themes of *Family & Brotherhood*, *Commodification & Compensation*, *Student-Athlete Lived Experiences and Challenges*, and *Student-Athlete Programs and Services* emerged. The basketball student-athlete is a unique point of analysis due to its complex nature and identity as a transitive role between an amateur and a professional athlete. Further, this study enhances the ability for stakeholders such as NCAA executives, parents, athletic directors, and college faculty to gain further knowledge of the NCAA as an institution and the process of a student-athlete's college basketball recruitment.

Research and Practical Implications

Dialectic tensions are also present during everyday decisions involving balancing school and basketball. Some student-athletes put basketball as a greater priority, believing their intended purpose at a particular institution was to win games and use the college basketball opportunity as a springboard to the professional level. They make plans to stay longer in the gym to work on their individual skill development as well as watch basketball film analysis, indicating a love and importance for the game. On the other hand, others recognize that there are responsibilities with being a student-athlete and disclosed strategies to ensure that their academics are up to required standards. These tactics include communicating with professors and academic advisors, using a scheduling

system to keep track of tasks and assignments, and using student services such as the tutoring center, math center, writing center, and study hall.

The present study also indicated that there were dialectical tensions between multiple discourses of the college decision-making process. In this sense, there are pulls in opposite directions that make the college choice between multiple different institutions a difficult and contradictory one. A common narrative retrieved from the interviews was that individuals made their college decision based on basketball reasons such as coach/player relationship and team fit with academics taking a backseat for most student-athletes. There is an apparent tension when high school or AAU coaches have individual intentions that are not always in the best interest of the high school recruit. This goes against the student-athlete's desire to explore all available college options. When these wrong intentions arise, a sense of corruption within a student-athlete's college choice that functions as a subcategory to the theme of commodification seems to occur.

For example, players talked about how everything related to college basketball recruitment and competition is predicated on how the NCAA and its institutions operate as a business. It seemed that they felt vulnerable and had to think about every choice from an individualized cost-benefit viewpoint. Misguidance and corruption can lead to a student-athlete's professional potential decrease in value. In basketball terminology, this is referred to as a prospect's draft stock and fluctuates depending on how much perceived value the player can bring to the team.

Moreover, these contradictions appear through a multi-faceted bidding between college coaches for a high school prospect. In this instance, the recruit becomes a commodity that is hoped to be gained by a college basketball program. While recruits

have the final decision regarding their college choices, the AAU events described in the interviews illuminate college recruiting like a shopping spree of scholarships. Coaching staffs from around the country have lists of recruits they have interest in and move down their depth chart once an option is gone. They typically entice recruits with the same message during initial interactions and recruiting to make the recruit feel wanted, which was a central sub-theme to commodification in recruiting. This synonymous message functions as an oppressive message as genuineness is not present. While some recruits mention the humane element of social connection as a factor to college choice, this factor may not be influential when people buy into the expectations and culture of the basketball industry.

Student-athletes recognize that in the nature of the basketball business, people may have intentions that do not align with their own and implicitly these players can be oppressed. The ultimate decision has to rest on what they believe is the best fit that takes into account a variety of variables that include perception of coaching staff, playing style, basketball fit on team, school culture, community and fans, and weather among others. Thus, it can be suggested that the concept and process of commodification and decision-making are related and share a similar vein. Bi-directionally, the recruits become products that are bided upon and the institution is an entity that is being sold to the prospective student-athletes. The amateur part of collegiate athletics loses its token meaning because of commodification.

The findings conveyed the notion that there are perceptions of misconceptions and misunderstandings about the student-athlete experience and lifestyle. While student-athlete are often gloried almost as if they are professional players, participants note that

there is some stigma of laziness and entitlement attached to the student-athlete identity. Besides the stigma, student-athletes face academic challenges and have many sports related tasks that involve not only practicing and competing, but also media initiatives, community outreach, and rehabilitation.

From the interviews, the concept of compensation and the arguments for and against it connect to Marx's class struggle. The student-athletes relayed the message of how their lived-experiences deserve to be compensated in the role of student and athlete. For instance, the participants advocated for a compensation model that permits them to pursue endorsements and other opportunities. They also brought up the importance of the Pay for Play Act that ties into payment from name, likeness, and image usage. These difficulties of balancing a hectic student-athlete lifestyle infer an alienation from the wealth that they generate from their amateur athlete personas. Understandably, the participants are aware that if paying student-athletes were a reality, class differences may result in more valued student-athletes receiving higher revenue shares than less valued student-athletes. These class differences could matriculate from overall individual value as an athlete to individual social media following and perceived marketability.

Policy Implications

Enclosed in student-athlete programs and services, a thematic subgroup appears to be the necessity of gathering unbiased and relevant information for both high school recruits and their families. Although there are consulting businesses and recruiting services, high school prospects can still be manipulated and pushed in the wrong direction. Thus, research and training in professionalism and conduct may help prospective student-athletes make sound and non-regrettable college decisions.

Findings from this project implied there is room for improvement from a policy standpoint for not only governing NCAA student-athletes, but also promoting their growth, well-being, and career development. The participants noted that they are not much aware of the NCAA programs and services for student-athletes. Perhaps this means that the NCAA and its associated conferences and institutions can implement required programs, orientations, and workshops for incoming freshmen before the start of their collegiate journey. On the other hand, increasing accessibility and convenience should certainly promote the usage of these tools for student-athletes. These initiatives would help address academic issues and concerns that some student-athletes feel is a huge burden when compounded by travel to competitions and missed class time. Some participants desired more understanding from their peers and professors about the student-athlete experience while others had tangible suggestions for an enhancement in academics for student-athletes.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of semi-structured interviews for this population is their sensitization to the interview routines. Student-athletes are often covered and interviewed by media so their ability to respond in greater depth and clarity in a research inquiry could have been potentially impeded. They are often trained in detail on how to respond and what to inhibit from others when posting on social media platforms or interviewing during media availability, which is a scheduled time for media members to ask student-athletes questions. I did not know the extent of each student-athlete's media training and the varying levels that it could affect participant's openness. While it could be sensed that not all student-athletes respond with depth due to this tendency, the

questions of who trains them and for how long was a sufficiency that was not answered. As a result, it was a challenge to probe for further details in responses for most participants during the semi-structured interviews. Moreover, this negative connotation of interviews seems to have been generated by influence from professional athletes who voice hatred over sports media and journalists, which fosters a sour relationship between the parties (Foxworth, 2019). For this reason, there is much difficulty in getting inside the mind of student-athletes and hearing their uncensored opinions and experiences.

Further, there was a lack of incentive for participation causing anticipated participants to back off from the study. This is difficult paradigm to navigate because the studied population represents a special group membership with restrictions against any monetary and beneficial compensation attributed by NCAA rules. Delays in data collection in accordance with the original timeline were also affected by the ongoing health concerns of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), which forced some originally scheduled face-to-face meetings to be postponed. The interview scheduling process took longer than initially expected and it was clear that the early signals of COVID-19 started to promote fear, caution, and uncertainty for the participants even before campus shut down. During this stage, there was widespread shock among the student-athletes of not only the cancellation of post-season basketball tournaments, but also the transformation of courses into an online format post spring break. As a result, it was clear that participation in research became a lower priority in this unique global situation. The studied sample size was limited to five participants, which was fewer than the ten that I wanted. While the thought of continuing interviews through the phone with other participants was an option, the unprecedented circumstances may have played an

influence in tinkering or confounding the data. Only one participant agreed to do a virtual interview.

As a limitation, the study was conducted focused on a small group of student-athletes from a single institution. While broad generalizations could be assumed to college basketball athletes overall, it should be cautioned that every basketball student-athlete will have unique lived experiences that differ from one another. This was evident in the interview of how some student-athletes receive financial support from their families while others do not. Thus, their narratives and stories will vary, too.

The conference of the school plays a role in the level of prospects that are recruited. In other words, higher ranked institutions are able to recruit more blue-chip prospects and with more highly touted players comes increased exposure and more stakeholders involved. This has implications on the thematic results as the possibility of sketchy recruiting practices is hypothetically more prominent at schools with lucrative financial resources and the ability to attract and compete for the top high school players. The NBA's One-And-Done Rule making high school prospects play a year in college for free can be attributed as a factor to the underground NCAA corruption that has occurred. With more available professional routes to the NBA such as the NBA G League's Professional Pathway Program and the National Basketball League's Next Stars program, more high school players can achieve dreams of making an immediate salary, attending life skills workshops and programs, gaining exposure from personnel and scouts, and obtaining a future scholarship to pursue a college degree when desired (Haynes, 2020). Consequently, this limitation could potentially explain the lack of depth in responses related to the college recruitment process and exchange with various college coaches.

Nevertheless, the interviews still shed light on the unique process of recruitment and college decision as well as opinions on improving the student-athlete experience.

Strengths

As a graduate assistant to a basketball program, I think my role helped me gain exclusive access to these student-athlete participants that would not have been possible coming from an outsider perspective. It is common for clichés to be remarked in sports interviews, so I believe my previous relationship with the population encouraged more candid responses to the interview questions. In my job role, I was also able to see things occur first-hand as well as the culture of college basketball and the culture of an organization. Through this, I could better understand the perspectives, feelings, and thoughts of the student-athletes in addition to gaining the possibility of making inferences regarding implicit codes and themes. Since I am inside the culture of basketball, I was able to observe the type of support services and personnel made available to student-athletes as well as witness their daily timetables to the hour.

Further, another strength of this study was its sample, which was representative of U.S. college basketball programs in terms of age, race, and family backgrounds. Having a representative sample allows for potential generalization and extrapolation to the typical college basketball program in the NCAA. Even after accounting for the COVID-19 limitation of conducting my anticipated number of interviews, the demographics of the participants suggested a representative group.

Reflexivity

Looking back on this thesis project, I gained significant vision not only on the topics of NCAA, college recruitment, and student-athlete decision-making, but also on

the processes of engaging in ethically sound research. In regard to the IRB process and receiving approval to begin commencement of interviews, I originally experienced a double bind situation in which I was implicitly governed by both the IRB office and the institution's compliance office. This was a unique scenario in which I was required to receive approval to begin data collection from two parties with different interests.

The current global circumstances during this research also affected me with a good deal of stress and uncertainty. It was a difficult time to work from home and push forward with a delayed interview schedule. However, I found it to be effective to make gradual progress each day, which helped with maintaining motivation. Beyond the immediate effects of COVID-19 on institutional operations, I discovered that adjusting to a less-structured lifestyle and not being able to get the anticipated number of interviews a bit frustrating. For the student-athletes who were available, it was an engaging opportunity to be able to give them a voice to reflect about their own lived experiences and ideas related to policy and student-athlete services and programs.

This thesis study taught me the importance of upholding rules in ethical research and respectful of participants, which can translate to meaningful work experience in the professional sport industry besides academia and research. I envision being able to integrate this thesis project into a summer internship that can assist in parlaying further insight related to student-athlete reflexivity after former student-athletes have turned professional.

Overall, the chief takeaway from this project is education of the student-athlete experience from a lucrative sport in NCAA college basketball. Society and many stakeholders who interact with student-athletes on a daily basis may not all be aware of

the underlying occurrences of this population. With the recent FBI/NCAA investigation of recruiting practices along with the sizeable money involved in the sport, I think there can be a compromise towards the notion of compensation as well as more evaluations of optimal college choice for student-athletes. For starters, this does not necessarily mean more rules and regulations in place. This thesis study reveals that accessible information and appropriate support systems are a basis for the growth and development of student-athletes.

Recommendations for Future Research

When addressing the limitation of short interviews with multiple student-athletes, a solution of conducting a more comprehensive case-study of one individual could serve as another step to furthering scholarship on NCAA basketball student-athletes. In this case, having a researcher not only conduct interviews with a student-athlete, but also take an observational approach of “a-day-in-the-life” might enhance the understanding of student-athletes’ unique lived experiences. This inquiry could be made possible much like how media members write up features on players and/or have camera crews following them around to shoot documentaries. Moreover, replicating this inquiry in college football would be an applicable similar undertaking that deals with a similar targeted population in race, upbringing, SES, and experiences among others.

In terms of further exploring the notion of compensation, an online survey sent to multiple college basketball programs could bring back greater depth of ideas for policy change. A concise and easily accessible administration of the measurement tool should be able to garner more responses from a targeted population in the broader scheme. There is no consensus method as to how compensation should be administered for student-athletes

in regard to their name, likeness, and image. Any action towards compensation has to begin with economic research that explains the ramifications of value added of a student-athlete to the NCAA and its institutions.

Since recruitment and compensation are fluid topics, next steps should entail interviewing other stakeholders so researchers can collect multiple angles besides the student-athlete one. This incorporates individuals such as high school and AAU coaches, academic advisors, parents, athletic directors, and NCAA executives among others. Additionally, it would be beneficial to look at how responses, attitudes, and outlooks change longitudinally for student-athletes. Interviewing them when they are playing professional versus when they are in college should produce different insight and a more holistic picture.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The co-investigator declared there were no conflicting interests to report.

Funding

The study did not receive any grant or funding by the institution or a third party for this research.

Conclusion

The implications of this thesis project suggested that there is important information and novel knowledge to be acquired from working with and helping student-athletes on-and-off the playing surfaces. For NCAA basketball athletes who have increased national media exposure and play a lucrative sport, their physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development is understudied. The voices and anecdotes from the semi-structured interviews served as a positive element towards comprehending these lived experiences and can be used as a springboard towards changes in policies and services for student-athletes. Overall, I saw that student-athletes comprehended NCAA college basketball as a business – the purpose is generating revenue and winning games. Student-athletes recognize that the school’s athletic program and brand is separated from the school as an academic institution.

While this study highlighted a need for understanding about the student-athlete experience, actionable steps to support this population from an educational and holistic standpoint should be a paramount priority for the NCAA and its institutions.

Accordingly, the findings demonstrate the obligation from the NCAA and NCAA colleges to bypass money as the singular priority in collegiate sports and establish plans for growth and development of all student-athletes. Whether we like it or not, college

sports like basketball and football serve the purpose of entertainment for society in which a product is bid upon as early as grade school and later marketed as closely as the professional levels. Through it all, commodification and the college decision for student-athletes go hand in hand. Exploitation can be occurring for student-athletes and they may not even know it. This pivotal life stage in choosing a college for student-athletes has enormous ramifications and must not be taken with a grain of salt.

Appendix A

Interview Guide

This interview is motivated by an interest in better comprehending the lived experiences of student-athletes that span from their time as a high school recruit to an extrapolation of their perceived future outcomes. The researcher is looking for detailed and candid responses as much as possible. During the interviews, the researcher's entire focus is on the participant and will merely concentrate on hearing the voices and stories of the participants.

Along with the interview, responses to each question will be kept confidential. The participant has complete autonomy to ask clarifying questions about certain topics and end the session at any time. In addition to the signed consent, permission for audio and video recording will need a verbal consent after the objectives and procedure of the study have been noted to the participant before interviews can commence.

1. What are some of your hobbies outside of school?

- Favorite Music?
- Favorite Food?
- Favorite Movie/TV show?
- Best moment at UNR?

2. How did you become involved in basketball and how many years have you been playing?

3. What athlete(s) inspire you and what do you love about basketball?

4. Are there challenges related to being a student-athlete? If so, can you elaborate on how you have handled these challenges?
5. What is your opinion of your institution and the NCAA? What type of treatments or programs has the institution provided you as a student-athlete?
6. How do you like your current school? What aspects do you like about it?
7. Describe the recruiting process as a high school prospect.
 - Who had an input in your college choice? Who did you trust in your inner circle and why?
8. In retrospect, do you think you made the right college choice?
 - What might you have done differently?
9. If student-athletes were able to get paid, how do you think compensation should be administered?
 - What is your perception of the current compensation?
10. How do you feel as a student-athlete on campus?
 - Are there any stigma or stereotypes associated with student-athletes?
11. Describe your high school and AAU experience.
 - What events did you participate in? What were some of your favorite memories?
12. What were your goals heading into college?
 - How has that goal changed through the many influences in your life?
13. Where do you envision yourself after you leave college and finish playing college basketball?
14. Are there any questions I missed and if there anything else I should know?

Appendix B

Consent Form

University of Nevada, Reno

Social Behavioral or Educational Research Consent Form

**Title of Study: NCAA Basketball, College Recruitment, and
Factors That Influence College Decisions For Basketball Student-
Athletes**

Principal Investigator: Dr. Shawn C. Marsh

Co-Investigators / Study Contact: Conrad Chow

Study ID Number: 1547193-1

Sponsor: N/A

Summary Of Key Elements:

Communication Studies M.A. candidate Conrad Chow is conducting a research study to learn about your college decision and experiences as a student-athlete at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). We intend to write an academic thesis as a result of the data collected in this project. Your participation in the study will take about 30-45 minutes.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. This research study is considered minimal risk of harms. This means the risks of your participation in the research are similar in type or intensity to what you encounter in your daily activities. Benefits of doing the research are not definite; but we hope to learn useful information about the lived experiences of student-athletes on-and-off the playing surface. There are no direct benefits to you in this study activity, however we may provide you with our insightful findings once the study has been completed.

We will treat your identity with professional standards of confidentiality and protect your private information. We will do this by de-identifying participants in transcripts. We will not use your name or other information that could identify you in any reports or publications.

You may discuss a problem or complaint or ask about your rights as a research participant by calling the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office at (775)

327-2368. You may also use the online *Contact the Research Integrity Office* form available from the [Contact Us page](#) of the University's Research Integrity Office website.

If you agree to participate in this study, you must sign this consent form. We will give you a copy of the form to keep.

Participant's Name Printed

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

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