

A Systematic Review on the Relationship between Student-Athletes' Identities and their College Experience Through the Lens of Social Identity Theory

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Student-athletes' identities play a significant role in shaping their college experience. Despite a growing body of literature, additional investigations are needed to create a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities shape their college experiences and outcomes. Therefore, in this study, I began by systematically reviewing previous literature to identify which college experiences and outcomes tend to be associated with student-athletes' identities. Following, I utilized Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a guiding framework to better understand how student-athletes' identities may shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments. Utilizing two coding cycles, five salient student-athlete identities were identified that impact seven common dimensions of their college experience. Interpreted through the lens of SIT, it appeared student-athletes may actively engage or disengage from certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to their perceptions of prestige and sense of belonging. Practical implications suggest coaches and athletics staff should collectively aim to create a team culture that demonstrates norms, values, and behaviors that elevate and support student-athletes' holistic identity development.

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The value of higher education is often demonstrated through higher education institutions supporting students' cognitive and noncognitive development and their search for a sense of belonging (Black & Allen, 2017; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Despite the variety of learning and developmental activities and population-specific programs designed to support higher education students, disparities persist in how students experience the value of higher education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024; Renn & Reason, 2021). Among the groups navigating these disparities are students who participate in intercollegiate athletics.

Students participating in intercollegiate athletics, commonly referred to as student-athletes, have the unique responsibility of balancing both athletic and academic participation during their college experience. The combined commitment to athletic and academic participation inherently creates a rigorous schedule for student-athletes, averaging 70 hours per week, completing athletic and academic responsibilities (NCAA, 2020). While student-athletes receive support through financial aid, academic tutors, medical care, access to athletic facilities, and other specialized resources, many continue to struggle to balance their multiple commitments (Gaston-Gayles, 2015). Consequently, student-athletes are often faced with making difficult choices between competing commitments, with athletic participation taking precedence (Chaplin & Lim, 2020; Edwards & Froehle, 2023; Grafnetterova et al., 2021; Zvosec et al., 2023). As a result, student-athletes are often limited in their ability to participate in exploratory behaviors (e.g., on-campus extracurricular activities, internships, or part-time employment) outside of their regular responsibilities.

Brewer and Petitpas (2017) described exploratory behaviors as an optimal way for individuals to discover and develop unique skills, values, and interests, which form the foundation of their occupational and ideological beliefs and opinions. In the case of student-athletes, exploratory behaviors often assist in identifying skills, values, and interests outside of athletic participation and performance contexts. For example, student-athletes who successfully engage in exploratory behaviors tend to prioritize academic performance and find greater balance when navigating their multiple responsibilities, often feeling empowered to use athletic participation to their advantage (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Unfortunately, student-athletes frequently sacrifice participation in exploratory behaviors in pursuit of athletic participation and achievement (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). As a result, student-athletes are prone to relying on athletic participation and performance to determine self-worth, which can influence their identity development, sense of belonging, and their overall college experience (Whitehead & Senecal, 2020).

While scholars have demonstrated a significant interest in understanding the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experience, less consideration has been given to how student-athletes' identities shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments. As a result, previous studies often document mixed findings regarding the relationships between student-athletes' identities and their corresponding experiences and outcomes (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Graupensperger et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2024; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018; Zvosec et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite the guidance and sup-

port of targeted interventions, disparities persist in student-athletes' cognitive and noncognitive development and their search for a sense of belonging across gender, race, and divisional association (Kroshuset al., 2023a; Kroshuset al., 2023b; NCAA, 2020). Therefore, additional investigations are needed to create a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities shape their college experiences and outcomes (Caza et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014).

In this study, I systematically review previous literature to address the research question: How does the past 10 years of academic literature suggest student-athletes' identities impact their college experience?

In doing so, I identify which college experiences and outcomes tend to be associated with student-athletes' identities. Furthermore, I utilize Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a guiding framework to better understand how student-athletes' identities may shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments. As a result, this seeks to build upon previous studies (Caza et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014) by incorporating multiple student-athlete identities into a single study while considering how the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison shape their college experiences and outcomes (Rees et al., 2015). Taken together, this study aims to assist in creating a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

Literature Review

Social Identity Theory

Over time, numerous theories have been used to investigate the impacts of identity on college students' experiences and outcomes (Renn & Reason, 2021). Dominant theories within social science identity research include Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory, which focus on how group affiliation or social roles impact identity development and behaviors (Ronkainen et al., 2016). Considering SIT as a model informing identity development, the seminal work of Tajfel (1970), Tajfel et al. (1971), and Tajfel and Turner (1979) demonstrated individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from group membership, which informs their motivations, decisions, and behaviors. Since its early conceptualization, SIT has repeatedly provided a useful framework for understanding a variety of social domains, such as leadership, crowd behavior, military participation, health and wellness, public policies, and sport psychology (Hogg, 2016; Rees et al., 2015).

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), SIT consists of three central components, which include social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Through social categorization, individuals organize their social world by classifying themselves and others into distinct social groups, each commonly associated with norms, values, and behavioral expectations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Through social identification, individuals internalize group membership as part of their self-concept by adopting and expressing norms, values, and behaviors associated with their in-

group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consequently, individuals develop the perceptions of being similar or different and better or worse than others. Finally, through social comparison, individuals seek to maintain or achieve a positive social identity by favorably evaluating their own groups in relation to others, which often contributes to the formation of groups of high or low prestige (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As a result, perceptions of high or low prestige tend to encourage individuals to distance themselves from or identify with a group or its membership by either enhancing the prestige of their current group or seeking affiliation with an alternative group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Taken together, these processes illustrate how group membership plays a significant role in shaping identity development and social behavior. Consequently, scholars have argued social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). Therefore, in this study, I utilized SIT to investigate the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experiences and outcomes.

Social identity approaches have been used by numerous scholars to understand the relationship between student-athletes' identities and their college experiences and outcomes. For example, Copeland et al. (2024) utilized SIT to investigate the foundation of student-athletes' identity by examining the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and their athletic identity. In this study, Copeland et al. (2024) surveyed 102 student-athletes currently enrolled in higher education institutions across NCAA divisions, utilizing three measures, which included the Personal Data Form, Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, and Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey. The results from Copeland et al. (2024) did not show a significant relationship between adverse childhood experiences and athletic identity. However, considering race and gender, they did report a significant correlation specific to Black male student-athletes, which suggested Black males who have been exposed to a higher number of adverse childhood experiences may develop a stronger athletic identity.

Additional studies include those of Stokowski et al. (2022) and Parker et al. (2021). In Stokowski et al.'s (2022) investigation, they examined the impact of divisional association on 332 NCAA Division III student-athletes utilizing the Athlete Identity Measurement Scale and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21. Stokowski et al. (2022) reported participants did not display a strong connection to their athletic identity and therefore did not demonstrate concerning levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. As such, it was noted these findings demonstrate how divisional association impacts student-athletes' college experience, highlighting the benefits of the NCAA Division III philosophy (NCAA, 2025), which encourages a balanced college experience for student-athletes.

Considering Parker et al.'s (2021) investigation, they examined Canadian student-athletes by conducting secondary analysis of the 2017–2018 Motivation and Academic Achievement archival database. In doing so, they investigated the relationship between student-athletes' social identity and psychosocial adjustment among first-year student-athletes. In this study, Parker et al. (2021) utilized a subsa-

mple of 331 first-year student-athletes. Results from this study suggested Canadian student-athletes' social identity was correlated to increased perceptions of control and decreased perceptions of stress and learning-related anxiety, which positively impacted academic performance and mental well-being. Therefore, similar to Stokowski et al. (2022), these findings demonstrated positive effects of social identities and group membership for student-athletes.

On the other hand, Graupensperger et al. (2018) and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018) reported more troubling impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experience. In an investigation of NCAA Division II and III student-athletes, Graupensperger et al. (2018) surveyed 379 student-athletes to test their hypothesis that those who strongly identified with their team would demonstrate increased risk of conforming to their teammates' behaviors. As a result, Graupensperger et al. (2018) found student-athletes who strongly identified with their athletic identity tended to conform to their team's norms, values, and behaviors. These included the participation in risky behaviors, such as excessive alcohol use and hazing practices, as well as prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering or helping a stranger. However, when controlling for student-athletes' gender, Graupensperger et al. (2018) reported female student-athletes were less likely than male student-athletes to conform to risky behaviors and more likely to conform to prosocial behaviors.

Considering Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018), this investigation included 1,151 undergraduate varsity student-athletes from nine NCAA Division I institutions who completed questionnaires assessing athletic and academic identity saliency, athletic task and ego orientation, academic mastery and performance goals, and dimensions of sport conduct. In this study, Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018) found student-athletes' athletic and academic identities were significant indicators of ethical behavior during competition. For example, salient academic identities positively predicted student-athletes exhibiting ethical behavior and negatively predicted unethical behavior during competition. On the other hand, salient athletic identities negatively predicted student-athletes exhibiting ethical behavior and positively predicted unethical behavior during competition.

Athletic Identity

Investigations into student-athletes' athletic identity are typically traced to the work of Brewer et al. (1993) and their initial Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Over time and through subsequent work, the initial AIMS has evolved into the current seven-item AIMS, incorporating aspects such as social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). The seminal work of Brewer et al. (1993) defined athletic identity as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (p. 237). However, recent studies have suggested more nuanced understandings of student-athletes' athletic identity.

Through a qualitative approach, Newton et al. (2020) examined how NCAA Division I student-athletes understand and experience their athletic identity. Participants in this study included three male and six female student-athletes participating in various sports from a southeastern university in the United States. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, Newton et al. (2020) found the participants' athletic

identity was personally internalized, reinforced through long-term commitment, and shaped by social recognition. As a result, student-athletes' athletic identity was described as an iceberg, a participant-generated metaphor that suggested an athletic identity comprises seen and unseen characteristics that are above and below the surface.

Previous studies have also suggested student-athletes may become addicted to their athletic identity. For example, Huml and Nite (2019) conducted a two-phase quantitative study with 118 current NCAA Division I and II student-athletes and 458 former student-athletes to examine whether athletic identity reflects characteristics of behavioral addiction. Using this approach, they developed and provided initial evidence for the reliability and validity of a four-factor Athletic Identity Addiction Scale. As a result, Huml and Nite (2019) suggested student-athletes may display symptoms such as withdrawal, over-commitment, and relapse in relation to both athletic participation and athletic identity.

Additional studies investigating student-athletes' athletic identities have suggested a give-and-take relationship between student-athletes and their athletic identity. For example, Zvosec et al. (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 former NCAA Division I student-athlete football players from 14 institutions to examine post-athletic career transitions. Findings from this study suggested student-athletes develop high levels of athletic mastery, which often correlate with transferable skills such as confidence, commitment, and a strong work ethic. However, the development of athletic mastery typically came at a cost, as opportunities to advance skillsets outside of athletic participation were often viewed as incompatible with the rigorous demands of athletic schedules.

Similarly, Watson et al. (2024) examined the relationships among athletic identity, motivation, satisfaction, and mental well-being. In this study, survey data were gathered from 207 student-athletes at mid-major NCAA Division I institutions during the 2020–2021 academic year. Using a 60-item questionnaire, Watson et al. (2024) found that while student-athlete motivation and satisfaction were positively associated with mental well-being, athletic identity was negatively correlated with mental well-being. As a result, it was suggested a salient athlete identity may carry psychological consequences under certain conditions.

Finally, through a cross-sectional quantitative survey of 104 former NCAA Division I student-athlete Powell et al. (2024) investigated the extent to which student-athletes' athletic identity impacts their present-day life satisfaction. Findings from this study suggested athletic identity did not significantly impact present-day life satisfaction unless the mediating effect of the search for meaning in life was included. In other words, while athletic identity did not significantly influence the presence of meaning in life, it did significantly predict engagement in the search for meaning. Therefore, it was suggested that student-athletes would benefit from integrating alternative identities outside of athletic participation before graduation to facilitate more successful transitions out of sport.

Student-Athlete Experience

The Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Learning of Students in College Study (GOALS) is one of the most comprehensive studies examining the experiences and well-being of current student-athletes and was conducted in 2006, 2010, 2015, and 2019 (NCAA, 2020). The NCAA GOALS survey used a stratified random sampling method (Fetters, 2019) to ensure the sample distribution reflects the population across all sports teams. In these studies, student-athletes are randomly selected from one to three preselected sports teams per school (Hwang & Choi, 2016). In 2019, over 22,000 student-athletes participated in the NCAA GOALS survey by completing an 84-question survey, answering questions regarding their background, social experience, academic experience, athletic experience, recruitment experience, and support received for overall health and well-being (NCAA, 2020).

Findings from the 2019 NCAA GOALS Study identified significant disparities in mental health, academic engagement, perceived support, sense of belonging, and time commitments. Considering sex, female student-athletes were more likely than male student-athletes to report feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities and expressed lower comfort levels in discussing mental health concerns with coaches. Additionally, female respondents reported devoting more time to academic activities compared to male student-athletes. Considering race, student-athletes of Color indicated a lower sense of belonging compared to White student-athletes. Additionally, White student-athletes were more likely to perceive their coaches and teammates had created inclusive environments. Finally, considering divisional association, NCAA Division I student-athletes reported increased time spent on athletic participation, which limited their extracurricular engagement, faculty interactions, and academic participation. Conversely, NCAA Division III student-athletes reported increased likelihood of forming close relationships with faculty and higher levels of academic balance and support (NCAA, 2020).

Minority Identity Support

Considering the disparities among student-athletes, Kroshus, Ackerman, Brown, et al. (2023) and Kroshus, Coakley, Conway, et al. (2023) sought to identify ways in which student-athletes with minority identities could be better supported. During the NCAA Summit on gender identity and student-athlete participation, Kroshus et al. (2023a) utilized a modified Delphi consensus process, which included two phases to identify ways in which trans and gender nonconforming student-athletes (TGNC) could be better supported. Phase one included didactic presentations, small-group discussions, and opportunities for anonymous feedback to generate potential support strategies. Following, phase two used an asynchronous process in which participants anonymously rated and refined proposed support strategies. Participants included current or former TGNC student-athletes, academic and healthcare professionals, and intercollegiate athletic stakeholders who are actively involved in policy implementation. In this study, summit participants suggested there is a need for structural and systemic action to support TGNC student-athletes' well-being. For example, it was suggested that all individuals involved in athletic programs should receive

athlete-centered, gender-affirming healthcare. Additionally, it was suggested that role-specific education should be provided to stakeholders to address biases, myths, and misperceptions about the sexual and gender identity of LGBTQ+ student-athletes.

Similarly, Kroshus et al. (2023b), used a Delphi-informed approach to investigate ways in which student-athletes of Color could be better supported. This study began with a scoping review of literature on racial and ethnic differences in student-athlete mental health. Following, a multiday virtual meeting was held to integrate empirical findings with the lived experiences of a racially and professionally diverse group of student-athletes, clinicians, athletics administrators, DEI experts, and health educators. Through a consensus process, participants recommended implementing organizational policies and practices such as increasing staffing diversity, establishing reporting and accountability mechanisms, supporting non-sport skill development for student-athletes of Color, and providing trauma-informed education for stakeholders.

Taken together, previous studies suggest student-athletes' identities play a significant role in shaping how they experience the value of higher education, including their cognitive and noncognitive development and their search for a sense of belonging. Despite a growing body of literature, additional investigations are needed to create a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities shape their college experiences and outcomes. Therefore, in this study, I systematically reviewed previous literature to address the following research question: How does the past 10 years of academic literature suggest student-athletes' identities impact their college experience? In doing so, I utilize SIT as a framework to interpret why student-athletes' identities may be related to their college experiences and outcomes. As a result, this seeks to build upon previous studies (Caza et al., 2018; Rees et al., 2015; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014) by incorporating multiple student-athlete identities into a single study while considering how the processes of social categorization, identification, and social comparison shape the decisions and motivations underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments.

Method

Search Strategy

In this systematic review, I utilized the online databases ProQuest, ERIC, and One Search. Using ProQuest, I began with the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*. ProQuest delivered 13,678 results. I then limited results to the past 10 years. Selecting a range of 10 years reduced the results to 6,513. I continued by selecting peer-reviewed articles published in a scholarly journal. This decision resulted in lowering the total to 669 results. Following, I limited results to *full text* and the document type *articles*. This search strategy resulted in a total of 57 articles. Finally, I selected the subject *athletes*, which resulted in 23 articles for review.

Using ERIC, I began with the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*. ERIC generated 493 results. I then limited the results to the past 10 years. Selecting a range of 10 years reduced the results to 212. I continued by selecting only peer-reviewed articles, which reduced the results to 177. I then limited the results to *full text* and the publication type *research report*. This search strategy resulted in 118 articles. Finally, I selected the descriptor *student-athletes*, which resulted in 25 articles for review.

Using One Search, I began with the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*. Upon using the search term *NCAA student-athlete identity*, 217 results were found. I then limited my search to the past 10 years. Selecting a range of 10 years reduced the results to 163. I continued by only allowing for peer-reviewed articles published in an academic journal. This search strategy resulted in a total of 65 articles. Finally, I selected the subject *athletes*, which resulted in 32 articles for review.

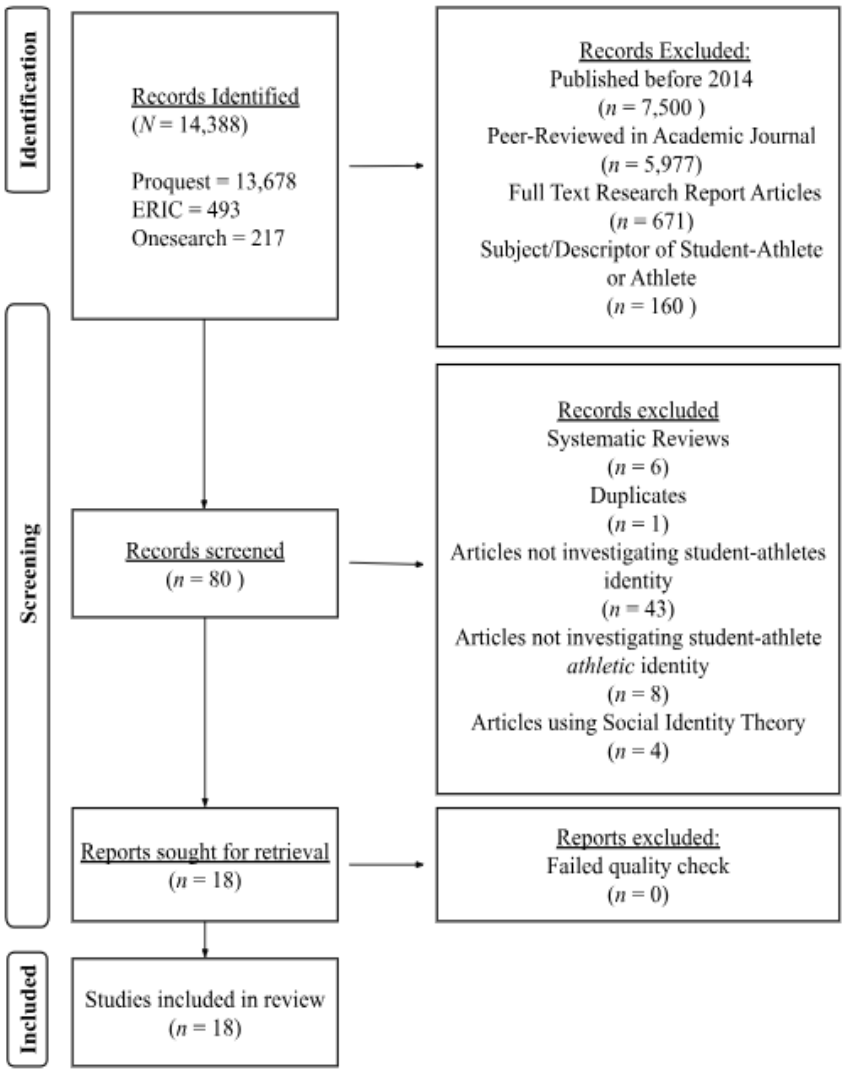
All 80 articles found using ProQuest, ERIC, and OneSearch were then downloaded and grouped into the software program EndNote 20©. EndNote 20© is a system that allows an individual to manage an extensive reference list, assisting with citation formatting, viewing abstracts, identifying keywords, and generating bibliographic data. With all the articles in EndNote 20©, I began reviewing the titles and abstracts of each publication. I started by excluding articles that were systematic or literature reviews. This removed six articles, resulting in 74 articles. I then excluded duplicate articles. This removed one article, resulting in 73 articles. I then excluded articles that did not investigate student-athletes' identities. Applying this exclusion criterion, 43 articles were removed, resulting in 30. I then excluded articles that did not incorporate student-athletes' *athletic* identity in their study. Applying this exclusion criterion, eight articles were removed, resulting in 22 articles for review. Finally, I excluded articles that utilized Social Identity Theory to investigate student-athlete identities, removing 4 articles, resulting in 18 for review. These 4 articles were instead retained for comparison in the discussion, allowing the findings identified in this study to be considered alongside existing SIT-based literature on student-athletes' identities and their college experience.

Before proceeding to the final evaluation of the 18 articles, I completed a quality check to assess the scholarship of each article. Qualitative studies were evaluated, considering the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who suggested rigorous qualitative research studies must incorporate strategies to establish trustworthiness, such as credibility, transferability, and dependability. Quantitative studies were evaluated considering the recommendations of Johnson and Christensen (2017) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), who suggested rigorous quantitative research must display markers of robustness such as generalizability, validity, and reliability.

Reviewing the methodological rigor of each article, I assessed the methods, results, findings, and discussion sections of each article. Evaluating the methods sections of each study, I assessed how data were collected and analyzed. Assessing the results and findings sections within each article, I reviewed the extent to which the study addressed its respective research questions and the purpose of the study. Reviewing the discussion sections of each article, I examined the authors' ability to

communicate the significance of their findings within a broader scholarly context and the implications of their findings. My comprehensive review of methodological rigor did not exclude any additional articles (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2020)



Data Analysis

Analyzing the articles included in this study involved two coding cycles. First, I utilized holistic coding (Saldaña, 2021) as a preparatory method to review each article and identify the ways in which previous studies investigated and suggested student-athletes' identities impacted their college experiences and outcomes across a range of research designs. For example, I documented how and when student-athletes' identities were investigated. Additionally, I documented the ways in which previous studies suggested student-athletes' identities impacted their college experiences and outcomes. Next, I utilized pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021) to organize the holistic codes into smaller, conceptually related categories and to identify recurring patterns across studies. For example, I documented the recurring ways in which student-athletes' identities were investigated and described as impacting their college experiences and outcomes. After completing both coding cycles, I interpreted the emerging patterns through the lens of SIT. In doing so, I utilized the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison to identify the ways in which student-athletes' identities may shape the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments.

Findings

In total, 13 studies utilized a quantitative approach, five studies utilized a qualitative approach, and no studies utilized a mixed methods approach. Across the 18 articles, seven investigated the impacts of student-athletes' identities across multiple NCAA divisions, nine investigated NCAA Division I student-athletes, one investigated NCAA Division II student-athletes, and one investigated NCAA Division III student-athletes. Considering publication year, eight articles were published between 2016 and 2018, seven between 2019 and 2022, and three since 2023 (see Table 1).

Table 1
Key Characteristics of Studies Included

Reference	Methods	Sample	Purpose	Main Findings
Allen et al. (2022)	Quant	884 senior student-athletes at a private, religiously affiliated, NCAA Division I university.	Investigated the religiosity of student-athletes.	Reported student-athletes scored higher than non-athletes on religious beliefs, religious behaviors, and sense of religious identity. White student-athletes were more prone to indicate higher religious behavior.
Anderson et al. (2023)	Qual	Nine female student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Explored the experiences of NCAA female sexual minority student-athletes.	Found participants experienced a challenging climate and role negotiation. Participants discussed the challenging environment created by a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, which encouraged student-athletes to hide their sexual orientation. Participants described a fear of verbal and physical discrimination, which discouraged them from sharing their sexual orientation.
Bell et al. (2018)	Quant	44 student-athletes from various NCAA Division II institutions in the Southwest United States.	Assessed whether there is an association between athlete identity and career exploration and engagement among current student-athletes.	Results suggested there are associations between athletic identity and career exploration and engagement. Female student-athletes reported increased career exploration and engagement.
Beron & Piquero (2016)	Quant	19,000 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Investigated the connection between athletic and academic identities of student-athletes.	Results suggested student-athletes with a strong athletic identity spent more time on athletic participation and less on academic involvement, leading to lower academic achievement.
Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Qual	29 NCAA Division I student-athletes across sports.	Explored NCAA Division I collegiate student-athletes’ perceptions regarding their transition out of sports participation.	Found participants described negative feelings toward transition out of sport due to the loss of their athletic identity. Participants found comfort and confidence when approaching their transition when they were encouraged and supported by family members and stakeholders to develop a holistic identity.

Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Qual	Four Black female student-athletes at an NCAA Division I historically White institution (HWI).	Explored athletic identity vs. academic performance in Black female student-athletes.	Found participants tended to over-identify with their athletic identity and under-identify with their academic identity. Participants expressed their athletic role dominated their time and energy, resulting in reduced academic performance.
Fynes & Fisher (2016)	Qual	10 former NCAA Division I lesbian student-athletes.	Explored the social experiences of female LGBTQ+ student-athletes.	Found participants described the climate for LGBTQ+ athletes as relatively unsupportive. Participants felt the need to conceal their sexual orientation depending on the context.
Gabana (2020)	Quant	331 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the relationship between student-athletes' religious identity and levels of gratitude.	Reported student-athletes who identified as spiritual/religious had higher levels of dispositional gratitude than spiritual/non-religious and non-spiritual/non-religious athletes.
Gabana (2022)	Quant	596 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the relationship between student-athletes' religious identity and levels of gratitude.	Results supported their previous study (Gabana, 2020) by suggesting student-athletes who identified as spiritual/religious had higher levels of dispositional gratitude than spiritual/non-religious and non-spiritual/non-religious athletes.
Gayles et al. (2018)	Quant	7,703 NCAA Division I student-athletes.	Examined student-athletes' experiences and perceptions of campus climate in relation to perceived sense of belonging on college campuses.	Reported a negative relationship between athletic identity and sense of belonging, with students of color reporting lower belonging than their White counterparts. Positive perceptions of institutional and team climate were associated with a higher sense of belonging, particularly for student-athletes of Color.
Huml (2018)	Quant	546 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the differences related to student-athletes' athletic identity.	Identified a similarity between athletic identity scores of NCAA Division I and Division II student-athletes and the lower athletic identity scores of NCAA Division III student-athletes.

McDowell et al. (2018)	Quant	119 student-athletes across 15 NCAA Division I universities.	Investigated the impact of authentic leadership on student-athlete psychological development and team engagement.	Indicated student-athletes who perceived head coaches as authentic leaders felt they experienced a positive team climate and therefore experienced increased psychological development. Head coaches perceived as authentic leaders increased student-athletes' optimism regarding success, self-confidence, and resilience
Menke & Germany (2019)	Qual	15 former NCAA Division I male student-athletes.	Explored NCAA Division I collegiate student-athletes' perceptions regarding their transition out of sports participation.	Found participants described their feelings toward transition out of sport as negative and participants credited their negative feelings to the emotional loss of their athletic identity.
Rankin et al. (2016)	Quant	8,481 student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the impact of institutional characteristics on student-athlete identity development and athletic and academic success.	Reported positive campus climate and positive interactions with faculty and athletic personnel had the most significant positive impact on identity development and athletic and academic success.
Riciputi & Erdal (2017)	Quant	60 NCAA Division III student-athletes from a single institution.	Examined the effect of priming athletic identity on academic performance with a challenging math test.	Reported athletic identity priming (saliency) reduced academic performance while multiple identity priming improved academic outcomes.
Santos & Sagas (2023)	Quant	5,042 student-athletes across NCAA divisions	Investigated the connection between athletic and academic identities of student-athletes.	Reported participants with a strong athletic identity spent more time on athletic participation and less on academic involvement, leading to lower academic achievement.

Scheidler et al. (2021)	Quant	204 NCAA student-athletes across NCAA divisions.	Examined the relationships between athletic identity, activist identity and commitment, stress control mindset, and mental toughness.	Reported low activist identity and commitment. Athletic identity and activist identity and commitment did not predict stress control mindset or mental toughness, and stress control mindset and mental toughness were positively related.
Yoon & Petrie (2023)	Quant	266 NCAA Division I student-athletes from a single university.	Investigated the barriers and facilitators for athletes seeking mental health care, as well as the impact of shared identities between athletes and sports psychologists.	Reported lack of time, stigma, and unsupportive coaches were major barriers to participants seeking mental health care, with head coaches identified as the greatest barrier.

Utilizing two coding cycles, I identified five recurring student-athlete identities that significantly impacted their college experiences and outcomes. These included gender, race, sexual orientation, divisional association, and athletic identities (see Table 2). Additionally, I identified seven common dimensions of student-athletes' college experiences and outcomes that corresponded to their identities. These included academic performance, sense of belonging, career preparation, religious behavior, activist participation, transition from college/sport, and identity integration (see Table 3).

Considering sex, female student-athletes typically experience increased academic performance (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Rankin et al., 2016), sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018), and career preparation (Bell et al., 2018) compared to male student-athletes. In terms of race, White student-athletes typically experience increased academic performance (Rankin et al., 2016), sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018), and religious behavior such as prayer, reading sacred texts, and congressional attendance (Allen et al., 2022) compared to student-athletes of Color. Concerning sexual orientation, LGBTQ+ student-athletes typically experience a reduced sense of belonging (Anderson et al., 2023; Fynes & Fisher, 2016; Rankin et al., 2016) compared to heterosexual student-athletes, which subsequently impacts academic success and career preparation. Considering divisional association, NCAA Division I student-athletes typically experience reduced academic performance (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Huml, 2018), sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2016), and career preparation (Bell et al., 2018; Huml, 2018) compared to NCAA Division II or III student-athletes. Finally, regarding student-athletes' athletic identity, student-athletes with salient athletic identities typically experience reduced academic performance (Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Riciputi & Erdal, 2017; Santos &

Sagas, 2023), mental health (Yoon & Petrie, 2023), activist participation (Scheidler et al., 2021), a negative transition out of college/sport (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Menke & Germany, 2019), reduced career preparation (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Menke & Germany, 2019), and an increase religious behavior (Allen et al., 2022; Gabana et al., 2020, 2022) compared to those without salient athletic identities.

Importantly, several studies suggested the negative impacts commonly associated with student-athletes' identities were often reduced when student-athletes integrated or acknowledged their multiple identities and embraced the intersectionality of various social groups. For example, Beron and Piquero (2016) and Gayles et al. (2018) reported student-athletes who actively engaged with their student identity through classroom participation, internships, and study-abroad experiences demonstrated increased academic performance and a greater sense of belonging. Furthermore, Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020), McDowell et al. (2018), and Rankin et al. (2016) found encouragement from faculty, staff, athletic personnel, and family members to pursue a more holistic identity was associated with improved academic outcomes, mental health, and transitions out of intercollegiate athletics. Finally, the results from Yoon and Petrie (2023) suggested the impacts of student-athletes' multiple identities are a significant factor for mental health professionals to consider to be able to contextualize and better address student-athletes' mental health concerns.

Taken together, two overarching patterns emerged across the reviewed studies. First, student-athletes without salient athletic identities and those who identified as White, female, heterosexual, or who competed in lower NCAA divisions (II or III) tended to experience more favorable academic, social, and developmental outcomes compared to student-athletes with salient athletic identities and those who identified as male, as persons of Color, as LGBTQ+, or who competed in NCAA Division I athletics. Secondly, student-athletes who integrated multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups tended to increase their access to more favorable experiences across academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Collectively, these patterns suggest student-athletes' identities are not merely associated with collegiate experiences and outcomes but they may also play a significant role in shaping the motivations and decisions underlying their engagement across multiple college commitments.

Table 2
Identity Pattern Codes

Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Divisional Affiliation
Bell et al. (2018)	Anderson et al. (2023)	Allen et al. (2022)	Bell et al. (2018)
Beron & Piquero (2016)	Fynes & Fisher (2016)	Gayles et al. (2018)	Beron & Piquero (2016)
Gayles et al. (2018)	Rankin et al. (2016)	Rankin et al. (2016)	Gayles et al. (2018)
Rankin et al. (2016)			Huml (2018) Rankin et al. (2016)
Athletic Identity			
Allen et al. (2022)	Gabana et al. (2020)	Riciputi & Erdal (2017)	Yoon & Petrie (2023)
Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Gabana et al. (2022)	Scheidler et al. (2021)	
Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Menke & Germany (2019)	Santos & Sagas (2023)	

Table 3
College Experience Pattern Codes

Academic Performance	Sense of Belonging	Career Preparation	Identity Integration
Beron & Piquero (2016)	Anderson et al. (2023)	Bell et al. (2018)	Beron & Piquero (2016)
Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Fynes & Fisher (2016)	Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)
Huml (2018)	Gayles et al. (2018)	Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Gayles et al. (2018)
Rankin et al. (2016)	Rankin et al. (2016)	Gayles et al. (2018)	McDowell et al. (2018)
Riciputi & Erdal (2017)		Huml (2018)	Rankin et al. (2016)
Santos & Sagas (2023)		Menke & Germany (2019)	Yoon & Petrie (2023)
Activist Participation	College Transition	Religious Behavior	
Scheidler et al. (2021)	Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020)	Allen et al. (2022)	
	Cooper & Jackson (2019)	Gabana et al. (2020)	
	Menke & Germany (2019)	Gabana et al. (2022)	
		Yoon and Petrie (2023)	

Discussion

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory consists of three central components, which include social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Taken together, these processes illustrate how group membership plays a significant role in shaping identity development and social behavior. Consequently, scholars have argued that social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). Therefore, reviewing the patterns identified in this study through the lens of SIT provides theoretically grounded interpretations regarding the ways in which student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

Interpreting the patterns identified in this study through the processes of SIT, student athletes without salient athletic identities or who identified as White, female, heterosexual, or who competed in lower NCAA divisions (II or III) may represent groups who categorize themselves and others based on norms, values, and behaviors associated with increased academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Therefore, student-athletes who strongly identify with these identities may feel encouraged to adopt and express norms, values, and behaviors associated with these traditional college outcomes to be perceived as similar to those within their group and distinct from those outside their group. As a result, this group of student-athletes may come to evaluate social prestige through academic, social, and developmental experiences and outcomes. Consequently, to achieve and maintain a positively distinct social identity, student-athletes with these social identities may place greater emphasis on these achievements, as they perceive it may increase the prestige of the current social group.

On the other hand, student-athletes with salient athletic identities or who also identified as male, person of Color, LGBTQ+, or who participated in NCAA Division I athletics, these individuals may represent groups who categorize themselves and others based on norms, values, and behaviors outside of academic, social, and developmental outcomes such as athletic success or artistic abilities. Therefore, student-athletes who strongly identify with these identities may feel encouraged to adopt and express norms, values, and behaviors outside of traditional college outcomes to be perceived as similar to those within their group and distinct from those outside their group. As a result, this group of student-athletes may come to evaluate social prestige through achievements outside of academic, social, and developmental experiences and outcomes. Consequently, to achieve and maintain a positively distinct social identity, these individuals may place greater emphasis on athletic success, artistic abilities, or other alternative activities they perceive may increase the prestige of their current group.

Considering student-athletes who integrate multiple identities, these individuals may represent a group of student-athletes who navigate across social categories and the corresponding norms, values, and behavioral expectations. Therefore,

student-athletes who integrate multiple identities may feel less inclined to adopt or express the norms, values, and behaviors of any single social group or identity to develop a sense of belonging. As a result, these individuals may come to evaluate social prestige across a broader range of college experiences and outcomes rather than through more uniform pathways. For example, student-athletes who integrate multiple identities may evaluate social prestige through academic achievement in educational settings while equally valuing athletic performance in competitive environments. Consequently, to achieve and maintain a positively distinct social identity, these student-athletes may place more or less emphasis on particular forms of achievement depending on which social identity is most salient within a given context, or which is perceived as creating the most prestige. Ultimately, identity integration may provide student-athletes with greater flexibility to maintain a positive social identity if a particular group membership becomes undesirable or is perceived as being associated with low prestige.

Taken together, interpreting the patterns identified in this study through the lens of SIT suggests the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison may shape the motivations and decisions that guide how student-athletes engage across their multiple college commitments. Viewed in this way, student-athletes' academic, social, and developmental experiences and outcomes may be shaped by the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with the social groups with which they most strongly identify. Therefore, beyond experiencing identity-based differential outcomes, student-athletes may actively adjust how they engage with certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with their social identities. On the other hand, when student-athletes integrate multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups, they may shift between identities by adopting or expressing norms, values, and behaviors corresponding to the identity that is most salient within a given context and the one they perceive will provide the most prestige. In turn, they may prioritize norms, values, and behaviors they perceive will contribute to achieving or maintaining the most positively distinct social identity. Overall, examining the impacts of multiple student-athlete identities through the lens of SIT provides a coherent framework for better understanding how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

Findings

The findings of this study affirmed disparities persist even among student populations who appear to receive significant institutional support, such as student-athletes (Gaston-Gayles, 2015; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Additionally, the findings of this study affirmed student-athletes of Color and those who identify as LGBTQ+ remain at greater risk of experiencing reduced academic engagement, lower perceived support, diminished sense of belonging, and increased athletic commitment (Kroshus et al., 2023a; Kroshuset al., 2023b; NCAA, 2020). Furthermore, the findings from this study affirmed student-athletes who integrate multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups tend

to find greater balance across their multiple college commitments (Brewer & Pettipas, 2017; Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Powell et al., 2024; Stokowski et al., 2022; Whitehead & Senecal, 2020) and therefore are more likely to experience the benefits of higher education, such as cognitive and noncognitive development and finding a sense of belonging (Black & Allen, 2017; Gopalan & Bready, 2020).

While the findings identified in this study affirmed many of those from previous investigations, the use of SIT provided additional insight into how these patterns may emerge. For example, beyond experiencing identity-based differential experiences and outcomes, student-athletes may actively adjust how they engage with certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with their social identities. More specifically, through the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison, the findings from this study suggested student-athletes' identities may be associated with their college experiences and outcomes by shaping the motivations and decisions underlying how and why they engage across their multiple college commitments. Viewed in this way, the findings of this study support the suggestions of previous scholars who argued that social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). Therefore, in conjunction with previous investigations that have also utilized a social identity approach (Copeland et al., 2024; Graupensperger et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2021; Stokowski et al., 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018), the findings of this study contribute to a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes.

The findings of this study also add to the existing literature by providing additional explanations as to how and why student-athletes' identities have been observed as impacting their college experiences and outcomes. For example, previous studies have suggested the rigorous schedules of student-athletes (NCAA, 2020) often encourage student-athletes to choose between multiple commitments, with athletic participation taking precedence (Chaplin & Lim, 2020; Edwards & Froehle, 2023; Grafnetterova et al., 2021; Zvosec et al., 2023). However, the findings from this study suggest student-athletes may also wrestle with expectations to adopt and express the norms, values, and behaviors associated with various social groups to develop a sense of belonging. Therefore, while student-athletes tend to struggle with balancing multiple commitments, this study suggests they may be equally challenged with balancing multiple social identities, each associated with distinct norms, values, and behavioral expectations.

Considering the investigations related to student-athletes' athletic identity, previous studies have described student-athletes' athletic identity as a give-and-take relationship (Powell et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2024; Zvosec et al., 2023) that has been likened to an iceberg (Newton et al., 2020) and that can manifest as the experience of addiction (Huml & Nite, 2019). While the findings in this study affirmed a nuanced relationship between student-athletes and athletic participation, they also offer identity-based explanations for such descriptions. For example, the give-and-take rela-

tionship often identified between student-athletes and their athletic identity suggests athletic participation offers beneficial outcomes while, at the same time, challenging student-athletes' opportunities to advance skill sets outside of athletic participation (Powell et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2024; Zvosec et al., 2023). The findings from this study add to this discussion by providing additional information related to the challenges student-athletes face. For example, the findings from this study suggest the opportunity costs facing student-athletes may also be related to social identities, expectations, and perceptions of prestige. Specifically, the opportunity costs facing student-athletes may also be related to the consequences for engaging in activities or behaviors outside of group norms, values, and behaviors, which may challenge their commitment to their social group and reduce their sense of belonging. Consequently, student-athletes may actively avoid or adopt certain behaviors to maintain their sense of belonging or protect the prestige of their social group.

The findings from this study also add to Huml and Nite's (2019) suggestion that student-athletes may become addicted to their athletic identity. Considering the findings from this study, the suggestion that student-athletes may become addicted to their athletic identity may also be understood as reflecting identity-based pressures associated with social categorization, identification, and comparison. For example, student-athletes may categorize themselves and others into various social groups that are associated with corresponding norms, values, and behaviors. Therefore, student-athletes may be encouraged to adopt or express certain norms, values, or behaviors to be perceived as similar to those within their social group. Consequently, student-athletes' demonstrations of withdrawal, overcommitment, and relapse, commonly associated with addiction (Huml & Nite, 2019), could also be understood as manifestations of the stress or fear associated with being perceived as different from those within their social groups or reducing their prestige.

Finally, considering Newton et al.'s (2020) participant-generated iceberg metaphor, the findings from this study also identified above and below the surface impacts of student-athletes' identities, which may contribute to the recommendations of Kroshuset al. (2023a) and Kroshuset al. (2023b) on how to better support student-athletes with minority identities. For example, the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experiences and outcomes are often visible and therefore exist above the surface. Consequently, these visible characteristics are frequently used to create policies or design practices to support student-athletes. Considering the findings of this study, below the surface lie norms, values, and behaviors corresponding to social groups that appeared to impact student-athletes' decisions for engaging in their multiple college commitments. Therefore, supporting student-athletes with minority identities may require creating team cultures that increase the perceived value of academic, social, and developmental opportunities, thereby increasing the likelihood they choose to pursue these outcomes.

Taken together, the findings from this study support the argument that social identity approaches provide unique and powerful contributions to understanding the phenomena and behaviors that lie at the core of athletic participation and sport psychology (Rees et al., 2015). In conjunction, the findings of this study affirmed and

expanded upon existing literature by incorporating multiple student-athlete identities into a single study and creating a clearer and more theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes' identities co-exist and shape their college experiences and outcomes (Caza et al., 2018; Rees et al., 2015; Steele et al., 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Specifically, beyond viewing the impacts of student-athletes' identities as leading to fixed experiences and outcomes, the findings from this study suggest student-athletes' motivations and decisions for engaging across multiple college commitments may also be understood through their identification with various social groups. Consequently, student-athletes' perceptions of group norms, values, and behavioral expectations, along with the relative prestige associated with different identities and activities, may shape how they prioritize commitments and determine where they seek belonging. In this way, student-athletes' identities may be understood not only as personal characteristics but also as socially constructed influences that guide how they engage across multiple college commitments.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest important implications for athletic coaches and athletics staff, such as advisors and development coordinators. For example, the findings from this study suggested norms, values, and behaviors associated with student-athletes' identities play a role in shaping their engagement across multiple college commitments. Therefore, coaches and athletics staff should work together to create team cultures that adopt and express norms, values, and behaviors that promote engagement with the broader campus community and reflect more holistic developmental experiences and outcomes. Specifically, these individuals should consider providing opportunities for student-athletes to participate in non-sport skill-building activities alongside teammates or non-athlete peers during regularly scheduled athletic programming. As a result, student-athletes may be better positioned to integrate multiple identities and engage with various social groups through a broader sense of belonging and perceptions of prestige tied to a wider range of activities and relationships.

Additionally, coaches and athletics staff should consider elevating the significance of holistic identity development to increase student-athletes' perceptions of prestige related to non-athletic accomplishments and relationships. For example, similar to highlighting athletes' contributions within athletic competitions during team meetings, coaches and athletics staff should also consider publicly acknowledging a variety of achievements and campus relationships. Overall, coaches and athletics staff should strive to create team cultures that value diverse forms of engagement and strengthen connections with the broader campus community, thereby fostering identity integration through shared norms of belonging and prestige that do not rely exclusively on athletic participation and success.

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, this study exclusively relied on the results or findings from previous literature, which limited

this study to how student-athletes' identities and college experiences and outcomes were measured and interpreted within existing studies. Second, the search strategy of this study utilized specific search terms and inclusion criteria, which limited the incorporation of additional relevant studies that used alternative terminology to describe student-athlete identities and their college experiences. Similarly, this study was limited to peer-reviewed academic literature published within the past ten years, which limited the scope of the study and may have excluded earlier studies that could provide additional context for understanding long-term trends in student-athlete identity research.

Considering the findings from this study and the recommendations of previous scholars (Rees et al., 2015), future research would benefit from additional studies utilizing a social identity approach to investigate the impacts of student-athletes' identities on their college experience. For example, given the limited number of qualitative studies included in this review, future investigations should include qualitative case studies using interviews and observations to more fully examine how student-athletes perceive and navigate the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison across athletic and institutional contexts. Similarly, comparative case studies may also provide additional insight into how these identity processes operate differently across student-athlete populations based on factors such as sport, gender, race, divisional level, or institutional context.

Future research should also consider mixed methods designs that integrate qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys drawn from the same participant sample to more fully understand the processes of social identification, categorization, and comparison among student-athletes. In such studies, quantitative surveys could be used to document patterns in identity salience and associated academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Following, qualitative interviews could provide additional insight into how student-athletes interpret these identities and navigate group expectations across multiple college commitments. In conjunction, these recommendations would support future research in moving beyond documenting identity-based differential outcomes and toward more fully understanding the ways in which student-athletes' identities shape motivations, decisions, and patterns of engagement across multiple college commitments.

In this study, I systematically reviewed previous literature to address the research question: How does the past 10 years of academic literature suggest student-athletes' identities impact their college experience? In doing so, I found student-athletes without salient athletic identities and those who identified as White, female, heterosexual, or who competed in lower NCAA divisions (II or III) tended to experience more favorable academic, social, and developmental outcomes compared to student-athletes with salient athletic identities and those who identified as male, as persons of Color, as LGBTQ+, or who competed in NCAA Division I athletics. However, I also found student-athletes who integrated multiple identities by embracing the intersectionality of various social groups tended to increase their access to more favorable experiences across academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Interpreting these patterns through the lens of SIT, I found that beyond

experiencing identity-based differential outcomes, student-athletes may actively adjust how they engage with certain individuals, groups, behaviors, or activities in relation to the norms, values, and behavioral expectations associated with their social identities. Consequently, coaches and athletics staff should work together to create a team culture that demonstrates norms, values, and behaviors that elevate and support student-athletes' holistic identity development.

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