

Beyond the Jersey: Black Male College Athletes and the Construction of Self-Identity at Historically White Colleges and Universities

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Drawing on the master narrative framework and strategic responsiveness to interest convergence, this qualitative study examines how Black male college athletes (BMCAs) understand and define their Black identity as male college athletes, and how intersecting identities (race, gender, class, and role status) shape *self-awareness* and day-to-day decisions in historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs). We conducted interviews with six Division I BMCAs at an HWCU and complemented these data with an archival analysis of a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) forum featuring two additional BMCAs. Findings illuminate identity work as the central mechanism linking institutional context to outcomes along two pathways: (1) identity work → academic engagement, performance, and persistence, as identity negotiation organizes time allocation, helpseeking, and interpretation of classroom feedback; and (2) identity work → athletic role demands, performance pressures, and wellbeing, as racialized expectations and revenuesport logics intensify surveillance, role engulfment, and stress management. Although the nomenclature (e.g., NCAA; HWCUs) is U.S.-specific, these mechanisms map onto university sport systems internationally where racialized climates, classed opportunity structures, and commercialization shape athletes' identities and choices. The study offers theoretically integrated, practice-relevant implications for scholars and practitioners.

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Introduction

Since 2020, Black men have continued to encounter entrenched systemic barriers across the United States (U.S.) higher education and remain the least likely student group to earn a degree (Hye et al., 2024; Wiltz, 2025). Sport can provide an entry point into college, yet Black male college athletes (BMCAs) are disproportionately represented in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) profit-generating sports such as men's football and men's basketball relative to their non-athlete peers (Harper, 2018; Harper & Davis, 2012). Although, the NCAA's Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for BMCAs has increased from 51% to 79% over the past two decades, it still trails that of other racial groups (e.g., Hispanic or Latino men increased from 56% to 86%, and White men increased from 76% to 92%) and has only recently surpassed the graduation rate of White male athletes from twenty years ago by three percentage points (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2024). Racial disparities also persist in psychosocial development and readiness for life after sport, as most BMCAs will not play professionally and are less likely than their non-athlete peers to develop key life skills during college (Brown, 2016; Charleston et al., 2015). Scholarship has consequently characterized big-time college sport as exploitative, particularly for BMCAs who generate substantial revenue while receiving limited returns in personal, academic, and career development (Bimper, 2014; Harper, 2018; Harper & Davis, 2012; Howe, 2023; Keaton & Cooper, 2022; Kidd et al., 2018; Singer, 2016). Popular media portrayals such as *All American* (The CW), *Swagger* (Apple TV+), *Last Chance U* (Netflix), and *Student-Athlete* (HBO) illustrate many of these sociocultural constraints, yet they often understate how exploitative values shape BMCAs well before college (Hawkins, 1995). This contradiction is evident in the 2022-2023 NCAA men's basketball tournament (March Madness), which generated more than \$1 billion in revenue while holistically athletes saw no share of that income (Parker & Brown, 2024).

To better support BMCAs, it is essential to examine how collegiate experiences, especially within historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs), shape identity development and *self*-awareness (Cooper, 2019; Harrison et al., 2017). Research on Black boys in U.S. K-12 contexts reveals how (counter)narrative frameworks are central to strengthen academic outcomes and disrupting deficit-based expectations (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Harper, 2018; Howard & Howard, 2021; Johnson, 2022). Similarly, designing meaningful support programs for BMCAs requires attention to how institutional and cultural contexts influence holistic development and everyday decision-making (Adler et al., 2017; Cooper, 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how BMCAs at HWCUs narrate Black male identity and develop *self*-awareness through day-to-day decisions in academic, athletic, and campus life.

Literature Review

BMCAs develop within a broader social order that, Edwards (1979) argued, has long "denied the benefits of vital Black skill development" while urging Black

communities to “deal with sport more intelligently and as the essentially political phenomenon that it is” (p. 126). This study is conceptualized through the Narrative, Identity, and Liminality Model (NILM), which frames BMCA development as a narratively mediated process shaped by racialized institutions, developmental transition, and everyday negotiations of belonging. From this perspective, the athletic industrial complex (AIC) is not merely the backdrop to athletes’ lives but a formative structure linking youth sport pipelines, media infrastructures, NCAA governance, and profit-producing college athletics across the transition from boyhood to emerging adulthood (Cooper, 2016; Runstedtler, 2018; Smith, 2007). Within this system, athletic potential is often commodified while educational development is subordinated to performance imperatives. The trajectories of Lenny Cooke (who became a national celebrity before 18) and Maurice Clarett (standout BMCA during Ohio State football’s 2002 champion season) illustrate how early promise can be publicized, marketed, and disciplined through institutional control, even as athletes are celebrated for their value to programs (Safdie & Safdie, 2016; Zimbalist & Zimbalist, 2014). Accordingly, BMCA identity work involves constructing a coherent sense of *self* as Black men and athletes while navigating race, masculinity, classed opportunity structures, and institutional role expectations in HWCUs. NILM is useful as it treats these decisions not as isolated acts, but as part of an evolving narrative of *self* formed under conditions of scrutiny, uncertainty, and institutional asymmetry.

Educational settings powerfully shape identity during emerging adulthood, a period marked by exploration, expanding autonomy, and consolidating independence (Arnett, 1998). Dumas and Nelson (2016) called for a “critical reimagining of Black boyhood” that affirms self-determination and vulnerability in spaces where adultification and surveillance are common (p. 27), while Nigrescence theory emphasizes how racial identity development can be shaped by societal devaluation and exploitation (Cross Jr., 1971, 1978). Worrell (2008) similarly notes the salience of the “pre-encounter” stage can involve “self-denigration” and exploitation that can disrupt self-acceptance and well-being (p. 158). NILM extends these insights by emphasizing how identity development is also a narrative process, especially during liminal periods when individuals must integrate past experiences, present constraints, and future possibilities into a coherent sense of *self* (McAdams, 2008). Within predominately White institutional spaces, Black adolescents and young adults often adopt code-switching as a coping strategy in response to racial stereotyping and discrimination (Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016). These processes can intersect with identity status processes to produce constrained trajectories when Black male flourishing is unsupported (Marcia, 1966). For BMCAs, sport can both provide a site for asserting humanity and intensify scrutiny, as dominant U.S. imaginaries have historically cast Black men as threatening, “inferior”, and hypersexual, rendering them acceptable only when perceived as controllable and “nonthreatening” (Ferber, 2007, pp. 12, 22; Coakley, 2021; Cooper, 2019). Contemporary scholarship therefore shows that BMCAs’ socio-identities shape leadership, engagement, and belonging even as microaggressions and pathologizing discourses erode their legitimacy beyond athletics, particularly within liminal HWCU contexts where racialized scripts

of belonging remain powerful (Bonner, 2011; McAulay, 2025; Sims et al., 2021; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Black Male College Athlete Identity Work in Historically White Colleges and Universities

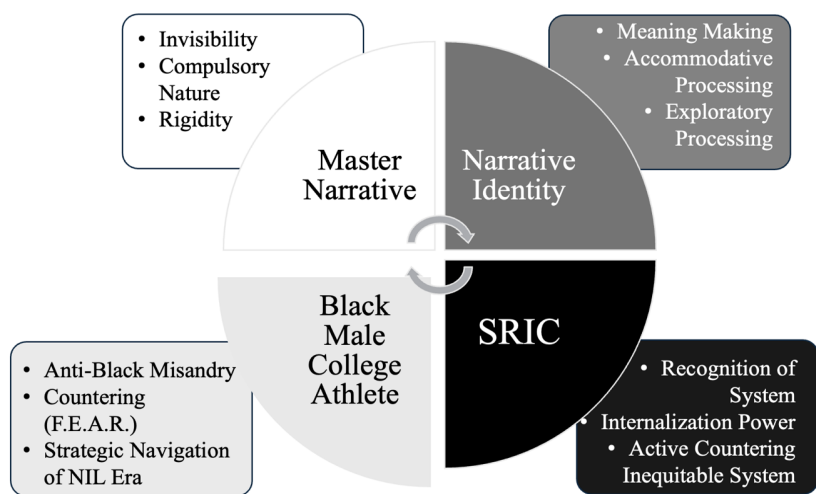
The modern ideal of the college athlete assumes commitment to “high-level achievement” in both their “academic and sport endeavors” (Cross & Fouke, 2019, p. 1), but for BMCAs this ideal is filtered through the realities of historically White, profit-driven environments. Du Bois’ (1903) concept of double consciousness remains instructive here, as Black men must continually negotiate *self*-understanding alongside constant awareness of how they are viewed by others in a racialized hierarchical order. In such settings, BMCAs often calibrate *self*-presentation across classrooms, team spaces, campus life, and media contexts, including through code-switching and “unrepresentative” presentations of *self* to manage surveillance and competing expectations (Dexter et al., 2021, p. 206; Howe, 2023; Okuwobi et al., 2023). Although the scholar-baller paradigm seeks to integrate academic and athletic identities and disrupt narrow public narratives (Dexter et al., 2021; Harrison, 2002), that integration remains difficult within structures that privilege performance and revenue generation over holistic development (Adler & Adler, 1989; Bimper & Harrison, 2011). Scholars have therefore described the AIC as producing forms of (mis)education that steer athletes toward athletics-first priorities and narrow future possibilities, especially for Black men (Bimper et al., 2013; Edwards, 1979; Harrison et al., 2017; Howe 2020, 2023; Runstedtler, 2018; Singer, 2008; Smith, 2007; Turner II, 2018). In this context, narratives and (counter)narratives are essential as BMCAs *self*-awareness is not merely an internal trait but a socially produced and narratively sustained orientation shaped by institutional contexts, cultural scripts, and everyday negotiations of power. Narrative identity, understood as an “internalized, evolving, and integrative story of *self*”, helps clarify this process (McAdams, 2008, p. 242; 2011), while related identity scholarship highlights the importance of struggle, *self* narration, anti-identity, and the limits of available identifications (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). As an extension of Cross Jr.’s (1971, 1978) reinterpretation of Goffman’s (1959) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, NILM provides the conceptual root of the present study by showing how BMCA identities are narratively composed and recomposed within liminal spaces where race, gender, sport, and institutional power intersect. Although this work does not claim to be first, it rearticulates identity frameworks for today’s collegiate context, paying special attention to the name, image, and likeness (NIL) implementation era – that is, the policy changes enabling college athletes to earn income from their names, images, and likenesses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the NILM, which serves as the overarching framework for examining how BMCAs make sense of themselves within big-time collegiate sport. NILM integrates narrative identity theory with Critical Race Theory (CRT)

and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) to explain identity development as a narratively mediated process shaped by racialized institutional environments rather than as an individual process detached from context (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2021; Bell, 1995; Yosso, 2005; See Figure 1). Within this framework, CRT frames how race, intersectionality, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling structure collegiate sport and the conditions under which Black male identity is recognized, constrained, or marginalized (Delgado, 1989; Yosso et al., 2022). CCW complements this analysis by identifying the linguistic, social, and navigational forms of capital racially minoritized communities cultivate to survive and move through exclusionary spaces (Yosso, 2005). NILM therefore provides the broader explanatory logic for understanding BMCA identity development as shaped by dominant institutional narratives and by the community-based resources athletes draw upon in responding to these narratives.

Figure 1
Conceptual Frameworks

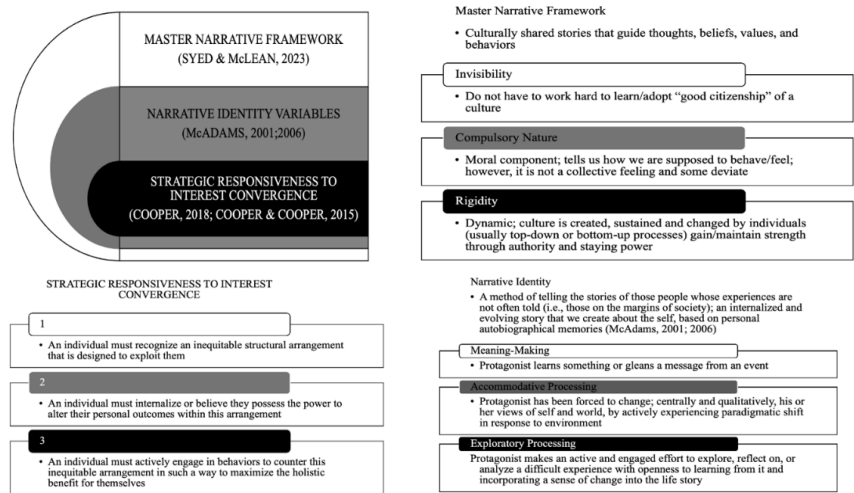


Within NILM, the master narrative framework (MNF) explains how culturally shared stories define what is normal, valuable, and possible within HWCUs (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Syed et al., 2020). Master narratives guide how individuals interpret past experiences and “imagined futures”, while also delimiting which identities and life paths appear legitimate (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 234; Syed et al., 2020). Be that MNF centers the interplay between “*self* and society” through the principles of ubiquity, utility, invisibility, rigidity, and compulsory nature, it is well suited for analyzing how scripts about Black masculinity, athletic success, and campus belonging become taken for granted in HWCUs (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 318). MNF also clarifies how (counter)narratives contest those scripts and articulate more agentic

and humane possibilities, particularly during liminal periods when individuals are actively interpreting who they have been, who they are becoming, and what futures remain available to them (Bauer et al., 2022; Schwab, 2020; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Strategic responsiveness to interest convergence (SRIC) extends CRT by focusing on how BMCAs recognize and respond to exploitative practices within the AIC and big-time collegiate sport (Cooper, 2018; Cooper & Cooper, 2015). SRIC is organized around three criteria: (1) recognizing inequitable structural arrangements that exploit labor and constrain outcomes, (2) internalizing a belief in one's capacity to alter personal outcomes within those arrangements, and (3) engaging in behaviors that challenge inequity in ways that maximize holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). In this study, SRIC frames *self*-awareness as an applied strategic orientation that develops through repeated daily decisions in academic, athletic, and campus life, especially when institutional messages about support, belonging, and opportunity remain aligned with athletics-first priorities (see Figure 2; Oseguera, 2010). Within NILM, these decisions are understood as part of an ongoing narrative process through which athletes interpret institutional conditions and reposition themselves within them. CCW adds further clarity by showing that such strategic responses are often enabled by linguistic, social, and navigational capital accumulated across racially minoritized communities (Yosso, 2005).

Figure 2
Frameworks Operationalized



In unison, MNF and SRIC allow this study to analyze both structure and response. MNF identifies the dominant cultural scripts that shape what BMCAs are expected to do and who they are expected to be whereas SRIC explains how they strategically accept, revise, or resist those scripts through everyday choices in aca-

demic, athletic, and campus life at HWCUs (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). NILM provides coherence across these lenses by locating narrative negotiation and strategic action within liminal developmental spaces, while CCW clarifies the cultural assets that support such action (Yosso, 2005). Guided by this integrated framework, the study examines how BMCAs at a HWCU narrate Black male identity and develop *self*-awareness through day-to-day decisions. Using these lenses, the analysis of interviews with six Division I BMCAs from one HWCU and an NCAA forum featuring two additional BMCAs illuminates how race, gender, class, and athlete status shape *self*-understanding and strategies for navigating historically White institutional environments in ways that support holistic well-being.

Methodology

This study was designed to afford BMCAs' accounts of their pre-collegiate and collegiate experiences and to examine how those experiences shape *self*-awareness in day-to-day decisions within HWCUs. Although prior scholarship documents many ways BMCAs navigate HWCU environments, less is known about how athletes connect their earlier life stories to their present identity work and routine choices across academic, athletic, and social settings (Herman II, 2023; Howe, 2023). To address this gap, we employed a multi method qualitative approach using narrative inquiry to treat experience how meaning-making unfolds through lived events (Clandinin, 2006; Mik-Meyer, 2020).

Grounded in constructivist (qualitative) approaches (Bliss, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Mik-Meyer, 2020), the study created space for participants to describe and critique dominant campus discourses and institutional logics that organize higher education and big-time sport (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Frisby, 2005). Strategic responsiveness to interest convergence further guided our focus on how athletes recognized inequitable structures, interpreted institutional incentives, and enacted strategies to protect holistic well-being in historically White settings (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Together, MNF and SRIC sensitized our design to the ways Black male identity is narrated and enacted through everyday decisions across HWCU contexts (Adler et al., 2017; Bimper, 2014; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Data collection

The interview protocol comprised two sections. The first explored participants' *self* identity awareness, including how they understood their racial, gendered, academic, and athlete identities (e.g., "Does your ethnic identity impact your experience as a college student?" and "What have been your most positive and most negative experiences as a BMCA?"). The second assessed how the HWCU sociocultural environment shaped identity work and day-to-day navigation of academic and athletic spaces (e.g., "What do you feel are some major issues Black athletes face on campuses at HWCUs?"). Questions were adapted from narrative identity and MNF scholarship to prompt meaning-making about formative events, cultural expectations, and

personal agency (e.g., “Do you act differently than you would in the presence of those who are Black? If so how?”; Adler et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2023).

To strengthen the study’s attention to narrative context and to incorporate contemporaneous accounts of racialized collegiate sport climates, we also conducted an archival analysis of a publicly available NCAA-hosted forum on student-athletes’ experiences with racial inequities and racial justice (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020). Consistent with MNF’s emphasis on how narratives circulate across social contexts, this source provided an institutional and cultural backdrop for interpreting how BMCAs publicity articulated experience and hope during the COVID-19-era (McAdams, 2008; Syed & McLean, 2023).

Interview data were collected from six BMCAs affiliated with sport programs at an NCAA D-I Power 4 institution identified as an HWCU. Three participated in men’s football and three participated in track and field. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes and 39 seconds to 1 hour, 25 minutes, and 47 seconds, with an average length of 51 minutes and 23 seconds. Since the institution was anonymized, identifying details beyond sport affiliation, year in college, and hometown zip code were minimized to protect confidentiality.

The NCAA-hosted forum included five student-athletes. For this study, only comments from the two Black male Division I athletes were included in the analysis because they met the study’s inclusion criteria (Black, male, Division I) and provided a contemporaneous account that helped triangulate themes from the interviews during a distinct historical period in college sport (Carter et al., 2014; Saedi & Amini Farsani, 2026; Syed et al., 2020). One forum participant played football at an NCAA Division I Group of Six (G6) institution. The second competed in track for two years at an NCAA Division I G6 institution and later transferred to play basketball at an HBCU. Since these statements were delivered in a publicly accessible NCAA recording, their names were retained as they appear in the public source. Additional participant details are provided in Table 1.

Data Analysis

All interview recordings and the NCAA forum video were transcribed prior to analysis. Analytical procedures aligned with a multi-method qualitative approach that integrates interview and observational or archival data (Mik-Meyer, 2020). We used narrative inquiry within a critical constructivist orientation and conducted a combined narrative and structural analysis to examine both what was said and how experiences were organized into stories of identity, constraint, and agency (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kincheloe, 2005).

Analysis proceeded deductively by using MNF and SRIC as sensitizing frameworks. First, we examined how participants’ accounts reflected engagement with master narratives, including culturally dominant expectations about Black male athletes and the perceived boundaries of belonging in historically White settings (Syed & McLean, 2023). Second, we analyzed how participants narrated *self*-awareness in routine decisions across campus and team contexts, attending to meaning-making

Table 1.
Collaborators Sociocultural Origin

Pseudonym	Sport participated	High school zip code	Private or public high school	Year in college as of 2019-20 season
Curtis	MFB	282**	Public	Redshirt sophomore
Chad	MT&F	INT	n/a	Redshirt junior
Dorian	MT&F	322**	Private	Redshirt sophomore
Boone	MFB	352**	Public	Redshirt junior
Christopher	MT&F	326**	Private	Freshman
Kenneth	MFB	330**	Public	Redshirt sophomore
*Josiah Hall	MFB	808**	Public	Graduate 2019
*Devin Norwood	MT&F and MBB	283**	Private	Junior

Note: *denotes real name of BMCA

processes that linked life events to evolving understandings of *self* (Adler et al., 2017). Third, we used SRIC to interpret how athletes described recognizing inequitable structures, believing in their capacity to shape outcomes, and enacting strategies to navigate interest convergence in ways that supported academic engagement, athletic performance, and holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Finally, we compared themes across interview narratives and the NCAA forum contributions to identify convergences and tensions between personal stories and broader public discourse, strengthening interpretive depth through triangulation across data sources (Carter et al., 2014).

Positionality

The research team included three individuals who differ in racial identity, life-course stage, and proximity to intercollegiate sport, which supported ongoing reflexivity regarding power, proximity, and interpretation throughout the research process. The lead author is a research assistant professor at University of South Carolina, a predominately White NCAA Division I institution. He identifies as a Black, cisgender male of Creole lineage and a former scholar-athlete who lettered in football at an HBCU. His experiences earning early academic recognition and later navigating imposter syndrome, depression, illness, and reduced playing time inform his attention to the intersecting pressures that shape BMCAs' well-being, persistence, and day-to-day decision-making.

The second author is an assistant professor at University of Alabama, a historically White NCAA Division I institution. He identifies as a White, middle-aged man and was not a student-athlete or collegiate football player. Although he has professional experience working with and around college football programs, he acknowledges limited shared identity with the participants and approaches interpretation with deliberate reflexivity. The third author is an assistant professor at Quinnipiac University, a historically White NCAA Division I institution. He identifies as a Black man whose scholarship centers Black male college athletes and interrogates systems that reproduce dominant narratives about their identities and experiences. As a former four-year Division I football letterman, and a prior practitioner in Division I physical training, he contributed sport-specific and structural insight to the analysis.

Findings

Across both aims, participants' narratives indicate that *self*-awareness operated as an applied strategic orientation developed through repeated daily decisions about speech, movement, community, academic engagement, and public visibility within HWCUs. Interpreted through NILM, the findings show BMCAs did not simply describe hardship. They narrated how they recognized inequitable arrangements, interpreted what those arrangements meant for Black male identity, and selected responses that protected dignity, belonging, and long-term possibility (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed et al., 2020; Yosso, 2005). Consistent with scholarship on the AIC and historically White environments, the accounts also show how BMCAs moved through campus as simultaneously celebrated and constrained, highly visible for athletic labor yet less fully affirmed as students, intellectuals, and developing Black men (Bonner, 2011; Cooper, 2016; Harrison et al., 2017; McAulay, 2025; Runstedtler, 2018; Sims et al., 2021).

Aim 1: Factors Influencing Black Male College Athletes' Narration of Self Identity Awareness

Theme 1: Hyper/(In)visibility on Campus

Aim 1 examined factors that shaped BMCAs' narration of *self*-identity awareness through meaning-making and accommodative processing of major challenges on campus. A central pattern across participants' accounts was hyper/(in)visibility: they were highly visible as Black athletes yet often rendered invisible as full persons in academic and social life. Rather than treating this pattern as a series of separate criterion-specific moments, the findings below show how participants first recognized constrained belonging, then counter positioned themselves against deficit scripts, and finally used voice, vigilance, and community to preserve dignity and well-being (Bonner, 2011; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; McAulay, 2025; McLean & Syed, 2015).

SRIC Criterion 1: Inequitable Arrangements Constraining Belonging and Legitimacy. Kenneth illustrated racial isolation in academic spaces as both routine and consequential: "It sucked sometimes", and "I don't know, it's weird sometimes,

just I'm the only Black kid in the class." He explicitly stated, "I can count on one hand, maybe two fingers, how many classes I've had where there were other Black people or there were other Black professors." As a freshman, Curtis "was really intimidated" engaging with others in social settings, a (self)perception that impeded efforts to find a community. Over time, however, he identified an affirming counter-space through a Black Student Union event, noting, "Hanging around brothers and sisters definitely made it a lot easier for me adapting into my freshman year because there were times where it was like, 'I don't know if I'm ready for this'." Boone similarly described the racialized structure of campus life and the dual role of athletics as refuge and reminder of marginality:

I'd say the majority, shoot, 90% of the team is Black... walking around campus, I feel like I don't see an abundant amount of Black people. So, I feel like I am – and Black people – are definitely the minority here.

Collectively, these excerpts show how participants first developed *self*-awareness through recognizing how HWCU spaces unevenly distributed belonging and legitimacy. Classroom isolation, social intimidation, and minority status made Black presence hyper noticed yet insufficiently affirmed, while Black student and athlete counter spaces functioned as social and navigational capital that made campus life more livable. In this sense, recognition of inequity was not passive awareness, but the opening stage of strategic identity negotiation (Brown, 2016; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2015; Yosso, 2005).

SRIC Criterion 2: Internalizing Capacity Through Counter-Positioning. Participants also described how campus and fan perceptions reduced them to athletic role status while constraining fuller *self*-expression. Curtis described feeling dehumanized by such perceptions: "(They) look at us as just athletes. They don't look at us as human beings." Christopher narrated routine phenotyping: "If you see an African American, he's an athlete." Dorian similarly described how visible markers of athlete status invite stereotyped interpretations and constrain authenticity:

Once you see the shirts or the book bags ... they kind of give you this negative depiction of where you think you're better than everyone else ... We get labelled athletes so much that we don't get to express like our real selves.

Kenneth's most directly narrated refusal to accept that deficit framing:

I had several instances in classes where a professor would randomly call on me to answer a question and then not ask another for the rest of the session. I never addressed it directly – I'd just take mental notes and move on. For me, it became more about proving them wrong. Yes, I'm Black, but I'm knowledgeable and educated. I know the material, and if you want to pick on me, I'm gon show you in front of the class, I belong here.

Together, these accounts show how participants did not simply absorb dominant scripts about Black masculinity and athlete status. Instead, they engaged in accommodative meaning-making and counter positioning, reframing stereotype and surveillance as conditions to be read, resisted, and strategically managed. Within the

MNF, these excerpts show how culturally dominant stories organized legitimacy; within SRIC, they show how participants internalized agency by insisting on intellectual competence, authenticity, and belonging despite biased settings (Cooper, 2019; Dexter et al., 2021; Du Bois, 1903; Ferber, 2007; Howe, 2023; McAulay, 2025; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

SRIC Criterion 3: Strategic Behaviors Challenging Inequity and Protecting Holistic Well-being. Participants further described responses that ranged from public voice and activism to vigilant everyday navigation under conditions of racial threat. In the NCAA forum, Josiah Hall described anger and grief alongside guarded hope in response to racial injustice:

As a young Black man in this country, who maybe thinks about having some kids someday, you don't want your kids to grow up in a world like this ... Most momentum I think I've seen in my entire lifetime, as far as the discussion and the actions that are being taken ... little bit encouraging, but at the same time, it's inexcusable and it's just upsetting. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 9:55-10:22)

Devin Norwood echoed these sentiments while foregrounding the heightened surveillance and vulnerability tied to being a Black student-athlete:

I'm in disbelief. I'm disgusted. It's sad and it's sickening that it has to come to this point where we have to realize that Blacks need rights too. However, I have to watch myself, especially as a Black student-athlete. I just got a message from a godfather of mine telling me that the KKK are starting rallies in these certain states ... Any of my Black student-athletes, Black students, or any Black people that are out there, just watch your back... we're starting to realize that this is bigger than us. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 8:19-9:28)

Josiah attributed his willingness to speak up to familial socialization and role modeling:

My parents always really encouraged me when I was growing up to be a leader ... you see something wrong then just speak up about it. ... That's kind of where I found my voice. My dad is a football coach ... high school counsellor ... everybody looks to for, you know, encouragement. So, I've always tried to be like him. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 13:18-13:49)

Devin similarly described activism as a deliberate strategy enabled in part by institutional allies while requiring constant role negotiation:

Commissioner McWilliams, she has implemented diversity within her shows Mac Attack. ... However, we're taking it to our phones ... to the streets. And we're protesting, we're making sure our voices are heard some way, somehow. ... Still finding time to separate being a student-athlete and being an activist in our community. (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 24:49-25:35)

He also narrated hope through a recognition of structural exclusion and a belief in the possibility of navigating within it: “We’re not the only ones that are facing [backlash] ... The system wasn’t even really built for you. But I beat the system, obviously, with athletics” (National Collegiate Athletic Association Resources, 2020, 54:05-53:43). Kenneth articulated the vigilance required to navigate campus interactions shaped by racialized fear and assumptions:

I think a lot of it has to do with just misunderstanding people in general. Some are afraid to approach or talk to me because of stereotypes about how Black people – especially Black men – are supposed to be. It’s been tough, connecting with students from different backgrounds. With other athletes, it’s different because; we understand each other’s lifestyle, so it’s easier to connect. But students, it’s like, “He’s Black, always angry”, or “He looks like he’s going to curse me out”, or “Why is he looking at me?” I’ve had moments where I was walking up a staircase behind a group, and they noticeably sped up once they saw me. I’m like, “What did I do to make them act that way?”

Altogether, these excerpts show how a strategic response involved both public and quiet forms of action. Participants used voice, protest, role negotiation, and familial modeling to contest compulsory scripts of silence, but they also relied on vigilance, movement management, and situational assessment in campus spaces shaped by anti-Black misandry and threat perceptions (McAulay, 2025; Curry, 2019; Smith et al., 2007). Interpreted through CRT and CCW, these responses function as (counter) storytelling supported by social, familial, aspirational, and navigational capital. In addition, narrative identity implies they also reflect redemption-oriented movement, or what the findings frame as countering False Evidence Appearing Real (F.E.A.R.), in which stigmatizing experiences are reworked into opportunities for affirmation, persistence, and future possibility without erasing structural harm (Brown, 2016; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Delgado, 1989; Du Bois, 1903; Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2017).

Aim 2: Challenging Factors to Black Male College Athletes’ Self Exploratory Processing

Theme 2: Mirror Manipulation

Aim 2 examined factors that constrained *self*-identity awareness through exploratory processing, including pessimism about navigating HWCU environments, suppressed feelings of being undervalued, and limited access to holistic development, sociohistorical knowledge, and culturally relevant pedagogy. *Mirror manipulation* captures the pressure participants felt to monitor, alter, or withhold parts of themselves in order to remain acceptable and safe within historically White settings. Rather than restating each criterion separately, the synthesis below clusters participants’ accounts around two broader dynamics: recognizing the mismatch between institutional benefit and holistic support and navigating that mismatch through future orientation, code-switching, impression management, and movement toward affirming spaces (Dexter et al., 2021; Howe, 2023; McLean & Syed, 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016).

SRIC Criterion 1: Recognizing the Mismatch Between Institutional Benefit and Holistic Support. Chad reflected a racially marked moment in COVID-19-era online coursework that sharpened awareness of how he and other BMCAs are read in academic settings (Comeaux, 2012; McAulay, 2025): “In the breakout room, you could see her expression change. I think she underestimated us. I don’t think there was any bad intent behind it, but it kind of hurt a little bit.” Echoing Chad’s account of being visibly underestimated in the breakout room, Curtis connected that moment to a broader pattern of interest convergence in which athletes are valued for entertainment but expected to remain politically quiet and socially contained:

We entertain you on Saturdays, but we’re people outside of our sport. One thing I wish would change about some of [University fanbase] is the way they respond online. I’ll see comments on Twitter like the infamous, “Shut up and dribble”, or “Stick to football and leave politics out of it.” But it’s like – No, you don’t understand. We’re educated – obviously on the field, but we’re educated on this thing called life. The least you can do is acknowledge that we do more than just sports.

Chad summarized the weight of these expectations succinctly: “It’s just the expectations, a lot of expectations that come with being a Black student-athlete.” Kenneth added a parallel recognition of uneven institutional care (e.g., injury, lack of playing, homesickness) during periods of vulnerability: “Definitely, my mental health support was non-existent, but at the same time I was learning myself at that time.”

Together, these excerpts show that participants clearly recognized the contradiction at the center of the AIC: their labor and visibility were celebrated, while their intellectual legitimacy, emotional safety, and developmental needs were inconsistently supported. In that sense, *self*-awareness emerged not only as reflection, but as structural literacy. Participants learned to identify when institutional messages about support and belonging remained aligned with athletics-first priorities rather than holistic development (Comeaux, 2012; Cooper, 2016; Harrison et al., 2017; Runstedtler, 2018; Smith, 2007).

SRIC Criterion 2: Internalizing Capacity Through Exploratory Processing and Future Orientation. Even within constrained settings, participants narrated a future-oriented capacity to revise purpose and navigate risk strategically. Boone framed *self*-awareness as developmental and tied to learning oneself beyond immediate athletic demands:

I would probably really figure out what I want to do with my life. I mean, when you come to college and you’re 17, 18 years old, you’re going to be completely different than what you are when you’re 21.

SRIC Criterion 3: Strategic Navigation Through Assimilation, Code-switching, and Selective Resistance. Dorian described code-switching as a long-term, routine practice shaped by both external feedback and internalized habit:

I remember people used to tell me, “You know your voice changes when you’re around certain people. When you’re talking to a certain race, it gets higher, but when you talk to us, it slows down and sounds different.” I never

noticed it until they pointed it out. I've done it so often that it's become second nature – I don't even realize I'm doing it. Lord knows, what else I've been doing unconsciously. Code-switching was big part of my existence, specifically from high school through college.

Kenneth similarly framed strategic *self*-monitoring and academic excellence as a way to disrupt stereotypes and secure legitimacy:

I've pushed those buttons, and when I showed professors that I wasn't who they assumed I was, it made them pause – some even felt dumb. I often feel like I have to be perfect, like it's my responsibility to change how people perceive the Black community – people who look like me. My first thought – I don't want anyone thinking I'm just some dumb Black jock. I'm going to let them know I'm educated and have every right to be in this class.

Christopher described impression management as a protective strategy that prevents early stereotyping from becoming permanent:

My dad once told me, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." Some expect me to come in speaking slang, sagging my pants, and walking a certain way. But when I approach them speaking proper English, it catches them off guard. If I walk into a room and act the way they expect, I'll later regret it and think, "That's not who I am." But by then, it's too late – that's how they'll always see me.

Christopher's description of his track and field "family" added an important counterpoint. He emphasized "anybody anywhere" could "fit in" because "everyone is welcoming and wants to see everybody succeed." He also narrated his identity as effort-based and representational, explaining he goes out there and "gives it my all; my best", while echoing perceived expectations from the Black community to "Try, succeed, and push for the best possible."

As a whole, these excerpts show that constrained exploratory processing did not eliminate agency. Participants maintained a future-oriented sense of *self* while adopting context-specific strategies to protect access, legitimacy, and well-being. Boone's reflection demonstrates exploratory processing and developmental revision, whereas Dorian, Kenneth, and Christopher show how code-switching and impression management were not merely interpersonal adjustments, but strategic responses to institutional surveillance and racial expectation. Christopher's account of team "family" also clarifies that strategic navigation was not limited to defensive *self*-monitoring. It included movement toward affirming environments where fuller expressions of *self* felt possible. Interpreted through CCW, these strategies reflect the use of linguistic and navigational capital; deciphered through narrative identity, they show how BMCAs linked present constraint to future possibility during a liminal period of identity revision (Arnett, 1998; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Discussion

Across both aims, the findings position *self*-awareness as a narratively constructed and strategically enacted orientation shaped by culturally dominant scripts,

institutional conditions, and the uneven distribution of belonging within historically White environments. Narrative identity helps explain how BMCAs interpreted challenging experiences through accommodative meaning-making and exploratory processing, while the MNF clarifies how hypervisibility, invisibility, rigidity, and compulsory expectations shaped what participants believed they could safely say, do, and become within HWCUs (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed et al., 2020). SRIC, in turn, connects these interpretive processes to daily decision-making by showing how BMCAs recognized inequity, internalized agency, and engaged in behaviors that challenged inequity or reduced its harm in pursuit of holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). These findings reinforce scholarship on the commodification of Black male athletic labor within the AIC and on racialized surveillance, anti-Black misandry, and double consciousness by showing participants often understood when institutional interest in them was tied more to performance than to their full development, and that everyday campus navigation required ongoing assessment of safety, legitimacy, and *self*-presentation (Cooper, 2016; Curry, 2019; Du Bois, 1993; Harrison et al., 2017; McAulay, 2025; Runstedtler, 2018; Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2007). Collectively, hyper/(in)visibility on campus and mirror manipulation reveal how institutions benefited from athletes' performance while leaving them to navigate racially organized classrooms, fan expectations, and limited psychosocial care, a pattern consistent with SRIC criterion 1.

At the same time, the findings complicate deficit-oriented readings of BMCAs by showing how participants did not merely absorb institutional narratives. Rather, consistent with SRIC criterion 1, they interpreted, revised, and strategically moved within and against them through voice, community-building, code-switching, activism, and future-oriented *self*-definition. They engaged in accommodative meaning-making and exploratory processing that enabled them to reinterpret stereotype, surveillance, and exclusion as sites of self-defense and resolve (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015). Kenneth's academic counter positioning, Boone's future orientation, and participants' insistence that they were more than "just athletes" indicate an internalized sense of capacity to shape outcomes even within constrained environments. In that respect, the findings align with NILM by showing how BMCA identity is neither purely intrapsychic nor reducible to institutional constraint. Rather, it is a liminal, narrative, and strategic process through which athletes read the environment, make sense of themselves, and decide how to act. At the same time, the study complicates any straightforward reading of internalized agency as stable empowerment. Participants' sense of capacity was often situational, defensive, and costly. They described having to prove legitimacy, monitor tone, and manage first impressions in order to secure recognition that should not have required performance in the first place. This nuance extends scholarship on code-switching and identity negotiation by suggesting that agency in historically White settings often takes the form of conditional self-management rather than unconstrained *self*-expression (Dexter et al., 2021; Howe, 2023; Mik-Meyer, 2020; Whaley, 2016).

Criterion 3 is also strongly supported, although the findings broaden what counts as strategic action. Participants described public forms of response, including voice,

activism, protest, and role negotiation, which align closely with SRIC's emphasis on behaviors that challenge inequity or reduce its harms in pursuit of holistic well-being (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Yet the findings also show that criterion 3 includes less visible strategies such as moving toward Black student and athlete (counter)spaces, regulating emotion, code-switching, impression management, and choosing when to speak and when to withhold. These actions did not always confront inequity directly, but they functioned as forms of harm reduction, survival, and future protection within racially stratified environments. CCW further clarifies how these responses were not improvised in a vacuum; they were often supported by familial guidance, peer networks, culturally affirming spaces, and accumulated forms of linguistic, social, navigational, and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). In this regard, the findings align with scholarship, including the Blathlete framework, that emphasizes the importance of educational, racial, and sociocultural support for Black athletes' development, while extending that literature by showing how these resources inform micro-level decision-making across classrooms, teams, and campus life (Brown, 2016; Carter-Francique et al., 2015).

A final contribution of the findings is they clarify the relationship among NILM, MNF, and SRIC without overstating coherence. The data supports the argument that BMCA identity development in HWCUs is liminal, narrative, and strategic, but they also show that the three SRIC criteria are not always linear or evenly distributed. Recognition of inequity was often quite clear, whereas internalized agency and strategic response varied by context, perceived risk, and access to affirming support. Mirror manipulation is especially significant because it offers an important qualification to any celebratory account of strategic responsiveness: some strategies preserved access and dignity, yet they also narrowed the range of acceptable *self*-expression and made *self*-awareness labor intensive. Thus, the findings reinforce scholarship showing how BMCAs are highly visible for athletic labor. Yet, they are insufficiently affirmed as students, intellectuals, and developing Black men. While also complicating deficit-oriented readings by demonstrating participants continuously interpreted, revised, and at times resisted the narratives imposed on them (Smith, 2007). Overall, the study suggests Black male identity in HWCUs is narrated through ongoing negotiation between master narratives and (counter)narratives and enacted through strategic responses designed to preserve dignity, belonging, and long-term possibility (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Syed et al., 2020).

Limitations

The study contributes to scholarship on BMCAs' lived experiences at HWCUs, particularly by highlighting how visibility, meaning-making, and accommodative and exploratory narrative processing shape *self*-awareness in everyday decisions (Adler et al., 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2023). However, the study relies on retrospective narratives in which former athletes reconstructed past experiences from memory, which introduces the possibility of recall bias and post hoc interpretation (Syed & McLean, 2023). This limitation is conceptually consequen-

tial within the MNF, which treats accounts of the past not as neutral reproductions of events, but as situated reconstructions shaped by culturally available scripts and the narrator's current standpoint (McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2023). Accordingly, the narratives analyzed here should be interpreted as evidence of how participants currently organize meaning and *self*-awareness in relation to Black male identity and athlete status, rather than as comprehensive documentation of historical campus climates or institutional practices.

Additional limitations stem from the study's scope and timing. Since interviews occurred after earlier collegiate periods had concluded, the protocol could not consistently probe when participants recognized specific master narratives, how they weighed the costs of compliance, or how their strategic responses shifted across contexts and time. Time constraints also restricted the sociohistorical contextualization needed to fully situate participants' accounts within the AIC and the specific institutional conditions of their HWCU. In addition, although SRIC highlights how strategic action is shaped by institutional arrangements, the study did not systematically examine how athletics leadership, academic affairs, counseling services, faculty, and compliance or student success units coordinate or conflict in supporting BMCAs' holistic development. Future research would therefore benefit from longitudinal and multi-stakeholder designs that trace how self-awareness develops across repeated decisions and clarify how institutional structures expand or constrain the strategies BMCAs can safely employ.

Implications

The findings suggest improving outcomes requires changing the narrative and structural conditions that shape routine decisions rather than relying on generic support initiatives. Since master narratives influence what is perceived as legitimate, safe, and attainable on HWCU campuses, and SRIC clarifies how athletes respond to institutional incentives tied to athletic labor, athletic departments and academic units should more systematically document BMCAs' life stories and identity trajectories. Doing so can improve cross-unit understanding of how visibility, stereotype threat, and authenticity costs shape daily choices; make master narratives and emerging (counter)narratives more visible in advising and transition programming; and clarify how athletes interpret institutional signals as they navigate classrooms, teams, and campus life (Cooper & Cooper, 2015).

These efforts should be paired with greater institutional transparency about under-resourcing, expanded access to culturally responsive personnel and mentors, and supports that directly address *self*-awareness and strategic agency. Such supports include mental health services attuned to the strain of code-switching, double consciousness, and public scrutiny, as well as education on financial planning and labor dynamics in profit-generating sport (Du Bois, 1903; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Myers, 2020; Whaley, 2016). Institutions should also rebalance performance cultures by rewarding academic exploration, leadership, and civic engagement as credible forms

of excellence, and by training coaches, advisors, and faculty to avoid reproducing athletics-first narratives that narrow Black male identity to entertainment value (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Future research should extend this work through longitudinal and multi-stakeholder designs, repeated interviews, focus groups, and institutional document analysis that clarify how strategic responses shift across seasons and contexts and how institutional messaging may pressure athletes to distance themselves from Blackness or treat sport as the primary horizon of possibility (Edwards, 1979).

Conclusion

This study displayed that BMCAs navigate the sociocultural contexts of HWCUs through identity work that is simultaneously narrative, racialized, and strategic. Across participants' accounts, SRIC captured the daily calculations required to secure resources, safety, and recognition in environments where their value was often most translatable through athletic performance, even as their racialized experiences were routinely rendered invisible. In these contexts, positionality and (counter)stories functioned as critical tools for contesting White normative assumptions at the individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels, aligning with calls for "anti-racist leadership" in higher education (Capper, 2019, p. 117).

As Howard Bryant argued, "The Black athlete is the most visible, most important, most influential Black employee [the U.S.] has ever produced" (Vanderbilt University, 2018, para. 2). That visibility can create opportunity, but it also intensifies commodification and narrows institutional understandings of Black male potential, echoing Edwards' (1979) call to cultivate pathways to success beyond sport. Consistent with scholarship on Black male identity formation at the intersections of race, class, and gender, the findings show BMCAs repeatedly confronted master narratives that positioned them as *just athletes* or as academically deficient, and that they responded through *self-improvement* practices, emotional regulation, and peer-based support networks that disrupted stereotypes without eliminating structural barriers (Dickerson, 2018; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Herman II, 2023; Howe & Cooper, 2024; McAulay, 2025). Although this analysis centers U.S. HWCUs, the broader mechanisms identified here, including racialized institutional climates, classed opportunity structures, and the commercial logics of high-performance sport, are not exclusive to the United States. Centering intersecting identities such as race, gender, class, and athlete status therefore clarifies how macro-level sport structures and campus climates become the micro-level decisions through which BMCAs engage, perform, persist, and sustain well-being.

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