In the summer of 2020, after a series of incidents of police brutality, deaths of Black Americans, and protests throughout the world, people flooded social media with their opinions. Several social media campaigns to support social change emerged, such as #BlackOutTuesday and the increased use of #BlackLivesMatter. As people and organizations began to raise their voices on social media about the country’s injustices, sport organizations and athletes also utilized social media to speak out. In the collegiate space, student-athletes with large social media followings sparked change through their online activism. Notably, college athletic departments posted about race relations on team accounts frequently.

Framed by critical race theory, researchers have examined how fans (e.g., Frederick et al., 2017) and athletes (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010; Intosh et al., 2020) feel about athlete activism. However, research on sport organizations’ activism is limited. At the collegiate level, athletic directors may be concerned with student-athletes’ perceptions of athletic departments’ efforts in the racial justice movement, as 18% of NCAA student-athletes are African American, including 44.8% of college football players and 53% of basketball players (Kluch & Wilson, 2020). Researchers have noted that Black student-athletes frequently perceive their institutions as unsupportive (Cooper, 2017). Meanwhile, activism efforts through social media can build community and promote civic engagement (Skoric et al., 2015), which fosters a more inclusive environment. Social media presence can further be an outward reflection of an organization’s values. Therefore, it is important for athletic departments to understand their role in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement on social media, as perceived by student-athletes. The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of student-athletes based on factors identified by Sappington et al. (2019)—namely, how student-athletes feel about social media posts made surrounding race relations and BLM movement by their college athletic department (affective response), the impact on the team (perceived conflict), and the role or perceived qualification of the athletic department to post about race relations. Because athletic departments began to use social media to address race related concerns in 2020 without real guidance or experience, this knowledge will help athletic communicators decide whether to post on these issues in the future and possible student-athlete reactions to these decisions.

To assess student-athlete perception of college athletic department involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement, a 30-item online survey will be distributed to NCAA student-athletes, from willing athletic departments, CoSIDA and NASSM listserve members, or via snowball sampling on social media. A modified version of the Attitudes Toward Athlete Activism Questionnaire (7-point Likert scale; Sappington et al., 2019) will measure the student-athlete’s response to athletic department’s social media activism: affective reactions (5 items), perceived conflict with team (4 items), athletic department role (3 items), and political qualifications/credibility (3 items). We will determine which factors are most salient and identify if differences in perception exists between racial groups or NCAA division levels using independent t-tests. Discussion will center on theoretical contributions and practical implications for athletic communication staff on their efforts in the racial justice movement.