

WEUSI x ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Access Is Not **Belonging:**

Negotiating Psychological Sense of
Community and Social Capital
in U.S. Squash



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O V E R V I E W

Contents

01	Introduction	3
02	Literature Review	5
	Sense of Community	5
	Social Capital	6
03	Methods	7
	Research Approach	7
	Philosophical Assumptions	7
	Participants and Recruitment	7
	Data Collection	7
	Data Analysis	8
	Trustworthiness	8
04	Findings	10
	Accessing the Squash Community	10
	Negotiating Belonging	11
	Giving Back	15
05	Discussion	17
	Accessing PSOC and social capital through supportive communities	17
	Contested sense of community and conditional access	18
	Giving back and transforming community	20
06	Conclusion	22
07	References	23

SECTION 01

Introduction

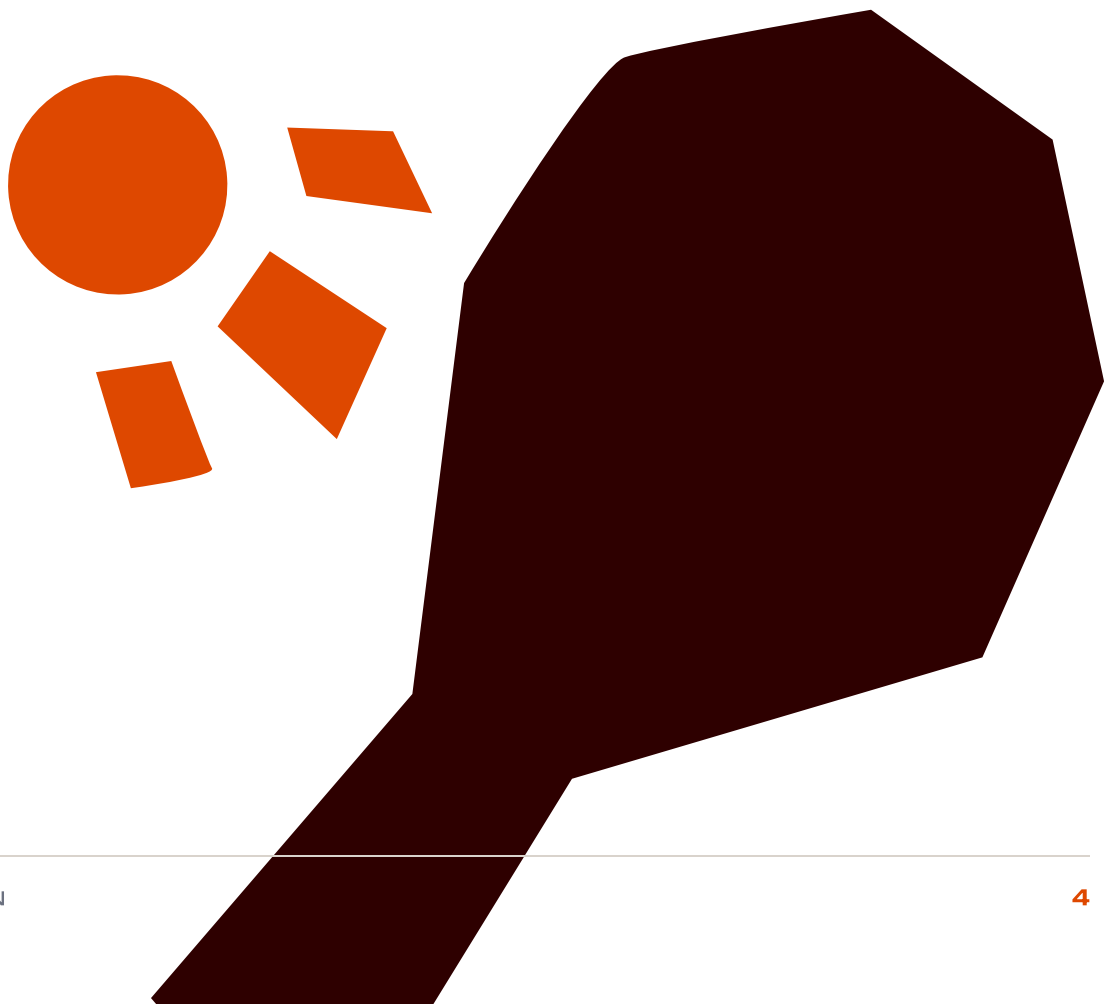
The sport of squash will make its Olympic debut at the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles. While this global platform offers the potential to elevate the sport's visibility and reach, squash in the United States has historically remained a niche activity, disproportionately associated with White, affluent communities and elite private institutions. Varsity collegiate squash programs are predominantly housed within Ivy League and similarly prestigious universities, and participation often requires access to exclusive clubs, private coaching, and significant financial resources (Beam, 2008; Pavia, 2024). The average income of squash players in the U.S. reflects this disparity, with participation patterns shaped more by socioeconomic privilege than by broad public access (U.S. Squash, n.d..)

Olympic inclusion offers an opportunity to both grow the sport and address longstanding inequities in who gets to participate, benefit, and belong. In particular, there is growing interest in expanding squash among youth of color, many of whom have been historically excluded from the sport's dominant spaces. Increasing diversity within U.S. squash is a meaningful goal in its own right, but it also carries broader implications for equity, access to elite educational institutions, and participation in social networks that have traditionally been closed off to marginalized communities. Further, increasing diversity requires more than expanding participation; it also requires understanding whether historically underrepresented populations experience belonging within the squash community.

To meaningfully diversify squash, stakeholders must first understand how those already inside the sport, particularly young players of color, not only gain access to the sport, but also whether participation translated into a genuine sense of community. While the extant research has highlighted the developmental and social benefits of sport participation (Eime et al., 2013; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Holt, 2025), less is known about how players of color experience community with sport, historically associated with white and elite identities. Understanding the development of a sense of community is important because of the numerous benefits associated with the development of a sense of community, particularly for individuals in marginalized communities. For example, a sense of community is positively associated with physical activity for women with disabilities (Gatt & Trussell, 2025), and sense of community on a soccer team for youth refugees was positively associated with resilience and cultural adjustment (Fader et al., 2019). Further, previous scholarship outside of sport suggests that a sense of community may facilitate the development of social capital by fostering trust, participation, and social relationships (Perkins & Long, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Thus, it is important to understand how players of color gain entry into

squash, where do they experience belonging, and what facilitates and hinders that belonging? Lastly, do those experiences also facilitate the personal and professional opportunities available through squash participation?

This study addresses these questions by exploring the lived experiences of racially diverse young adult squash players in the United States. Focusing on young adults provides retrospective insight into how participants navigated access and belonging within squash, and what role squash played in their lives. Guided primarily by psychological sense of community (PSOC) and drawing on social capital as a complementary lens for understanding access to instrumental social networks, the purpose of this study was to examine how participants navigated access into and through squash and how they experienced community and social benefits of a sport long associated with elite participation.



SECTION 02

Literature Review

Two related, but distinct, theoretical concepts guided our analysis – psychological sense of community and social capital.

Sense of Community

Psychological sense of community (PSOC) is a well-established theoretical construct with particular relevance to sport and leisure contexts. Initially developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), PSOC is defined as a feeling of community members that they belong, that they are important to the group, and that their needs are met through the group. Though originally developed in 1986, substantial scholarship has demonstrated ongoing support for the conceptualization, including in sport and recreation settings (Fader et al., 2019, 2020; Woo et al., 2025).

The foundational framework identifies four elements critical to PSOC: membership, bi-directional influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership refers to an individual's feeling of belonging and includes boundaries, emotional safety, and personal investment. Influence reflects the bi-directional power between individuals and the group, where individuals shape and are shaped by the community. Integration and fulfillment of needs describes how group membership satisfies members' social, emotional, and instrumental needs, while shared emotional connection is built through common experiences, shared history, and rituals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 2011).

As noted, since its original explication, PSOC has been widely used in sport and leisure settings. For example, Woo et al. (2025) used photo elicitation with roller derby participants and identified the particular salience of symbols (membership), self-governance (bidirectional influence), emotional support (membership) and shared emotions (shared emotional connection) as part of the strong sense of community. Similarly, Chen et al. (2025) described how PSOC can develop even in virtual sport settings through authenticity, theming, spectator support, and fulfillment of social needs – each of which map onto the elements of PSOC theory. Additional scholarship has used this theoretical approach to discuss PSOC in running clubs (Lizzo & Liechty, 2022), fan groups (Legg, et al., 2017), cross-fit (Edmonds et al., 2022), refugee sport groups (Fader et al., 2019, 2020), and youth sport parents (Legg et al., 2015). Although PSOC has been widely documented in sport settings, considerably less attention has been paid to how PSOC may be experienced differently

within the same community. Further, because participation in squash occurs across multiple social settings – from community programs to universities and elite clubs, it remains unclear how players experience PSOC within the broader world of squash.

Social Capital

Though often blurred with sense of community (PSOC), social capital is a distinct construct that refers to the value of social relationships and the resources that can be assessed through them. Whereas PSOC represents a psychological construct – reflecting feelings of belonging and emotional connection among members of a group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 2011) – social capital is a structural and functional concept that emphasizes the value embedded within social relationships. As Putnam explains, social capital involves “networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (p 67). Thus, while PSOC reflects how people feel about a group; social capital reflects the instrumental value of relationships within and outside of communities.

Within sport settings, social capital has frequently been examined through the concepts of bridging and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital refers to strong ties within a relatively homogenous group – such as individuals who share similar racial, cultural, or socioeconomic backgrounds. These ties promote solidarity, mutual support, and emotional safety, but can also reinforce exclusivity and limit access to outside sources (Bourdieu, 1986; Clopton & Finch, 2011). Bridging social capital, on the other hand, connects people across social strata and provides access to novel information, opportunities, and institutional resources. Bridging ties are generally weaker, but more outward-looking and inclusive, with implications for upward mobility (Woolcock, 1998).

Sport has long been considered an arena capable of generating both bridging and bonding social capital. However, the social capital generated through sport is not inherently equitable. In some contexts, sport may reinforce bonding social capital within elite or exclusive groups, while limiting bridging social capital from those with marginalized backgrounds (Walseth, 2008; Storr & Spaaij, 2017). For example, participation in sports such as squash – which is traditionally associated with White upper income participation – may reproduce social stratification rather than reduce it. In these cases, the benefits of social capital tend to accrue to those who already possess higher levels of cultural and economic capital (Stempel, 2005).

Accordingly, this study considers social capital as a complementary perspective to PSOC. Whereas PSOC provides the primary lens for understanding participants’ experiences of belonging within squash, social capital helps explain how those experiences shaped access to professional, educational, and institutional opportunities and networks within squash.

SECTION 03

Methods

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach informed by phenomenological orientation to explore the lived experiences of racially diverse young adult squash players in the United States. Phenomenology was appropriate given the study's emphasis on understanding the essence of players' experiences navigating an elite-coded sport (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach centers participant voices, particularly those traditionally marginalized in sport, and acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participant.

Philosophical Assumptions

The study was guided by a constructivist paradigm (Lincoln et al., 2011), recognizing that participants' realities are socially constructed and that their perceptions of barriers, supports, and opportunities represent authentic realities in and of themselves. For example, whether a program was objectively "accessible" mattered less than whether participants perceived it to be so. Findings thus represent a co-construction of participant knowledge and researcher interpretation.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using a combination of criterion and purposive sampling. Recruitment and interviews occurred from July, 2021 - September, 2021. The inclusion criteria required that participants had experience playing squash in the United States, were 18 yrs and older (18- 60) and identified as Black/African-American. In total, 33 participants took part in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to data collection. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method consistent with constructivist and phenomenological traditions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The interview protocol was designed to elicit participant narratives of introduction to squash, motivations for continued participation, experiences of support and barriers, and perceptions of community and network development. For example, participants were asked "how did you become

interested in squash”, “who supported you in squash, and in what ways did they support you,” and “what are some challengers or barriers you faced as you progressed through squash?”. All interviews were conducted via video conferencing (e.g. Zoom). Interviews lasted between 15 and 68 minutes, with an average time of 36 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Sampling continued until the research team determined that the data provided sufficient depth, breadth, and variation to comprehensively address the research questions and support robust thematic development (Malterud et al., 2016)

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with an iterative and inductive coding process. Transcripts were read multiple times for immersion, followed by open coding to capture meaning units related to participants’ experiences. Codes were collaboratively refined into a codebook and then grouped into higher-order categories aligned with the study’s research questions. Following the analytic strategies outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), codes were further organized into themes representing patterned meanings across participants. Themes were developed inductively from the data and subsequently interpreted the primary lens of PSOC, with social capital serving as a complementary framework for understanding participants’ descriptions of social networks. In this way, theoretical concepts served as sensitizing concepts for interpretation rather than predetermined coding categories (Bowen, 2006). Throughout the process, researchers remained open to additional concepts that extended beyond these theoretical processes. Theoretical concepts were used to interpret themes rather than define them.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Researchers engaged in prolonged immersion with the data through repeated transcript review and iterative discussions during coding and theme development. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation, as multiple members of the research team independently coded transcripts and compared interpretations. The researcher teams’ combination of insider and outsider perspectives further supported trustworthiness by balancing contextual understanding of the squash community with critical distance during interpretation.

Transferability was enhanced through the use of thick description, allowing readers to evaluate the applicability of findings to other sport contexts. The research team brought complementary perspectives of the study, balancing familiarity with the squash community and critical distance from it. The lead author, who identifies as White male, has an extensive

background in community sport research but no prior experience with squash. The lead author participated throughout the coding process, led theme development and interpretation, and was primarily responsible for manuscript preparation. The second author, who identifies as Black/African-American male, has substantial experience within squash communities, including leadership roles in organizations dedicated to expanding access to squash for individuals of color. The second author brought extensive contextual knowledge and established credibility within the community. The second author conducted all participant interviews. This positionality facilitated rapport with participants and provided a lived understanding of the cultural, terminology, and experiences discussed during the interviews. The third author, who identifies as a White female and had no prior experience with squash contributed to data management and independently coded the transcripts, providing an additional perspective during analysis. Throughout the research process, the team engaged in ongoing reflexivity to consider how their differing backgrounds, experiences, and assumptions might shape data interpretation.



SECTION 04

Findings

Consistent with our research questions, findings are organized chronologically across participants' squash journeys, from entry into the sport through ongoing participation and eventual efforts to give back. Within these stages, many participants experienced personal growth and developed both a sense of community and social capital. However, these positive benefits did not come automatically as a result of participation, and were often buffered by existing norms and practices within squash. As participants continued within squash, many chose to complete the cycle by giving back to the sport.

Accessing the Squash Community

Entry into squash was rarely a result of individual initiative, but rather depended on the facilitation of individuals and organizations to connect them to a sport and community that was generally considered to be elite and homogenous. To access the sport and community, individuals had to overcome both structural and cultural barriers.

Structural barriers included costs, travel, and court access. Costs and access to courts were often intertwined as courts were limited and frequently only available at private clubs. As Marcus noted, “it’s not like tennis where you can go anywhere within a five-mile radius.” And when private courts were available, they were often costly, as Caleb summed up, “one of the biggest challenges is access to courts, the cost to play, learning the sport, it’s the cost for us, to learn how to play the sports is just, it’s very expensive.” In addition to court access, costs also included “having those memberships to the clubs that have access to courts, and even just equipment like a good racket, good shoes” (Gabrielle).

Perhaps even more salient were the cultural barriers that participants faced. These included a reputation that squash was a white, elitist sport and not welcoming to outsiders. Prior to even addressing costs and court access, potential squash players wrestled with the reputation of squash as an elitist and overwhelming white sport. Nia suggested that his friends were concerned about him playing squash “because of the whiteness associated with squash,” and Aailyah similarly stated, that squash “gets pegged as a predominantly white sport. And Javier said, “being black and playing squash is definitely not like a normal thing at all”, and that squash “definitely was elitist.” Alana summed up the connection between access, cost, and a reputation for elitism, stating, “It is a classist sport because playing squash is not easily accessible like basketball and football.”

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J A V I E R

Given the substantial barriers to entering the world of squash, many participants required a connection to someone or an organization already within squash. These connections could be friends, family, or organizations dedicated to outreach to a broader community. Malik described being introduced to squash by his father, who picked up the game at a local gym. “I became interested when, through my father, who was a tennis player... he sort of picked it up when I was five at a local gym, and so I’ve been playing since I was five.” Others, like Aaliyah, found squash through community-based youth programs. “StreetSquash was already there for a year... and I’m so happy that my close friends... were already in this program and they said, ‘hey, you should try it out.’ For these players, entry was not accidental or motivated by a particular interest in the sport but facilitated by other individuals and organizations.

Negotiating Belonging

Even after entering squash, participants required ongoing support to navigate the broader and often exclusive squash community. Many participants continued to receive support from family and friends. Camila shared how meaningful it was when friends who did not play squash came out to support him, “I think whenever some of our friends would show up at a squash thing, I think it was always like super novel for us. So we’re like these people were coming into our world.” Jamal shared how his family played a central role in helping him overcome many of the access barriers: “I definitely had a very supportive family, like my parents would even fly out from California to come see me play squash... and also like financial [support]... the club isn’t free, racket, shoes, those kinds of things all provided by my parents.” And others shared how coaches were their primary source of support, “my number one was my coaches, my high school coaches, it was five of them but they all coaches in different areas so like squash academics, college stuff, but they all supported me all in one.” (Adrianna). These interpersonal social supports helped participants navigate entry barriers as well as many of the challenges they encountered after entering squash.

Beyond the continued support of family, friends, and coaches, many participants began to access to the many benefits that sport, and squash in particular, can provide. These benefits could be individual personal growth, and for many extended into the social benefits of a sense of community, and social capital networks

At the individual level, many participants noted personal benefits, including improved fitness, mental health, and leadership development. Alexis stated, “It’s a great workout. I work my whole body.” Multiple participants highlighted how squash helped them develop confidence including Camila who after describing how he was generally a very reserved person suggested that with time he “grew more confident.” Others highlighted how squash improved their mental health including as a place of stress relief. For example, Devon noted that after a stressful day squash “served me like a reset. And it just gave me some more energy for the rest of the day. And according to Darius emphasized how squash helped shape his understanding of life: “The fact that [squash] helps in shaping your life and making you understand some things about life.” These quotes all illustrate some of the numerous individual benefits that participants received from participating in squash.

Socially, some participants began to experience a sense of belonging within squash subcommunities, including their teams and local community organizations. In addition, participants often discovered camaraderie and a sense of community. Numerous participants used words such as “family”, “community”, and “camaraderie” to describe their experience. As Jamal described, “I think this is a nice outlet to grow a friendship base, and a community. That is, we’re all kind of looking at the same thing. This is a great game, you know, we all love the game we all want to be in.” Javier simply stated, “It was definitely a lot of community building.” Camila described the relationships and camaraderie with his team, “I just like my team, our teammates, the vision that we had, the camaraderie that we had, just the space that we had to, like, be ourselves and grow at our own pace,.”

Further, once in the community many participants were able to access the instrumental benefits of being part of the squash community. Darius shared that connections made through squash directly influenced his educational opportunities: “Some of the closest guys I’ve developed relationships with, I met through squash. One of them even helped me get my current job.” Malik also discussed the professional and interpersonal benefits of being part of a sport with strong alumni and institutional ties: “Part of the benefit is the people who play it... especially for me as a young professional. It’s helpful knowing or being able to build rapport with people who are a lot more senior in the industries I’m interested in.” In this way, squash served not just as a game but as a networking platform that provided credibility and connection. Importantly, this social capital could also bridge across backgrounds. Isiah described how he learned from individuals from various backgrounds, “That’s one thing that has to be there, being able to interact with different kind of people, thereby learning from them understanding that, that the different tribes, cultural traditions, and all those things, it helps me a lot.”

Despite the continued support and emerging benefits, participants continued to face both structural and cultural barriers. Though participants could develop social capital and a sense of community, not all interpersonal interactions were positive. Indeed, many participants reported continuing to experience microaggressions. Marisol described a situation, “But I do remember one time very vividly that the father of somebody actually threw my father's hand when he went to shake it. And something that I will never ever forget. And I felt that that gesture was just, you know, trying to, to, to let my family know that you're here, but not welcomed by everybody. And that's just a reality. And something you have to work through.” Alexis described the discomfort of going to a squash club, “Sometimes it's either, like, the lack of people looking at speaking to you, or the fact that they're staring. It's almost one or the other. Either, they're paying no attention to you, or they're too much.” Aailah described how people often assumed they were basketball players, “So my high school team was, you know, we were, we were like all minorities, you know, Black and Brown students. And, you know, a lot of times we'd go into tournaments you know, we get faced with people be like, 'Oh, you looking for the basketball courts?' kind of thing. Um, you know, 'No we're here for the squash tournament,' and, you know, we're always faced with that.”

One reality that could make participants feel unwelcome was the lack of diversity in squash settings. As Camila stated, “it really made me notice more that our family was very different than the other families. And it, sometimes it was troubling. And my parents would kind of have to talk to me and explain some things to me about, you know, being different.” For Camila, this meant having to gain acceptance by performing on the court, “I think that I was able to earn respect, although I looked different because I was a good player.” Tied to this lack of diversity was a unwritten code of the norms of squash, which prioritized certain cultural norms of behavior. Alana described understanding that, “squash is a gentleman's sport, and so well, I'm not a man. But it's just like the idea of having this level of mannerisms and courtesy on the court of how to be a good squash player. So it was kind of hard going to different tournaments, and then not seeing people that look like me, but then being expected to act like them on court.” In some instances, these cultural norms of whiteness manifested in actual “all whites” rules, which required players to only wear white. Kiara described being invited to an elite club by another player, “I didn't realize that they still were all whites. And I think they still do. No one told me. And so I think that was like the first and last time I played because I was like, “This is too much. It was a lot.” In this case, the player experienced the potential benefits of bridging social capital through another player. However, it was not enough to overcome the barriers. Kiara described here relationship with the person who invited him to play at the club, “we were in such different, you know, he was a much older, more, I want to say old school, but he definitely had like the classic squash player. persona, and I wasn't that.” Thus, even when social capital networks were developed, the cultural norms interfered.

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A L A N A

This largely homogenous environment was certainly noticed for many young players of color. For example, Aaliyah mentioned the discomfort of being the only Black player at tournaments or clubs: “Especially on my high school team... I think I was the only Black player, both boys and girls, that my school had had in at least 10 years.” The idea of squash as a “gentleman’s sport” or “White space” surfaced repeatedly. Imani reflected, “I do think that there was like a specific culture... a very ‘light’ sport... I remember feeling like I was too loud or too joyful... and I felt a little bit limited by that.” In these ways cultural norms about behavior, emotion, and decorum acted as invisible boundaries that constrained full participation..

For some players, accessing the benefits of sense of community and social capital meant having to conform to the existing norms. Camila discussed the norms of behavior and his need to adjust to those, “it’s not that I don’t, I’m not, I can’t be polite, but like, also, like, that’s not how I experienced athletics, some of the play, I think, maybe outdoor sports, you know, you’re just like, very emotional, you’re very loud. I think some people are like that, and I would see that sometimes I think, especially on the men’s side. But I think that like that was definitely an adjustment for me just like feeling like I’m too loud, or like too boisterous or too joyful, you know, or, like, distracting or, and I do remember, like, feeling a little bit. Just, like, limited by by that.” Overcoming the cultural barriers presented substantial challenges to players, which was reflected in the pride they took in overcoming the barriers, “being black and playing squash is definitely not like a normal thing at all. So definitely difficult in terms of like, being at those, like all white clubs, spending a lot of time in spaces that, you know, black people aren’t typically welcome. Either like exposit implicitly, or whatever. And even just like, just like being othered is like, definitely a weird and like, challenging feeling. And something that, you know, I should be able to deal with. And I think like, now, I think it’s probably one of my greatest competitive advantages is just being able to just kind of being able to be comfortable in those spaces, and just like, kind of be able to be myself in those spaces.”

Multiple participants described a general malaise and not feeling welcomed. Jamal described how cultural misrecognition manifested in subtle yet persistent ways: "There were times where I was in clubs, that it was clear, I was not welcome... I said hello, and they just walked right by me... I was definitely confused at times and hurt." These forms of exclusion were rarely overt, but they created a social context where participants had to work to maintain their sense of worth and belonging. And Javier stated, "You would go against, like these, you know, upper class, usually white, students who have like these private trainers, and, you know, they just look down on you. And, you know, it definitely was disheartening because you could feel like the, them just looking down on you."

Giving Back

Having both benefited from squash, and also wrestling with the structural and cultural barriers that finding belonging entailed, participants often sought to give back by creating opportunities and support for others in their own squash journey. Jamal described all the practical ways that he supports new players, "whenever they want to play, I'm willing to go out there, I have chauffeured them around I've fed them, I have restrung, I've done all the grips." This desire to give back often emerged from gratitude towards the people and programs that supported their own journeys. For example, Marisol stated, "and then give back to all these inner city children. That was tremendous. I wouldn't have had the opportunity in 2000 if someone didn't put a racket in my hand at age seven. So to me just kind of brought it full circle." She continued by noting that giving back also helped remove some of the emotions related to her bad experiences in squash, "It was just amazing. It really was. I was, I'm so happy that I was able to return to it. It took that little bad taste out and just put nothing but a great taste in my mouth." For others, giving back was both in gratitude for what they had gained from squash, and a value they believed in, Taylor stated "What if it wasn't for squash, I would not be where I am right now, I might probably be a doctor. But will I love what I'm doing? I'm not sure. But I, like I said, I believe in the principle of giving back to the community."

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M A R I S O L

Giving back meant providing the type of practical support that they had received, helping new squash players develop life skills and social capital, and trying to change the cultural barriers of squash. Alana, for instance, became a camp counselor and a fitness instructor in the program that supported him, “I was able to be like a camp counselor for the Metro Squash summer camp. So like, a big full circle moment, but I was like a fitness instructor. So I help kids on court, you know, work on their serve and different things like that, and I led them through different fitness activities, so just conditioning.” Adrianna talked about coaching younger students and remembering what it was like to be entering squash, “I know how they feel, and know how now it is, my guys. But it's just like, now being older being alum, and was able to really be there and help them.” And Omar echoed this sentiment of the importance of understanding new players’ experiences, “it's so funny, because I'm like, I'm barely older than, maybe only like four or five years older than them. But to them I'm a whole mentor, because it's like, I came from where they came from.”

Beyond the practical support, these players also provided support with life skills and assisting new players in developing social capital. For instance, Jasmine discussed helping players with academics and college applications, “whenever I had time to play with the kids, and then also just focus on academics and help people with like college applications and everything.”

Kiara described helping players tap into valuable social networks, “But I really have players from squash busters on my team, and made an effort to have them meet and introduce them to people who I think would be good mentors to them long term, whether it be summer jobs, I'm like you need to, if that's where you want to go to college, she's an alum, she'll help you out, meet this person, if you want to work in finance, you know, after you graduate from college, stay in touch with them, email them periodically, send them a thank you note, after they take you out for lunch.” Javier also discussed trying to provide players with emotional support and connect them to valuable networks, “As far as like emotional and mental support, I would say that, you know, I tried to help in the best ways I could, but you know, also making sure that they knew that there was people who had more experience than me that could help them.”

Others approached efforts to change the cultural barriers within squash as their way of giving back. Nia noted that she helped raise money, and “organized around anti-racism education at Metro Squash and squash in general.” And Aailyah described changing to change some of the structural barriers that he faced, “we're really trying to implement some changes at the program and some things we'd like to see. And just kind of make sure, you know, students coming up in the program now, you know, avoid some of the difficulties that we faced while we were coming up in the program.”

SECTION 05

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine how participants navigated access into and through squash, and more specifically, how do players experience the potential social benefits of a sport often coded as elite? Analysis identified three themes, accessing the squash community, negotiating belonging, and giving back. Taken together, these themes suggest that participants developed elements of PSOC and social capital, but that development was incomplete and regularly contested. Specifically, participants gained access to squash and many of the personal and social benefits associated with participation, yet this did not guarantee PSOC or social capital within the broader squash community. Rather, participants were often forced to negotiate existing cultural norms, while simultaneously attempting to access the benefits and resources that squash could provide. For participants who successfully negotiated this path, many responded by seeking to support more inclusive pathways for future players.

Accessing PSOC and social capital through supportive communities

Across the themes, participants clearly described experiences consistent with PSOC and social capital. Notably, however, these experiences were not experienced broadly across the squash community. Rather, participants most frequently discussed components of PSOC within supportive subcommunities within squash, including families, community squash organizations, coaches, and teammates. These subcommunities further almost always facilitated entry to the broader squash community and provided ongoing support. These findings echo previous research that sport participation can foster PSOC, including for marginalized populations, and that marginalized populations often require additional instrumental support to access PSOC (Fader et al., 2019, 2020; Lizzo & Liechty, 2022; Straume et al., 2025; Woo et al., 2025).

Participant descriptions reflected multiple components of PSOC. Specifically, elements of membership and need fulfillment are present in participant stories. Membership was present in participant descriptions of “camaraderie” and “family” when describing the people they interacted with in squash. This aligns with the membership attribute of a sense of belonging within PSOC theory (McMillan, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Likewise, participants described how participation in squash and these relationships fulfilled both emotional and instrumental needs through mentorship, encouragement, financial assistance, and personal growth. A substantial body of literature suggests that this feeling is

a common part of the shared experience of sport participation (Lizzo & Liechty, 2022). Further consistent with PSOC theory, the resources and support of the group were available to meet the needs of individual members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 2011). In this case, instrumental needs were met through the support of family, friends, and coaches, while participation in the sport also met personal physical and emotional growth needs. This aligns with previous research that suggests that sport participation can help meet needs that are part of PSOC (Chen et al., 2023; Woo et al., 2025). However, the present findings also suggest that feelings of belonging and need fulfillment were primarily met through supportive subcommunities rather than the broader culture and community of squash. Although family, friends, and community organizations were a part of the broader squash ecosystem, participants often distinguished these subcommunities from their broader squash participation.

Similarly, participants described access to professional networks that are indicative of social capital. Relationships developed within squash connected participants to educational opportunities, professional networks, and career pathways that extended beyond their immediate social circles. These findings support previous scholarship that sport can facilitate the development of bridging social capital by connecting participants to resources and networks outside of their existing networks (Boemmel et al., 2025; Davis & Knoester, 2024). Similar to the development of PSOC, however, participant's descriptions suggest that these resources were not an automatic part of participation but rather required navigating squash's existing cultural norms.

Contested sense of community and conditional access

Despite the very real presence of PSOC components and social capital, participants' experiences suggest that these benefits were not automatic, particularly within the broader squash community. Rather, in order to attain these benefits, participants were often forced to navigate ongoing barriers and code-switch to the existing cultural norms.

Though participants were able to access limited PSOC and social capital, several barriers remained. These included symbols (e.g. all white rules), microaggressions, a homogenous environment, and a general feeling not being welcomed. PSOC theory highlights that symbols help create boundaries by indicating who belongs and who does not, thus contributing to the membership component of PSOC. Previous scholarship has highlighted the importance of symbols in sport in building PSOC (Legg et al., 2017). For roller derby players, symbols, including tattoos and unique uniforms, served as symbols that everyone was welcome, serving as indicators that everyone was accepted as they were (Woo et al., 2025). Likewise, members of a virtual running club shared symbols and terminology, and many purchased a car magnet of the running club (Lizzo & Liechty, 2022). In contrast,

participants in this study indicated a need to conform to the existing symbols and norms rather than those norms providing a welcoming environment.

A second attribute of the membership component of PSOC is emotional safety. Emotional safety is described as a result of boundaries that allow people to feel that there is a place for them in the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Chen et al. (2025) described how a running community created a sense of normalcy that provided emotional safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, a soccer team for youth refugees helped facilitate emotional safety during a difficult transition (Fader et al., 2020), and roller derby players provided emotional support for each other during competition (Woo et al., 2025). Participants in the present study described emotional safety within community organizations; however, this emotional safety was not present in the larger squash community, thus detracting from a broader feeling of PSOC.

A third attribute of the membership component is a sense of belonging, which includes a feeling of being accepted and fitting into the group (McMillan, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This attribute is often highlighted by language, such as referring to community members as family (Legg et al., 2017; Lizzo & Liechty, 2022). Though many participants did describe similar feelings, experiences of microaggressions undoubtedly detracted from these feelings and from a sense of emotional safety. Unfortunately, microaggressions are an often described feature of participation in sport activities for members of underrepresented groups (Ayala et al., 2021; Gearity & Metzger, 2017(Lee et al., 2018))

Lastly, continued participation in squash often required participants to adapt to the sport's cultural codes. Participants described how the norms of squash – its reputation as “gentleman's sport”, its elite club settings, dress codes, and expectations for restrained emotional expression made them feel out of place. Players were often expected – explicitly and implicitly – to adjust how they spoke, carried themselves, and expressed their identities. A core component of PSOC is bi-directional influence. That is, the community member is influenced by group norms and what the group does, and is simultaneously influenced to conform to the community norms (McMillan, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Previous scholarship supports the importance of engagement with norms in sport as part of PSOC (Wirzén & Ekholm, 2024). When PSOC is present members not only are influenced by group norms, but also feel like they influence the group and even larger communities (Lizzo & Liechty, 2022). In one instance, for example, members of a fitness group challenged leadership over publicly racist comments, leading to the ouster of that leader (Edmonds et al., 2022), a clear indicator of the influence of community members over group norms.

This type of work is not unique to squash; previous research across sport settings has documented who individuals from underrepresented groups often manage stereotypes, adapt to dominant norms, and engage in code-switching to fit in (Hylton, 2010; Rankin-Wright et al., 2016, 2019). These findings deepen the distinction between structural access (being allowed to play) and cultural inclusion (being able to fully belong).

Similar to accessing PSOC, many participants also expressed frustration that these networks and resources were unavailable, or dependent upon conforming to the cultural norms. This echoes previous literature that has noted the challenges of sport participation as a tool for inclusion and bridging social capital (Collins & Kay, 2014). For example Clopton (2008, 2011) found that increased team identification among college students led to hyperbonding and reduced community-level social capital. Even when sport fosters social capital, it may only create bonding social capital or reinforce social exclusion (Burnett, 2006; Fulton, 2011; Tonts, 2005).

Giving back and transforming community

For participants who navigated the barriers to belonging within squash, they often chose to give back to the community within squash that supported them, and to further challenge the existing barriers within squash. Many participants sought to give back to the individuals and programs that had first facilitated their own access to squash. In doing so, participants engaged in transformative and generative trading. In his extension of PSOC theory, MacMillan (2011) added transformative and generative trading as an attribute to the integration of fulfillment of needs component, describing these as teaching skills (transformative trading), and handling off responsibilities from one generation to the next (generative trading). In more recent work, Woo et al. (2025) described this process through a boot camp where longer term community members taught skills to new members, and further described how players from different generations would practice and play together. In the present study, however, participants did not simply reproduce and continue the prior community, rather they actively sought to reimagine squash by creating more inclusive pathways that they experienced.

Numerous participants in this study indicated a desire to “give back” to the sport. Many described mentoring younger players, volunteering in community programs, or returning to the organizations that first introduced them to squash. These actions of generativity were not simply about service. Instead, they reflected participants’ own experiences of facing exclusion while benefiting from supportive relationships and subcommunities within squash. Their efforts thus represented an effort to reshape the squash so that future players would encounter fewer barriers to developing PSOC within the larger squash community.

These findings support MacMillan's (2011) notion that communities sustain themselves through reciprocal relationships and trading. Members influence the community, and are influenced by it; members have their needs met by the community, and also meet the needs of the community. The present study supports these ideas, while also extending them by suggesting that these actions of transformative and generative trading – actions such as coaching, mentoring, advocating, and taking on leadership roles can serve to not just preserve the existing community, but also challenge and transform it.

Lastly, participants not only worked to transform the squash community, they also transferred the educational, professional, and institutional networks embedded within squash. In this way, participants gave back by actively producing both PSOC and social capital. Whereas participants could gain access to valuable social networks through squash, once they navigated their own journeys, they assumed responsibility for extending those networks to younger players. In this way, they also became active facilitators of bridging social capital rather than just occasional beneficiaries of it.



SECTION 06

Conclusion

Together, these findings demonstrate that PSOC may develop unevenly across nested communities. Though participants described experiences consistent with PSOC and social capital, these benefits existed primarily within subcommunities such as teams and community organizations. In contrast, participants highlighted the complexity of navigating the broader squash community as a young adult of color in the United States. These experiences, however, also often led to participant efforts to give back and to transform the broader squash community in ways that make it more inclusive. As such, this present research further extends PSOC theory, by suggesting that transformative and generative trading not only work to continue community, but also to transform it.

SECTION 07

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