

Investigating the Physical Activity Experiences of Black Women Living in Alberta

Sarah Ajao is an undergraduate student in her final year within our faculty. She explores the physical activity experiences of Black women living in Alberta. From a young age, Ajao was encouraged to be inquisitive. A core personality trait, she attributes to her father, who has always challenged her to think critically, to challenge accepted constructs and to constantly ask questions. Her education within the Faculty of Kinesiology, led her to further explore the reasons that Black people experience negative health outcomes in Canadian society. As a Black woman scholar, she felt personally motivated to seek deeper understanding as to why these disparities persist. This study involves a broad scope of Black women ranging in age as well as includes more recent immigrants, to Canadian-identifying people. Throughout her degree, she has supplemented her education with varied research participation in labs on campus. Through these experiences, she has developed a deep respect of the necessity of research to implement change and effective solutions. While Sarah had observed the relatively lower involvement of Black women in physical activity, she understood it would require research evidence. Only then, there would be potential for actionable policy changes which would help achieve greater equity within Canadian society.

Inspiration and EDI Focus

The current literature states Black women are more prone to several chronic diseases and lower participation in exercise. Many of these chronic illnesses are mitigated and managed with exercise. This was the troubling narrative Ajao repeatedly encountered in several of her classes. She noted that rarely was any explanation or mechanism offered, in these classes as to why these statistics exist. She credits KNES444 with her decision to pursue this research project. Through discussions with her peers, she recognized her awareness was not sufficient and she felt the need to do something actionable, to help promote greater physical activity participation in Black women. Additionally, the body of work she discovered through her literature review was predominantly American-focused. While the infrastructure of Canada and the United States of America may be similar, she recognizes that there are differences which result in different experiences for individuals, and the need for Canadian-first research. She also was aware that there is very little research dedicated to women and even less dedicated to Black women. Using an intersectional lens, Ajao chose to focus on Black women as the experiences of all women are not the same, and the experiences of all Black people are not the same.

Current knowledge

Ajao found that Canadian research tends to focus on visible minorities, as one homogenized group, rather than looking at the experiences of specific racialized groups. As a result, nuance of experiences is often lacking in research. During the literature review, Ajao also noted, that the language in the papers, at times, placed responsibility of physical fitness solely on the individual. Social determinants of health are not self-imposed, but many

papers created a narrative that this was a choice people, particularly Black women, were making to not engage in physical activity regularly. Through this research, Ajao hopes to add a different perspective on Black Canadian women's experiences in physical activity. She aspires that her research initiative will inspire others and lead to tangible transformations in society and promote better health outcomes, to vulnerable populations.

Key findings

Ajao's research has provided her with fascinating preliminary insights into Black women's experiences of physical activity. Her study highlights the importance of culture and community to Black women's initial introduction to physical activity and what role this plays on the lasting effect on their adherence to physical activity. Many participants discussed the effect that their familial experiences had on their views of physical activity and how they approached physical activity, whether they were positive or negative. Ajao also found that there was preference for certain modes of resistance training and sports' involvement was often influenced by the way it was viewed within their immediate family and community. The role of societal influence and femininity was discussed and how these factors shape the engagement of Black women in physical activity. A consistent theme evident in every participant was that of resistance. While barriers of racial and sexual discrimination persist in Canada, often covert rather than overt in presentation; many still chose to navigate physical activity spaces because they recognized and enjoyed the benefits of physical activity, which demonstrates resilience. This theme illustrated that Black women do make the choice to engage in physical activity given the opportunity, an important distinction to make. This makes it clear that there exists occasion to implement meaningful change given more intentional and targeted strategies.

Evolution of Personal Perspective

As someone who identifies as a Black woman and passionate about wellness and personal fitness, Ajao was not shocked by the interviews, however, she was surprised to realize that each participant had shared so many similar experiences. This revelation was also comforting to Ajao as it validated many of her own experiences, a reality that she oftentimes questioned. As someone who has a keen interest in healthcare, holistic approaches to health/wellness and improving quality of life; this study works to reframe exercise as part of a holistic approach to medical treatment and as a preventive measure against chronic diseases. Chronic diseases unfortunately persist in Black populations. Having the opportunity to generate research that emphasizes Black women and their experiences in physical activity was a fulfilling experience for Ajao, where she felt she was able to contribute to her community, after receiving the privilege of being educated in the field of Kinesiology.