UNEVEN BARS? LOOKING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL MICROAGGRESSION EFFECTS IN NCAA WOMEN'S GYMNASTICS

We study whether environmental microaggressions, a type of racial microaggression, affect the performances of NCAA Division I women gymnasts of color when competing at any given university hosting women's gymnastics meets between 2015–2024. NCAA gymnastics meets provide an excellent setting to test for such an effect because scores are assigned individually but meets are hosted and attended by entire teams. We hypothesize that environmental microaggression effects would manifest as institution-specific racial gaps in scoring and employ a difference-in-differences model that quantifies such gaps, controlling for ability-, preparation-, and event-level factors that also contribute to scores. Across two specifications – first, comparing Black gymnasts to White gymnasts, and second, comparing White gymnasts to all other gymnasts – we find no convincing evidence that gymnasts' scores are affected by an environmental microaggression effect.

Keywords: women's gymnastics, college sports, racial microaggression theory

JEL Classification Codes: J15, Z2, Z20

Introduction

According to Sue et al. (2007), *racial microaggressions* are "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group." In their seminal paper on the topic, the authors identify nine broad categories of racial microaggressions; one category of interest was referred to by Sue et. al. as *environmental microaggressions*, referencing "[m]acro-level microaggressions which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels." Two examples of this type of microaggression supplied by the authors include "[a] college or university with buildings that are all named after White heterosexual upper class males" and "[t]elevision shows and movies that feature predominantly White people, without representation of people of color." Given that the history of women's artistic gymnastics in America is well-known to be sparse of women of color (Reid, 2024; Wamsley, 2023) and that some NCAA universities have complicated racial histories – for example, Brigham Young University (Bergara, 2013) and several SEC schools (Berry, 2004) – it may be the case that gymnasts of color participating in a historically unrepresentative sport experience environmental microaggressions at certain universities. If this is the case, these adverse pressures could manifest themselves as undue negative effects on the performances of gymnasts of color, or as a reversed positive effect on White gymnasts' performance.

In addition to the historical relevance described above, NCAA women's artistic gymnastics competitions provide several unique mechanical advantages to a study of environmental microaggression effects. First, meet winners are decided at the team level, but scores are assigned to routines at the individual level. This individual scoring element allows us to look for an individual-by-host effect (i.e. a gymnast of a certain race doing worse at a certain place) that would be unidentifiable or obfuscated in pure team scoring contexts. Second, the frequency and prevalence of meets across the country provide an exceptionally large sample size across a broad range of competitors. Third, like in other college sports, NCAA gymnastics meets are usually hosted by a specific university at a consistent venue.

This allows us to examine each host university as a consistent environment in which environmental microaggression effects may present themselves.

In order to identify a performance effect based in a racial microaggression, we need to assign a race prediction to each gymnast in our dataset. The NCAA collects self-reported demographic data for all of its student-athletes, but these “ground-truth” self-perceptions of race are not available to the public at the individual level. Instead, we apply the FairFace machine learning model created by Kärkkäinen and Joo (2021) to a headshot photograph of each gymnast and assign them to one of seven race categories. This allows us to make a relatively unbiased and consistent assignment of race using a model with excellent out-of-sample performance.

We combine these predictions with a newly assembled dataset of all NCAA women’s gymnastics scores from meets occurring between 2015-2024 to examine 1) whether Black gymnasts experience a *negative* performance effect relative to their White peers and 2) whether White gymnasts experience a *positive* performance effect relative to their non-White peers at each of the 64 D1 universities that hosted an NCAA meet over that time period. For each university, we use a differences-in-differences approach to analyze the performance of NCAA gymnasts on **visiting** teams over the first ten meets of any season(s) in which they performed at a meet hosted by that university at least once. Though we initially find significant differential racial gaps in scoring at nine universities, none of them survive corrections for multiple hypothesis testing; we discuss our methods and the implications of our findings below.

Background & Related Literature

NCAA Women’s Artistic Gymnastics

We begin with a description of how NCAA women’s gymnastics meets are scored that relies heavily on Grimsley and Wright (2019), which is a thorough explanation of scoring in

NCAA women's gymnastics written by experienced journalists.[1] Our summary also shares points about the sensitivity of gymnastics scoring with the "Gymnastics" section of Meissner et al. (2021). While our summary does not cite these articles for specific points (as it could also be considered a summary of common knowledge about the sport, especially to fans), they were very helpful to its creation.

In women's artistic gymnastics, a regular season meet is composed of four events: vault, uneven bars, balance beam, and floor exercise. Each performance is scored out of a maximum of 10 points by two judges whose independent scores are averaged to a final performance score. The typical regular season meet has four total judges – two from in-region and two from out of region – judging two events each, with two judges per event. When there are more than two teams at a given meet, at least eight individual judges judge one event each (still with two judges per event) with no rotation between events. Importantly, within a given meet, the set of judges that score each event is constant.

In each event, five or six gymnasts from each team perform; if six gymnasts perform, the lowest of those six scores is dropped when calculating the overall team score for that event. Although the maximum number of scorers for each event is capped at six, teams are not limited to six total gymnasts for the entire meet. This means coaches can craft lineups with specialized gymnasts performing in their best events and only deploying gymnasts as "all-arounders" (competing in all four events in one meet) as desired. When all the scoring gymnasts have competed for each of the four events, their scores are summed to compute each team's final meet score.

At the NCAA level, scores are determined by two factors: first is the "start value" of the routine, which is the score a gymnast would receive by performing their prepared routine perfectly, with more difficult routines providing higher start values up to the maximum 10

[1] Elizabeth Grimsley is the founder and editor-in-chief of College Gym News. Rebecca Wright is the current CNN Politics Photo Editor and a former Photo Editor for The Red & Black, a news organization that covers the University of Georgia.

points. Second, deductions are taken from the start value for technical or execution errors observed by the judges during the performance of the gymnast's routine. Though an individual score could range anywhere from zero to 10 in each event, routines are required by rule to have at least a 9.4 point start value, and they score below 8.0 very rarely.[2]

Because the practical range of scores is small, tiny differences in average scores separate elite teams from great and decent teams. A perfect team score would be at least five 10.0 routines in each event, giving team event scores of 50.0 each and a final team score of 200.0. In reality, only the best teams even approach that threshold by the end of a given season. A team is considered elite if it has the potential to hit a 198.00 meet score, which is obtainable only with an average score of 9.9 from every gymnast in every event across the entire meet; great teams can hit a 197.00 meet score (a 9.85 average performance score); and good teams could reach a 196.00 meet score (a 9.8 average performance score). These are differences of 0.05 points on average per routine, so losing even one-hundredth of a point (0.01) on a routine could be substantially harmful to team success; this motivates our research, as even a small environmental effect on scores could be meaningful to NCAA competition outcomes.

The unique attributes of artistic gymnastics meets offer us several key advantages. First, scores are assigned to gymnasts on an individual basis. This allows us to use individual routine scores to look for the presence of an environmental effect that would manifest itself at the individual-by-host level, i.e. a gymnast of a certain race experiencing a drop in performance at a meet hosted by a particular institution. This scoring model makes this individual-by-host analysis straightforward and differentiates this paper from research on other NCAA team sports like basketball and football in which individual performance is not always easy to fully isolate from team performance.

Second, our sample size is very large. Previous research investigating behavioral effects

[2] In the set of scores from which we construct each university sample, fewer than 1% are lower than 8.0; the 5th percentile score is 8.9, the 25th percentile 9.575, and the median 9.75.

using women's gymnastics has primarily focused on elite-level gymnastics competitions, which do not happen as frequently as NCAA meets. These papers most frequently deal with race-agnostic biases present in judges and competitors, finding effects attributable to difficulty bias (Rotthoff, 2020), overall ordering bias (Joustra et al., 2020; Morgan & Rotthoff, 2014; Rotthoff, 2015) and the superstar effect (Meissner et al., 2021) at the highest level of the sport. However, because there are so many fewer elite gymnasts than NCAA gymnasts, these articles can only analyze the performances of hundreds of gymnasts, while our sample includes thousands.

Third, like in other college sports, NCAA gymnastics meets are usually hosted by a specific university at a consistent venue; relatively few are hosted at neutral sites, especially early in the regular season of competition. This also means that institution-hosted NCAA meets differ from elite meets in the consistency of their environment, as elite meets are hosted at various international venues that are not necessarily fixed, with the Summer Olympics being a classic example. This consistency allows us to examine each host university as an environment in which environmental microaggression effects may present themselves.

Racial Microaggression Theory

Recent research that investigates the effects of environmental racial microaggressions at the college level is primarily focused on qualitative interviews or surveys of Black students' experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Holliday & Squires, 2020; Mills, 2020). This observation is also generally true of literature in this field historically, as evidenced by the many hundreds of papers based on interviewing Black students attending PWIs published from 1965-2013 that are summarized in Willie and Cunnigen (1981), Sedlacek (1987), and Holliday and Squires (2020). Also relevant to research on racial-environmental effects at the college level is Dix's body of work on sports programs at historically Black colleges and universities (or HBCUs) in which he shows teams from HBCUs experiencing negative performance effects while competing against PWIs in football

(Dix, 2017, 2021a), men's basketball (Dix, 2022a, 2022b), women's basketball (Dix, 2019, 2020a, 2022b), baseball (Dix, 2020b), softball (Dix, 2021b), and volleyball (Dix, 2023).

Much research also exists on racial biases within the world of professional sports. This research usually focuses on racial biases in referee/judge decisions (Eiserloh et al., 2020; Gallo et al., 2012; Parsons et al., 2011; Pelechrinis, 2023; Price & Wolfers, 2010; Rotthoff, 2020) or in fan/commentator preferences (Andersen & La Croix, 1991; Preston & Szymanski, 2008; Principe & van Ours, 2022; Quansah et al., 2023; Reilly & Witt, 2011). These studies use data from professional sports leagues in many sports and around the world to show that racial biases can affect sports teams and players both in competitive outcomes and perceived value. We contribute to this vein of research on race effects in sports by studying one of its subtypes (environmental microaggression effects) in a novel setting (NCAA gymnastics).

Of particular relevance to this paper is Caselli et al. (2023), in which the authors show that African players in a professional Italian soccer league improved their performance when COVID-19 prevented fans from attending their games. The authors argue that this effect stems from the absence of overtly racist fan behavior, which is common in the league they studied. As in our analysis of gymnasts' performance, the authors evaluated individual-level performance scores (in this case, aggregate performance scores assigned algorithmically to individual soccer players based on in-game contributions) in a generalized fixed effects model that allows them to control for player- and match-based fixed effects. They model the effects of the *removal* of racial aggressions that were directed towards athletes, while we analyze the *introduction* of athletes to a potential environmental microaggression. We add to what Caselli et. al. found for professional athletes by estimating site-specific racial scoring gaps for college-level athletes.

Methods

Data

RoadtoNationals.com has been the official statistical and rankings website of the Women's NCAA Gymnastics program since the summer of 2015 (Fredericks & Fredericks, 2013). It has been used as an accessible source for NCAA scoring and team ranking data in existing literature, as in Xiao (2022), Van Dyke et al. (2020), and Law (2020). To our knowledge, our dataset is the first comprehensive pre-processed compilation of these scores, as the data is not readily available for download at its source. In total, our dataset includes 230,088 scores received by 4,720 gymnasts over all 3,580 meets across all three NCAA divisions over the 2015-2024 seasons. We make our full dataset of NCAA women's gymnastics scores and all code used for the analysis in this paper available for future use.[3]

In addition to collecting data on scores, we also need to assign a race to each gymnast. Since we do not have access to the *individual-level* data that each gymnast reports to the NCAA, we use the FairFace race prediction computer vision model created by Kärkkäinen and Joo (2021) to predict each gymnast's race. In order to apply the model, we collect a headshot photograph of each individual gymnast in our dataset; these consist of official photos from their university team's website for the vast majority of gymnasts and comparable photos obtained from news articles or social media when photos were unavailable from official sources. After collecting the photos, we put each of them through the FairFace prediction model to classify each gymnast into one of seven race categories: White, Black, Indian, East Asian, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latina. We then align our categories with reported NCAA categories as far as possible, arriving at a final set of four aligned categories: White, Black, Latina, and Other.

We are aware that assignment of race based on visual features, even by computer algorithm,

[3] These will be made available via ICPSR (with future additions to the dataset housed in a GitHub repository) after publication. At that point, this footnote will be updated to reflect that fact.

subjects us to the "eye of the beholder" problem discussed in Fort and Gill (2000). For this reason, we compare our classifications to the *aggregated* racial demographics data provided by the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018) in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparing predicted & self-reported racial demographics

	Sample Year									
Race	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Panel A: Scorers in our sample (predicted race)										
Black	7.6%	7.6%	7.7%	8.4%	9.0%	9.8%	9.6%	9.4%	10.1%	10.6%
	(88)	(89)	(89)	(100)	(107)	(114)	(89)	(119)	(128)	(142)
Latina	4.4%	5.6%	6.2%	6.7%	7.1%	7.2%	8.2%	9.0%	9.6%	8.5%
	(51)	(65)	(72)	(80)	(84)	(84)	(76)	(114)	(122)	(114)
Other	11.21%	11.3%	11.3%	12.1%	12.9%	12.0%	12.0%	13.3%	12.8%	11.5%
	(130)	(132)	(131)	(144)	(153)	(140)	(112)	(169)	(163)	(154)
White	76.8%	75.5%	74.9%	72.8%	71.0%	71.0%	70.3%	68.4%	67.5%	69.4%
	(891)	(882)	(870)	(865)	(843)	(828)	(654)	(868)	(857)	(931)
Unique Gymnasts	1,160	1,168	1,162	1,189	1,187	1,166	931	1,270	1,270	1,341
Panel B: All enrolled gymnasts (self-reported race)										
Black	7.8%	7.9%	7.7%	8.0%	8.2%	8.5%	8.4%	7.7%	8.1%	7.7%
	(116)	(118)	(117)	(123)	(127)	(129)	(133)	(131)	(139)	(137)
Latina	3.9%	4.4%	4.3%	3.8%	3.2%	3.6%	4.0%	4.6%	5.3%	6.2%
	(58)	(66)	(66)	(59)	(50)	(55)	(64)	(78)	(91)	(111)
Other	15.7%	16.4%	17.9%	18.0%	20.4%	20.4%	19.9%	23.8%	22.9%	21.8%
	(234)	(246)	(273)	(279)	(315)	(309)	(316)	(407)	(392)	(390)
White	72.7%	71.4%	70.1%	70.2%	68.1%	67.5%	67.7%	63.9%	63.7%	64.3%
	(1,084)	(1,072)	(1,067)	(1,086)	(1,050)	(1,022)	(1,073)	(1,091)	(1,093)	(1,147)
Unique Gymnasts	1,492	1,502	1,523	1,547	1,542	1,515	1,586	1,707	1,715	1,785

Note: Percentages of the total count of unique gymnasts from a given year with a given predicted/self-reported race are reported, with actual counts in parentheses.

It should be noted that the NCAA database includes all registered student-athlete gymnasts, whereas our data only includes those who competed and received at least one score in a given year. Even with this caveat, FairFace predicts many more gymnasts in our sample as Latina than are reported in the NCAA database. This is likely because FairFace only identifies gymnasts as a single race when they may identify in the NCAA demographics as Two or More Races or Unknown; this is especially likely to complicate the counts for the Latina category due to the complex race vs. ethnicity issue common to these kinds of classification exercises. The comparisons in Table 1, especially our overprediction of the Latina category, motivate our decision to estimate our model in only two specifications: 1) comparing Black gymnasts to White gymnasts, looking for an environmental microaggression effect; and 2) comparing White gymnasts to all other (i.e. not White) gymnasts, looking for a sort of environmental micro-privilege effect.

Sample Construction

We begin by narrowing our sample to a subset of scores that meet four criteria: First, we drop scores from meets hosted at neutral sites (i.e. without a specific host university). Second, we drop meets with special titles like “SLC Regional”, “John Zuerlein Invite”, and “Big 12 Championships”. Third, we remove scores received by gymnasts who are not competing for Division I (DI) schools. Finally, in our Black-White comparisons, we drop scores from gymnasts that FairFace predicts are not Black or White (in our White-not White comparisons, we drop no scores for this step). But why narrow the sample in such a way?

First, we exclude any meet that is hosted at a neutral site in order to make the context surrounding the scores in our sample as similar as possible. Neutral site meets are hosted away from any university’s usual venue(s) by definition; therefore, they create a different type of environment than a typical regular season meet would have. This would confound the across-university comparison that is the focus of our research question, so we remove these meets.

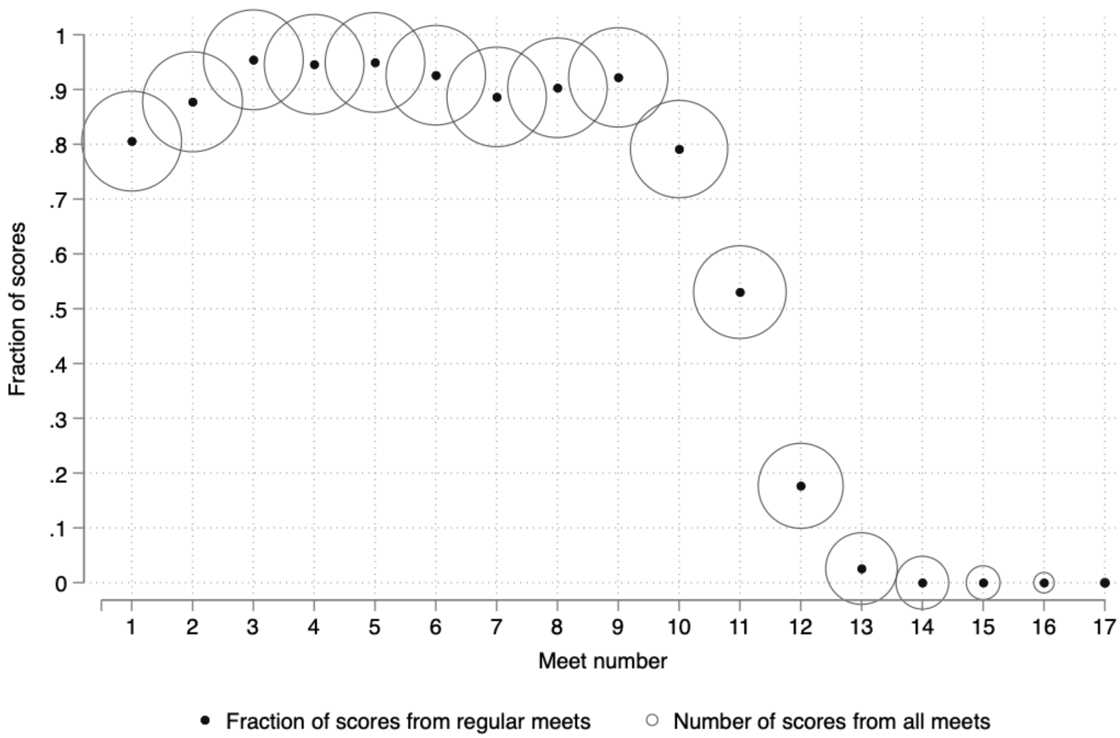
Second, we exclude titled meets in order to completely exclude playoff and invitational meets. Playoff meets can change incentives for gymnasts from the usual score maximization incentive[4] and present a higher pressure environment than regular meets,

[4] Early playoff meets advance the top teams from the meet to the next round, and final round playoff meets are won by both teams and gymnasts. A gymnast’s incentive to maximize her score may change if, for example, she is the sixth to compete on the uneven bars and she knows her team will qualify for the next round as long as her score is 9.75 or higher. In that case, she might adjust her planned routine to make it less likely she commits a major error instead of pushing for her highest possible score, which is the

representing another change that could muddy our key across-university comparisons. Invitational meets are also not conducive to our comparisons, as they are frequently hosted by organizations, not universities, which is a further change to the regular meet environment we wish to exclude.

Figure 1

Fraction of scores from "regular" meets by meet number.



Note: A "regular" meet is a meet hosted by a specific university that does not have a special title like "invitational" or "regionals".

Figure 1 shows the fraction of the total set of scores that are from meets that survive our first and second sample narrowing criteria, with outer rings showing the relative number of scores at that meet number. As seen in the figure, about 80% of teams' first meets (as in meet number one of the season) are ordinary meets whose scores remain in our sample, whereas no team has a single regular meet beyond their 13th meet. Under these criteria,

exact change in incentives we avoid by excluding playoff meets from our sample.

we drop mostly later meets with fewer scores under these criteria, and Figure 1 shows that we keep the vast majority of scores in our sample universe.

Table 2
Average score by event, NCAA division, and predicted race

	Vault	Bars	Beam	Floor	Overall
Panel 1: All gymnasts					
White	9.64	9.52	9.55	9.63	9.58
	(0.26)	(0.50)	(0.41)	(0.37)	(0.40)
Black	9.71	9.62	9.61	9.72	9.67
	(0.24)	(0.43)	(0.36)	(0.32)	(0.34)
All gymnasts	9.66	9.54	9.57	9.65	9.61
	(0.25)	(0.48)	(0.39)	(0.36)	(0.38)
Panel 2: Only D1 gymnasts					
White	9.72	9.66	9.66	9.72	9.69
	(0.18)	(0.36)	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.30)
Black	9.76	9.70	9.68	9.77	9.73
	(0.18)	(0.35)	(0.29)	(0.27)	(0.28)
All gymnasts	9.73	9.67	9.67	9.73	9.70
	(0.18)	(0.36)	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.29)
Panel 3: Only non-D1 gymnasts					
White	9.39	9.09	9.22	9.38	9.27
	(0.30)	(0.60)	(0.49)	(0.42)	(0.48)
Black	9.44	9.16	9.28	9.46	9.35
	(0.29)	(0.55)	(0.46)	(0.45)	(0.45)
All gymnasts	9.39	9.10	9.23	9.38	9.28
	(0.30)	(0.59)	(0.49)	(0.42)	(0.48)

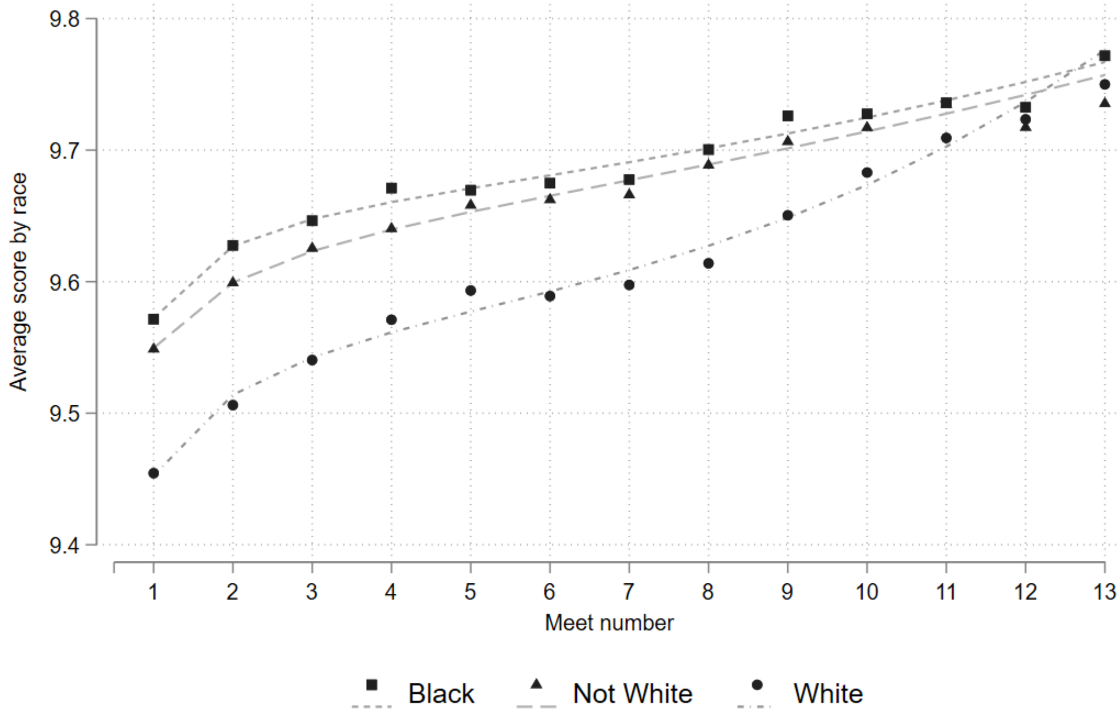
Note: Scores from titled or neutral meets are not included in calculations for this table.

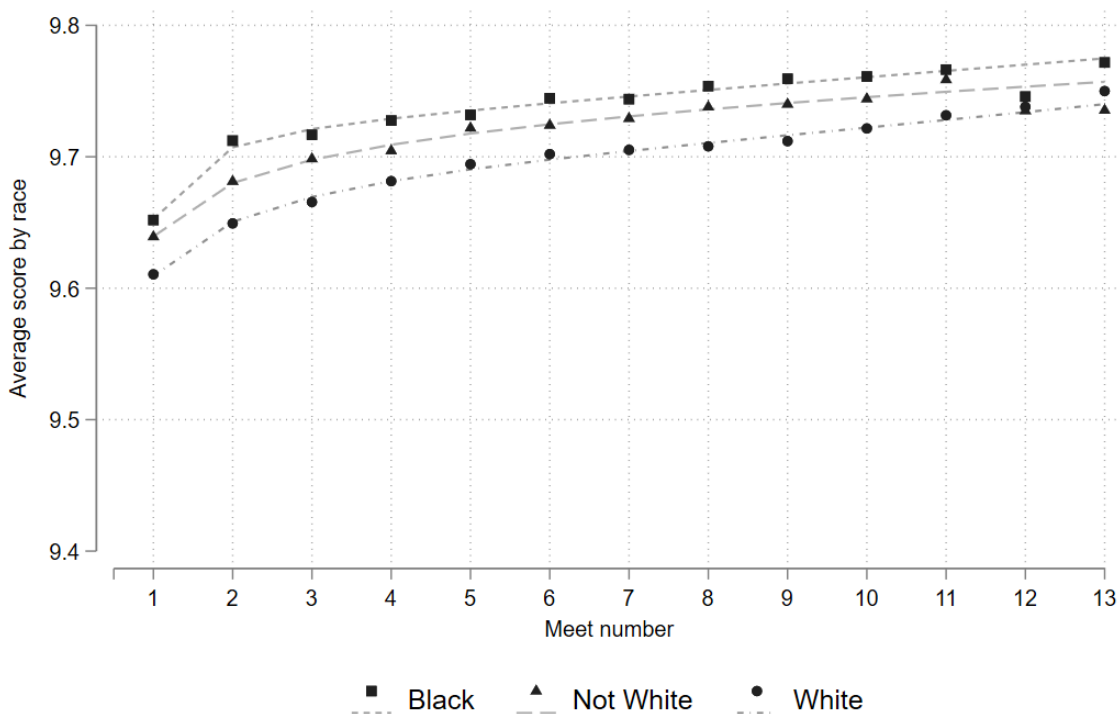
After applying the first two sample narrowing criteria, we further limit our sample to scores received by DI gymnasts. Table 2 illustrates average scoring by event, division, and predicted race, and it shows that DI gymnasts are much better and more consistent scorers both within and across events than their non-DI counterparts. We also motivate our decision to include only DI gymnasts' scores with Figure 2. The top panel of Figure 2 shows the trend in scoring when including all gymnasts in our sample across all three NCAA divisions (Divisions I, II, and III), and it clearly shows that White gymnasts catch up to their not-White and Black peers as the season progresses. However, when we limit the sample to only DI gymnasts as in the bottom panel of Figure 2, we see that gymnasts of all predicted races improve at nearly the same rate throughout the season. This same-rate improvement is consistent with the parallel trends assumption central to our differences-in-differences design, so keeping only the DI scores properly enables our identification strategy.

After applying all of the above criteria, we further narrow the sample each time we estimate our model for a given university. Explaining which meets we include in our sample for each university is easiest via an example, so suppose we take the University of Alabama as a host university. The University of Georgia women's gymnastics team performed at Alabama every other year beginning in 2016 through 2024, so we include in the University of Alabama sample every score from every Georgia gymnast at every one of their "regular" meets from those five years (2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024) in our sample. In contrast, the Alabama sample only includes University of Denver scores from 2019, as this is the only season in which Denver visited Alabama over our 2015-2024 time span. We repeat this process for every team that visited Alabama over that time period, collecting scores from meets in seasons in which they visited Alabama to eventually build the full Alabama sample as depicted in Table 3. We then estimate the models we describe below for Alabama and then repeat this sample building and estimation process until we have done so for each of the 64 DI universities to have hosted a meet in that time span.

Figure 2

Average Score by Race and Meet Week Number





Note: Not White also includes Black. Lines represent observation count-weighted fractional polynomials of best fit. Scores from titled or neutral meets are not included in this figure.

Table 3
Team-seasons included in the University of Alabama sample

Team	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Arizona	X									
Arkansas		X		X		X		X		X
Auburn	X		X		X		X		X	
Boise State	X		X						X	
Bowling Green					X					
Denver					X					
Florida	X		X		X		X		X	
Georgia		X		X		X		X		X
Illinois										X
Iowa State			X							
Kentucky		X		X		X	X	X		X
LSU	X		X		X		X		X	
Michigan					X					
Michigan State									X	
Minnesota										X
Missouri		X		X		X		X		X
North Carolina				X				X		
Northern Illinois					X					
Oklahoma	X			X		X				
S.E. Missouri					X					
Temple					X					
West Virginia		X								
Western Michigan								X		
Scores by Year	1,414	1,173	1,078	1,441	2,104	1,079	768	1,318	1,127	1,390
Total Sample Size	12,892									

Note: X denotes a year in which the scores from a team on a given row are included in the Alabama sample.

Model

We propose a simple model of a gymnast's score that breaks down influential factors into four principal categories:

$$\text{score} = f(\text{ability, preparation, event, environment})$$

In this model, ability-related factors could include, for example, the genetic makeup of a given gymnast, the age at which they began training, and the set of skills they have the physical capacity to perform. Preparation-related factors might include the quality of the team and coaches surrounding a gymnast, the number of years a gymnast has been competing, the types of skills a gymnast chooses to practice, and the number of meets that have already occurred in a season. Event-related factors account for the nuances of each event, which is necessary based on the large event differences in mean scores shown in Table 2. Finally, environment-related factors could include the relative competency or biases of judges at a given meet; the altitude, location, quality, and name of the venue; the time of the meet; and so on.

Having put forth this general framework, we further posit that gymnasts and their coaches behave as score maximizers when preparing their routines and setting event lineups. We assume that these agents aim to maximize the score a gymnast will receive in a given event by selecting routines of appropriate difficulty and practicing them adequately; this implies that a gymnast and her coach have perfect information about the ability-, preparation-, and event-related elements of our proposed scoring model, and can therefore select the optimal routine to perform and lineup to set. We also assume that they have no control over the environment-related factors of her scoring, so if there is an environmental effect on scoring unknown to these agents, they may not be able to respond optimally. Determining whether such an effect exists at this level is the focus of this paper.

Estimation Strategy

We have two across-race comparison specifications: first, we compare Black gymnasts to White gymnasts, and then we compare White gymnasts to all non-White gymnasts. We begin both specifications by estimating a baseline differences-in-differences model. For our Black gymnasts to White gymnasts model, it takes the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{score}_{imet} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Black}_i + \beta_2 \text{atHost}_m + \beta_3 (\text{Black*atHost})_{im} \\ + \gamma (\text{meet number})_{mt} + [\text{event}]_e + [\text{team}]_t + u_{iem} \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where subscripts i, m, e, and t refer to individual gymnasts, meets, events (vault, bars, beam, and floor), and teams, respectively. When we estimate our White-all others specification, we replace the Black indicator with an indicator for being White and adjust other variables accordingly. The dependent variable is the score earned by a gymnast in a given event, and the interaction term $(\text{Black*atHost})_{im}$ takes a value of 1 if the observation is a score received by a Black gymnast competing at a given host university and 0 otherwise. Black_i and atHost_m represent binary variables for a gymnast being Black and a meet being held at the focus university. We include a control for meet number $(\text{meet number}_{mt})$ to control for scoring trends observed in Figure 2. We also include fixed effects for the event in which a given score was received denoted as $[\text{event}]_e$ (motivated by the differences in event means recorded in Table 2) and for the team a given gymnast is on denoted as $[\text{team}]_t$. We cluster our standard error u_{iem} at the event level. In this model, β_0 is the regression constant term, and the coefficient of interest is β_3, which we interpret as the difference-in-differences estimate, or the differential impact of competing at the focus university on Black gymnasts relative to White gymnasts at that venue and those same Black gymnasts at other venues.

This baseline model certainly suffers from omitted variable bias. Chief among these omitted measures are 1) gymnast-specific characteristics such as build, talent, and training; and 2) meet-specific characteristics such as venue altitude, judge characteristics, and the year the meet takes place. To control for several of these factors, we introduce a set of gymnast fixed effects and forgo event fixed effects for event-by-meet fixed effects:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{score}_{imet} = \beta_0 + \beta_3(\text{Black*atHost})_{im} + \gamma(\text{meet number})_{mt} \\ + [\text{team}]_t + [\text{gymnast}]_i + [\text{event-by-meet}]_m + \epsilon_{iem}\end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where each of the new square bracketed terms denotes a relevant set of fixed effects and the error term is represented by ϵ_{iem}, which we cluster at the event-by-meet level as explained below.

The gymnast fixed effects control for every event-, meet-, and time-invariant characteristic unique to a given gymnast, including her physical characteristics such as strength and height, her training before university, and her innate talent for gymnastics. The event-by-meet fixed effects – four indicators for each unique meet, i.e. $\mathbb{1}$(Vault at Utah State, 9 January 2015), $\mathbb{1}$(Balance Beam at Utah State, 9 January 2015), etc. – control for unchanging venue characteristics like geography, climate, and altitude, but they also control for judging. Within a given meet, the judges giving scores in a single event are constant: all scores in the floor exercise from the meet hosted by Utah State on 9 January 2015 are assessed by the same pair of judges. As a result, not only do the event-by-meet fixed effects capture event- and meet-constant characteristics, such as the date of the meet or the particular nuances of the floor exercise compared to the vault; they also control for the biases with which that pair of judges issued scores at that meet, because the judges giving the scores are an event-by-meet-constant characteristic.

For a causal interpretation of β_3 to be possible, we assume that Black (White) gymnasts performing at a given host university would experience the same relative change in performance at that venue as their White (not White) counterparts would in the absence of any environmental effect of that venue on Black (White) gymnasts' scoring. Since different teams visit different hosts at different points in the season throughout our dataset, we scrutinize our assumption with the bottom panel of Figure 2, in which we plot average scores in our sample by race and meet number. The figure shows that both Black, White, and non-White gymnasts see their scores increase over the course of a season on average, and that this trend is parallel across race groups. This figure demonstrates the baseline viability of the assumption needed for our estimates to be interpreted as the causal effect of race-host factors on gymnasts' scores.

We interpret a given host university's β_3 estimate as a gymnast-at-host-level effect. If that effect is statistically significant at a given university, it could be due to an environmental microaggression factor like the name of a gymnasium or a predominantly non-Black student body, or it could be some other factor at a given university affecting Black gymnasts for some reason. If we were to see negative β_3 estimates in our Black-White comparison (or positive estimates in our White-not White comparison) within certain sets of universities – such as those included in a web article or Twitter thread compiling gymnasts speaking out against racism within their teams (e.g. Duffy (2020) or Boswell (2020)) – then we may reasonably conclude that an environmental microaggression effect is present for Black gymnasts at some subset of universities. However, if universities with statistically significant β_3 estimates do not follow a noticeable trend, we might instead attribute those results to statistical noise, especially if those estimates do not survive corrections for multiple hypothesis testing.

Results

Table 4 lists the universities in our sample for which estimating Equations 1 and 2 returned estimates of β_3 significant at the 95% confidence level. Of the 64 DI host universities in each specification, only four ever have a significant Black-White coefficient, while five have significant White-all others coefficients. There does not appear to be any pattern to which universities return these statistically significant estimates; they are not concentrated in any one geographic region, and most of them are not contained in Boswell's compilation Twitter thread or Duffy's article (Boswell, 2020; Duffy, 2020). In addition, only two estimates in the entire table (UC Davis and Towson) show an estimate with a sign opposite the direction of the gap that Table 2 shows already exists: White gymnasts are already the lowest average scorers, and Black gymnasts already the highest. Given these results, we find it unlikely that there is an environmental microaggression effect that affects Black gymnasts in the NCAA. But how should we interpret the results we do find?

By using 95% confidence intervals as our judge for the statistical difference of β_3 from zero, we necessarily subject ourselves a 5% Type I error rate, meaning we expect to estimate a truly zero effect as statistically different from zero once in twenty tries. Since our testing is

Table 4
Universities with significant interaction term estimates

Comparing Black gymnasts to White			Comparing White gymnasts to not White		
University Sample size	Estimate (St. Err)	p-value	University Sample size	Estimate (St. Err)	p-value
Equation 1: Baseline diff-in-diff					
Auburn N = 8,624	0.022 (0.005)	0.027	**Alaska** N = 2,822	-0.066 (0.017)	0.028
Oregon State N = 8,883	0.014 (0.004)	0.038	**Maryland** N = 16,741	-0.012 (0.003)	0.028
Equation 2: Full fixed effects model					
Pittsburgh N = 11,643	0.058 (0.024)	0.017	**Alabama** N = 12,892	-0.032 (0.014)	0.022
UC Davis N = 8,304	-0.073* (0.034)	0.031	**Towson** N = 15,089	0.042* (0.021)	0.043
			Washington N = 11,338	-0.037 (0.017)	0.028

Note: Teams with significant estimates for each specification are included in alphabetical order.
**Sign of estimate indicates potential environmental effect (opposite of expected gap).*

also two-sided, we would expect to estimate a truly zero effect as statistically greater than zero once in forty tries, and likewise in the opposite direction. If the null hypothesis of a true-zero effect held across all 64 universities in our sample, we would nonetheless expect to see one or two instances of statistically negative effects and one or two schools with statistically positive effects. In addition, because our sample already has an existing scoring gap, we would expect to see many more significant positive (negative) estimates in our Black-White (White-all others) specification, and fewer in the opposite direction; indeed, this is the case, with only two of the nine significant estimates being in a direction opposite of the existing gap. As such, we argue that the few statistically significant estimates we observe in Table 4 are little more than what we would expect from random chance.

Given that we think our significant estimates are the result of random chance, we might ask a natural follow-up question: would a conservative adjustment to our standard errors designed to account for the multiple hypothesis tests we perform leave any school with a statistically significant estimate for β_3? After all, if significant results are the result of our method of statistical inference allowing too high of a Type I error rate (false rejection of the no effect null hypothesis), then a correction or adjustment designed to prevent Type 1 errors may help clarify our results. Following this logic, we apply the Bonferroni correction as established in Dunn (1961) and discussed in Armstrong (2014) and VanderWeele and Mathur (2019), in which a p-value is seen as significant only if it remains below 0.05 after being multiplied by the number of tests performed. Each model is estimated for 64 schools, so any p-value that survives the correction would have to be smaller than $\frac{0.05}{64} = 0.00079$. Seeing that there are no p-values below 0.017 in Table 4 makes it clear that none of our estimates survive the correction, supporting our claim that the estimates are significant only by chance.

Discussion & Conclusion

We test whether Black gymnasts experience a change in performance that their White competitors do not experience when competing at 64 Division I NCAA universities. Our comprehensive dataset of women's gymnastics scores allows us to isolate racial scoring gaps at a given host university by controlling for the influences of individual events, gymnasts, meets, and judges through a series of fixed effects. While we do initially find a few significant differences in score distributions using our model that could be attributed to environmental interaction effects, they do not follow any predictable pattern, and none of them remain significant after adjusting for multiple hypothesis testing. This leads us to conclude that the evidence is inconsistent with the idea that any specific host university negatively affects Black or positively affects White gymnasts' performance to a notable degree.

Our findings challenge expectations that systemic or environmental factors associated with universities with complicated racial histories might lead to measurable disparities in agents' performance at those universities. Instead, it may indicate that NCAA gymnastics environments, characterized by standardized scoring practices and strict competition protocols, limit the avenues through which such effects could manifest.

We acknowledge that measuring the possible impact of environmental microaggressions only by examining performance scores is incomplete and overlooks the lived experiences the athletes might face by visiting these universities. We stress that the absence of measurable performance effects does not eliminate the possibility that experiencing environmental microaggressions influences gymnasts in other ways. They may affect other dimensions of gymnasts' experiences, such as mental well-being or feelings of inclusion, which are beyond the scope of this study. Continuing to explore these aspects through qualitative methods could provide valuable context to complement our quantitative analysis.

Within this analysis, we also rely heavily on the FairFace computer vision model for race predictions, which imposes additional limitations. Though FairFace is known for its strong out-of-sample performance, it still relies on visual cues to assign race, which may not align with how individuals self-identify. With access to that self-reported data, future research could examine this question using self-identified race variables to better isolate differential environmental effects on athletes of many different races.

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