

**EFFECTS OF PUBLIC REJECTION OF ATHLETES AND IDENTITY**

by

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### **Abstract**

Previous research suggests that perceptions of rejection from the dominant racial group are associated with increased minority identification (Branscombe, et. al., Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). This is known as the rejection identification model. These studies have found a positive association between perceptions of rejection and minority identification. Research has also found support for the rejection identification model across other contexts and among different groups (Giamo, et. al., 2012). With the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement, many Black athletes have utilized their platform and spoken up politically to support the movement. This has led to a significant amount of backlash and criticism, especially the assessment that athletes should just “shut up and dribble”. To this end, the purpose of the current study is twofold. First, the current study will explore Black athletes’ general views about athletes speaking up politically and doing activist work. Second, the current study will evaluate the rejection identification model among Black athletes by experimentally manipulating public rejection of athletes. Former and current Black athletes were randomly assigned (through Qualtrics) to either the control group or the rejection group. Participants in the rejection group watched a video of a political pundit news anchor suggesting that athletes should stay out of politics. Participants in the control group were not exposed to the rejection manipulation but watched a video of a cooking demonstration. Both the control and rejection group then answered questions regarding their Black, athletic, and Black athlete identification questions. It was hypothesized that participants who are exposed to rejection will report higher levels of Black and Black athletic identity in comparison to those who aren’t exposed to rejection. The athletic measure was explored more exploratively. No statistically significant differences were found between the control and rejection groups. Implications for the rejection identification model are discussed.

### The Effects of Public Rejection of Athletes and Identity

In response to several Black athletes taking a knee during the National Anthem, former president Donald Trump stated: “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect our great American flag (or country) and should stand for the national anthem. If not, you’re fired. Find something else to do!” (September 25th, 2017). According to Trump and many others, athletes should only focus on their sports. Prior research in social psychology suggests that negative sentiments like these have distinct effects on psychological life. The rejection identification model, for example, states that when individuals in lower status groups are rejected by those in the majority group then the identification with the lower status group increases. (Branscombe, et al., 1999). An example of this is if an African American person is rejected by a Caucasian person, then the identification with the African American group would increase because of that rejection. One of the first empirical studies to examine the rejection identification model was conducted by Branscombe, et al., (1999). They theorized that among racial minority groups, attributions of prejudice from the dominant majority group are associated with increased minority group identification. Branscombe et al. (1999) define attributions to prejudice as the extent to which an individual assumes an experience is caused by racial prejudice. In an analysis of these ideas, African American participants were presented with 10 theoretical scenarios like, “*Suppose you go into a "fancy" restaurant. Your server seems to be taking care of all the other customers except you. You are the last person whose order is taken.*” Participants were asked to rate how much they attributed each scenario to prejudice. Participants also reported their level of identification with their minority group. The results supported by the model; higher attributions to prejudice were positively correlated with minority group identification. This finding suggests that attributions of

prejudice from a dominant racial group may influence minority individual's identification with their ingroup.

Other more recent research has examined the rejection identification model longitudinally. Specifically, (Ramos, et al., 2012) explored how perceived discrimination overtime could affect an individual's identification with the minority group. International students from 32 different countries in their first year of university in Scotland took part in a longitudinal study. In the first part of the study, participants completed a series of measures including experiences of discrimination, day to day discrimination, outgroup privilege, attributions to prejudice, and minority group identification. A year later, participants were asked to complete those same measures. In line with the rejection identification model, there were significant correlations between day-to-day discrimination, experiences of discrimination and minority group identification in the second part of the study.

Other work has examined the relationship between rejection and multiple types of identification (Wiley, et al., 2013). Specifically, researchers investigated the relationship between rejection from Americans on their American and ethnic identification. Eighty-four self-identified first generation Latin immigrants were recruited from citizenship, computer, English-as-a- second language classes, and a women's discussion group. Participants completed measures of ethnic based rejection, ethnic political engagement, American and ethnic identification. Somewhat in line with the rejection identification model, there was a significant negative correlation between perceived ethnic based rejection and identification as American.

A second study by Wiley (2013) also considered the possibility that socially stigmatized groups also faced the possibility of experiencing rejection from members of their own group. Considering these ideas, Wiley (2013) explored the relationship between identity and group-

based rejection from Americans and group- based rejection from members of one's own heritage culture. Latino immigrants completed questions that measured their American, Latino, and bicultural identification, rejection from Americans (outgroup), and perception of rejection from Latinos/a (in-group). Wiley found some support for the rejection identification model. In particular, perceptions of rejection from other Latinos were positively associated with American and bicultural identification, and negatively associated with Latino identification. Moreover, perceptions of rejection from Americans were positively associated with disidentifying with the United States as measured in the American identification measure.

Research has also examined rejection identification in multicultural groups. In one specific study researchers examined the influence of perceived discrimination on psychological well-being and the willingness to engage in activism on behalf of one's ethnic group in a longitudinal study with Latin students (Cronin., et al., (2011). First-year university students completed a pre-college survey and were interviewed over the phone at the end of their first and fourth years of school. During the interview, participants completed measures of perceived discrimination, ethnic identification, activism, and well-being. It was found that in year one and in year four, there was a significant correlation between participants' perceived discrimination and identification with their ethnic group. There was also a significant correlation between ethnic identification, activism and well-being, such that those who identified more with their ethnic group engaged in more activism and reported higher levels of well-being.

Studies have used the rejection identification model to discuss a protective manner of minority group identification (Giamo, et al., 2012). Researchers examined how perceived discrimination affected multicultural identification and well-being. Two hundred fifty-two self-identified multiracial participants completed a questionnaire on measures of perceived discrimination, multiracial group identification, and life satisfaction. Participants were recruited

through a Facebook group for multiracial individuals. It was found that self-stereotyping, which is the extent that individuals perceive themselves as similar to the average ingroup member, mediated the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction. That is, the more discrimination multiracial participants perceived, the lower their life satisfaction.

Other research has examined the effects of rejection, identification, and self-esteem (Armenta, et al., 2009). Eighty Hispanic adolescents with ages ranging from ages 14-18 years old who were a part of a summer educational program at a Southern California university completed measures of personal discrimination, group discrimination, personal self-esteem, and ethnic group identification. It was found that personal discrimination was negatively correlated to personal self-esteem. Likewise, perceived group discrimination was positively related to ethnic group identification.

Other work has explored the psychological experiences of rejection more broadly. Mendoza Denton, et al., (2002) explored how expectations of rejection based on race (RS-sensitivity) would affect interpersonal relations and well-being over time among African Americans attending a majority White university. Participants were given a diary and asked to report their feelings of belonging and well-being at the university, feelings of well-being, and daily positive and negative experiences for three weeks. The researchers found that those high in RS-sensitivity had a lower sense of well-being across the three weeks, in comparison to those who scored low on RS-sensitivity.

In summary, previous research suggests that perceptions of rejection from the dominant racial group is associated with increased minority identification (Branscombe, et. al., Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). This is known as the rejection identification model. Some research has examined the rejection identification model among African American students (Branscombe et. al., 1999). These studies have found a positive association between perceptions of rejection and minority

identification. Research has also found support for the rejection identification model across other contexts such as life satisfaction and among different groups such as multiracial individuals (Giamo, et. al., 2012). However, few studies have evaluated the causal relationship between rejection from the majority group and minority identification. Since previous studies have mostly been correlational, there is no way to know whether rejection causes an increase in minority identification. This study attempts to address this gap in the research. Furthermore, with the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement, many Black athletes have decided to utilize their platform and speak up against social injustice to support the movement. This has led to a significant amount of criticism and resentment, especially the assessment that athletes should just focus on their sport and stay out activism. Athletes are the trying to be on the front lines of the fight against social injustice and this study provides insight to the way in which rejection could affect the Black athlete's identification with being Black, a Black athlete, and an athlete more generally. To this end, the purpose of the current study was twofold. First, the current study explored Black athletes' general views about athletes speaking up politically and doing activist work. Second, the current study evaluated the rejection identification model among Black athletes by experimentally manipulating public rejection of athletes using a manipulation. In line with the rejection identification model, it was hypothesized that participants who are exposed to rejection will report higher levels of Black and Black athletic identity in comparison to those who aren't exposed to rejection. It is not clear what effect rejection (or no rejection) will have on athletic identification, so the relationship was explored more exploratively.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Twenty -five African American former and current college athletes were recruited through the Introduction to Psychology Participant Pool, through announcements made in psychology classes, and through word of mouth via snowball sampling methods. Participants were 18 years old or older. All participants underwent an informed consent process before beginning the study. Eligible participants (i.e., Introduction to Psychology Participant Pool students and students in courses offering extra credit for research participation) were compensated with one research credit per every half hour of participation. This study took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

### **Measures**

**Athletes and Activism Scale.** The Athletes and Activism Scale is a four-item questionnaire that gauges participants' beliefs and attitudes about athletes speaking up politically. For example, participants read a statement, "Sports and politics should be separate" and responded to statements such as these using the numbers ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Negative items were reverse scored. Next, each item was summed together, and a higher score indicates that participants believe that athletes should speak out politically. This scale was created for this specific study. See Appendix A

**Distractor Tasks.** A distractor task was given to decrease the chance of the Athletes and Activism scale influencing later tasks (e.g., manipulation). The distractor task was a short set of easy math problems (e.g.,  $2+4$ ) and item searches (e.g., find the circle in the group of hexagons) which took about five minutes.

**Rejection or Control Manipulation.** Participants in the rejection and control groups were directed to view a video. The rejection video was of a news anchor responding to LeBron James' comments on politics and race. In that video, the news anchor is stating that LeBron should just



dribble the basketball and stay out of politics. She states that he is just “a dumb jock” and no one asked for his opinion on the matter. This video was used to make Black athletes temporarily feel rejected. Participants in the control group were not exposed to the rejection manipulation, but instead viewed a neutral video of a similar length. Specifically, participants watched a video of a woman making chocolate covered strawberries with different sport balls on them. After viewing the video, the experimental and control manipulation participants were asked the comprehension question: “What was the video about?”

**Identification Scale.** The Identification Scale is a 9-item scale consisting of three subscales measuring Black, Black athlete, and athlete identification. These questions were adapted from Wiley (2012). An example statement is “Being Black is an important reflection of who I am.” Participants will rate their agreement on a 7-point scale (1-strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree). Negative items were reverse scored. Next, each item was summed together, and a higher score indicates higher identification. See Appendix B

## **Procedures**

All participants received a link directing them to the webpage for the study. Participants first completed the informed consent form. Participants then completed the Athletes and Activism Scale, a Demographics Questionnaire, and then a Distractor Task. Once participants finished the distractor task, they were randomly assigned (through Qualtrics) to either the control group or the rejection group. Before viewing the video, participants in both conditions were told that they were going to watch a short video about something that occurred in 2020 and that they will be asked about the video they viewed afterward. Participants in the rejection group were redirected to watch a video of a political pundit news anchor suggesting that athletes should stay out of politics. Directly after, participants were given a comprehension question to ensure that they watched and understood the video. Participants in the control group were not exposed to the rejection

manipulation but watched a video of a cooking demonstration. Just like participants in the rejection group, they received the same comprehension question. Both the control and rejection group then answered questions regarding their Black, athletic, and Black athlete identification questions. The order of the identity measures was counterbalanced. Lastly, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

## Results

The research question pertained to how the exposure to public rejection of Black athletes affects the identity of being an athlete, being black, and being a black athlete. Participants answered the athletes on activism scale, so researchers could get an idea of how Black athletes felt on athletes in activism. It was hypothesized that participants who were exposed to the rejection manipulation will report higher levels of Black identity in comparison to those in the control group. To test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted comparing the control and the rejection participants on the Black identity measures. In contrast to what was hypothesized, there were no significant differences between the control and rejection groups in regard to the Black identity  $t(15) = .56, p = .58$ . The mean estimates for the rejection group ( $M=15.75, SD= 5.39$ ) were not significantly different from the mean estimates for the control group ( $M= 17.14, SD= 3.98$ ).

It was hypothesized that those exposed to the rejection manipulation will also report higher levels of Black athlete identity than those who weren't exposed. In contrast to what was hypothesized, there were no significant differences between the control and rejection in regard to the Black athletic identity  $t(15) = 1.57, p = .14$ . The mean estimates for the rejection condition ( $M= 11.5, SD= 3.42$ ) was not significantly different from the control condition ( $M= 14.14, SD= 3.02$ ).

When it came to the athletic identity there was no specific hypothesis, it was examined in an exploratory manner. Even though there was no hypothesis the findings for athletic identity  $t(15) = -.49, p = .63$  it was more in line with what was expected of the other measures. Although the results weren't significant and there was no significant difference in mean estimates for rejection condition ( $M = 17.25, SD = 3.33$ ) and the control condition ( $M = 16.43, SD = 3.10$ ) the rejection group showed a higher level of athletic identity.

In the athletes on activism measure it was something to look at, so there wasn't a hypothesis for it. The athletes on activism measure  $t(15) = .52, p = .61$  had surprising results. The results were not significant, but the control group ( $M = 21.86, SD = 3.58$ ) had a higher support than the rejection group ( $M = 21, SD = 2.78$ ) on athletes in activism.

### **Discussion**

The current study explored Black athletes' general views about athletes speaking up politically and doing activist work. Second, the current study also evaluated the rejection identification model among Black athletes by experimentally manipulating public rejection of athletes using a rejection manipulation. Participants answered the athletes on activism scale, so researchers could get an idea of how Black athletes felt on athletes in activism. Participants watched a video, but the video was different for those in the control group and in the rejection group. It was hypothesized that participants who had experienced rejection would have higher levels of black and black athletic identity. This means that when faced with rejection participants were expected to identify more with their black identities. This was not supported. It was actually found that there was no difference between athletic identity, Black, and Black athletic identity. There were no significant findings in this research. The closest to come to it was the

measure in which there was no hypothesis for which was the athletic measure. There was no difference in the three measures.

The makeup of this study had some similarities to the way in which the rejection identification had been examined, but the differences may have played a part in the discrepancy in results. The results of this study were not as expected based on previous research. In previous research when participants were faced with rejection, they were more likely to identify higher with the minority group. Some important reasons in which the identification was higher could be is because in most of the previous studies, the study has been correlational, and this study actually manipulated the rejection measure. In this study there was more of a focus on the casual aspect of the rejection identification model.

This study is important because it gives some insight into how Black athletes are actually feeling and the way in which rejection affects their identity. This study is important because rejection is happening more often now. With the Black Lives Matter movement becoming more visible and professional athletes getting involved with social justice, this study is important to understand. Everyone has their opinions on what athletes should be focusing on and many athletes have decided to try and be the voice of change; this idea is important to know to understand what goes into the decision for high profile athletes to speak up about social justice and the internal struggle that many of them may be dealing with. This study's use of Black athletes made the focus very specific and is not a very common practice when forming a sample size.

The strengths of this study were that this was a creative and new way to test the rejection identification model. This is the first study that manipulated the rejection aspect in all of the research that has been examined to my knowledge. The videos used in this study were used to

spark emotion, especially the rejection measure. The volatility of the rejection video gave everyone the opportunity to feel something even if the views are different than what is being spoken about. Some of the limitations of the study was that it couldn't be done in a controlled setting, so there is no way of knowing if participants actually watched the videos to actually get a real reaction to the rejection measure. COVID-19 caused this study to have to be done completely virtually. With COVID-19 still prominent the in-person recruitment and connections would've been useful in getting the sample size to be bigger. The participant numbers are not where one would have hoped, but considering remote learning and COVID-19, the given time and how specific the type of people to take part in the study are, they are the numbers that were given. Rejection of Black people as a whole has been very visible in society recently, so the frequency of the exposure to rejection could have played a factor into the results being what they were. Participants could be numb to it or the rejection that was shown in the study is not one that has the same effect as previous research because of all that is being shown in the media.

Future research could replicate this by study by having the participants be people of all different races and ethnicities. This could be important to examine whether other race and ethnicities have similar views and thoughts about what was discussed in the study. It would be good to understand if there is a racial divide in the opinions of Black athletes and their identities. Likewise, something that could be looked at is if participants had previously experienced prejudice or rejection in an athletic event, would the change the results. Previous experience of rejection at an athletic event could be an important factor on how rejection is perceived and it would add an interesting dynamic to the study about if previous rejection in athletics has an effect on identity when faced with rejection again.

**Appendix: Measures**  
**Athletes and Activism Scale**

To what extent do you believe in these statements? Please rate each on a scale from 1-7 (1=strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree).

- (1) Athletes should only focus on sports.
- (2) Black athletes are held to a different standard.
- (3) Sports and politics should be separate.
- (4) Athletes should use their platforms to make change.

Identification Questions

To what extent do you believe the following statements? Please rate each on a scale from 1-7 (1=strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree).

1. I consider myself African American/Black.
2. Being an athlete is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.
3. In general, being an athlete is an important part of my self-image.
4. My identity includes being Black and being an athlete.
5. Overall, being Black has little to do with how I feel about myself.
6. Being Black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.
7. Being an athlete is an important reflection of who I am.
8. In general, belonging to the African American/Black group is an important part of my self-image.
9. I feel that I am both Black and an athlete.

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