

Can I Belong in School and Sports?: The Intersectional Value of Athletic Identity in High School and Across the College Transition

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Objective: This study investigates whether being identified with both school and sports affords benefits for Black male and female students in high school and across the transition to college. Given gendered concerns about being academically identified and cultural associations of athletics with Black masculinity, being both academically and athletically identified is expected to play a larger role in the sociocultural and academic experiences of Black male students. **Method:** Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF), Study 1 ($N = 1,011$) employs a cross-sectional analysis of Wave 1 and Study 2 ($N = 822$) employs a longitudinal analysis of Waves 1–3 to test these hypotheses. **Results:** Identifying with athletics in high school is found to afford sociocultural benefits for academically identified Black male, but not Black female, students in the short-term and longitudinally across the college transition. In high school, Black male students identified with both academics and athletics reported greater identification with other young Black men compared to those identified with academics only (Study 1). Longitudinally, identification with athletics in high school was positively associated with sociocultural adjustment in the first year of college (e.g., interdependent studying behaviors), explained through this increased identification with young Black men (Study 2). **Conclusions:** Athletics is found to serve as a culturally valued identity with important benefits for Black male students' experiences in secondary and postsecondary contexts. Although centered on athletics, these findings more broadly point to the importance of academically engaged Black students, across gender identities, being able to feel secure in their intersectional identities.

Public Significance Statement

Black boys often contend with the idea that liking or identifying with sports is important to being a Black man, and that liking or identifying with school can threaten a sense of connection to other Black men. Among Black male high school students who identified strongly with school, those who also identified with sports reported feeling more similar to other young Black men at the start of college, which led to greater frequency of studying with others and having more close Black friends at the end of their first year of college. Although this same effect of identifying with sports was not observed for Black female students, this study highlights the need to create environments that permit all Black students, across gender identities, to have the ability to both be academically engaged and feel secure in their intersectional identities.

Keywords: intersectionality, race, athletics, belongingness, school transition

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"[Our style of play] was faster, louder, more stop-and-go, more improvised—a style that, like jazz, allowed for individual excellence within a team context . . . We kids being black, poor, and unwelcome outside our own neighborhood, our activities were pretty much limited to school, church, and sports. And basketball was the king of all sports. Guys played from sunrise to sundown."

—Oscar Robertson, 2017

Reflecting on his youth in 1950s Indiana, National Basketball Association Hall of Famer Oscar Robertson draws attention to how athletics served as a space where he, a Black male adolescent, felt a sense of belongingness even in the hostile racial environment of the time. For Robertson, sports was a source of connection to other Black youth and, in particular, other Black boys. Due to the systemic oppression and discrimination that restricted access to education and nonmenial occupations for Black men in the U.S. (Hooks, 2004), athletics has served as a historical pathway for Black men to achieve status broadly (Edwards, 1971; Messner, 1989), but also to achieve a

sense of connection with and pride among racial in-group members (Ashe, 1988; Edwards, 1971). Although Robertson describes a time over half a century ago, this cultural and identity-relevant experience of athletics for Black male adolescents persists today with implications for school contexts.

As social identities, being *Black* and *male* can be linked to pervasive stereotypes, but it also can be valued as a source of pride and self, or one's sense of "who I am" (Rogers et al., 2015). In school settings, what it means to be Black and male can ironically foster a sense of belonging in some domains (e.g., athletics) and exclusion in others (e.g., academics). Intersectionality as a theoretical framework invokes considering how multiple identities—and the privileges and inequalities that they implicate—interact and complicate questions of identity (Crenshaw, 1991). For both Black female and male students, shared racial experiences can contribute to a need to feel identified with one's racial group (Nasir et al., 2009). However, in addition, unique experiences at the intersections of one's race and gender can contribute to a need to also feel identified with one's race and gender group.

Consistent with scholarship that critically applies intersectionality within psychology (e.g., Cole, 2009; Rogers et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2011), I posit that identifying with one's race and gender in-group is important for both Black female and male youth. Yet, I further posit that Black males' intersectional experiences contribute to athletics serving as an especially valued source of self and identity with implications in academic contexts. Along with research highlighting how athletics and academics are often viewed as incompatible (e.g., Settles et al., 2002), identifying with both school and sports is often perceived as highly unlikely for Black boys and men (Czopp, 2010; Walzer & Czopp, 2011). However, I propose that identification with both domains is not only possible but can provide sociocultural benefits in high school. In particular, for college-going Black male students, these benefits of athletic identity in high school may have implications for adjustment across the college transition.

Beyond Sports Participation: Considering Athletics as a Sociocultural Identity

Whereas past research on the effect of athletics in education often focuses on whether a student participates on a sports team or not, capturing the qualitatively distinct meaning of athletics in school contexts requires looking beyond this dualistic distinction. Although participation on school sports teams is strongly related to a sense of school belonging across various racial/ethnic groups (Brown & Evans, 2002), findings on the specific academic benefits of athletic participation are mixed. Participation in sports is consistently found to be academically beneficial for White middle-class youth (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999). However, among Black female and male students, sports participation is associated with null and, sometimes, even negative effects on standardized test performance (Eitle, 2005; Eitle & Eitle, 2002) and high school grade point average (Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Montgomery, 2010; Rusin, 2015).

In contrast, understanding the nature of athletics as an identity may (a) help explain disparate sports participation findings among Black students and (b) provide a more holistic understanding of how athletic identity operates in schools. Research on *jock identity* provides initial evidence. Compared to participation in sports, identification as a "jock" is less associated with educational

outcomes, but more strongly related to self- and social-perception outcomes, such as greater self-esteem and perceived social inclusion (Barber et al., 2001). For Black female and male youth, identification as a jock is relevant to how they see themselves inside and outside of sports contexts (Miller et al., 2005). Thus, regardless of participation, identifying with athletics may influence the self-perceptions of Black youth in school contexts.

Divergent Intersectional Experiences in Academic and Athletic Contexts in High School

While the experiences of Black adolescents in academics and athletics share similarities across gender, the consequences of identifying with each domain for Black male and female students likely diverge in particular ways due to gender.

For Black male youth, both identity as a student and as an athlete are highly salient in school contexts, yet are often related to divergent experiences (Noguera, 2008). For instance, Black male students are stereotyped by their peers as less academically motivated than their Black female and White peers (Hudley & Graham, 2001). Teachers report lower expectations of Black male than Black female students to attend college (Wood et al., 2007). And, Black parents perceive their Black sons to be less academically competent than their Black daughters and expect less academic achievement (Wood et al., 2007, 2010). These academic stereotypes mirror persistent disparities, as Black male students graduate high school at significantly lower rates than their Black female and White peers (Jones-DeWeever, 2014; The Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

In contrast to negative academic expectations, athletics can serve as a domain where Black male adolescents feel supported and experience positive expectations due to their race and gender. For example, a young Black boy watching television is likely to see positive representations of Black men in the role of a football or basketball player (May, 2009; Messineo, 2008; The Opportunity Agenda, 2011; Tucker, 2003). While interacting with family and non-kin others, he is also likely to perceive greater support to play sports than other male youth (Shakib & Velez, 2012). This availability of positive role models, social support, and fewer structural barriers to developing proficiency in sports that more visibly lead to collegiate and professional opportunities (e.g., basketball, football; Edwards, 1971) can contribute to the relative ease of athletic identification for Black male youth. Further, the association of sports with Black masculinity affords Black male students social capital and acceptance among peers, regardless of actual sports participation (Holland, 2012; Ispa-Landa, 2013; Wilkins, 2014). Thus, salient positive representations, expectations, and ideas about Black men in sports may contribute to a sense of belonging and identification with athletics for Black male adolescents. Consequently, while academic identification can serve as a threat to perceived identification with other young Black men and broader social acceptance, athletic identification can instead facilitate greater identification with other young Black men and greater social acceptance.

For Black female adolescents, the intersections of race and gender can instead lead academic identification to be less threatening and athletic identification to be less socioculturally beneficial. Black female students show more engagement in classroom activities and are more likely to be perceived as good students by their teachers

than are Black males (Morris, 2007). This perception reflects broad gendered ideas about school and putting forth academic effort as more feminine (Heyder & Kessels, 2015, 2017; Howard, 2014; Jackson & Dempster, 2009) and reflect gendered expectations about Black girls' academic and behavioral conduct within Black families (Varner & Mandara, 2013). However, how Black female students express their academic interest is often policed in schools. Black female youth are more often punished for asking and answering questions than are other girls and White students (Morris, 2007), policed more often for their appearance and expressions (e.g., perceived as loud/ghetto; Ispa-Landa, 2013; Morris, 2007; Morris & Perry, 2017), and face disproportional school discipline compared to same-gender peers (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2015). Yet, despite facing unique forms of gendered racism in schools, Black women often still strongly identify with and pursue academics and, as a collective group, have one of the highest rates of college enrollment among Americans aged 18–24 (Hussar et al., 2020).

Black female students' two-sided experience in academic domains is mirrored in athletics. Although Black female youth perceive greater support to play sports than other female youth (Shakib & Velez, 2012), representations of Black female athletes and upward mobility through sports are systematically limited. For example, a young Black girl watching television is not likely to see women's sports covered at all (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Cooky et al., 2015). Further, her guaranteed access to high school and collegiate sports occurred relatively recently (i.e., 1972-Title IX;¹ U.S. Department of Education, 2018), and her professional sports opportunities offer less financially, even in sports where female athletes outperform their male counterparts (e.g., U.S. Women's National Soccer Team; Campbell, 2017; Kelly, 2019). In addition, socially in high school, female students who participate in sports report greater peer gender discrimination than those who do not participate (Knifsend & Graham, 2012). Thus, for Black female students, identifying with athletics is not likely to provide the same sociocultural benefits that are expected for Black male students.

Black Males' Intersectional Identity Needs and Academic and Athletic Identification

The navigation of social identities in high school is important as, particularly in adolescence, youth are focused on making sense of and trying to integrate information about the self (Quintana, 1998). This developmental period leads high school to serve as a critical period of identity formation and negotiation when questions of "Who am I?" and "Who can I be?" are salient. Along with the fundamental human need to feel a sense of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), feeling connected to and identifying with social groups can help adolescents provide answers to these important questions (Barber et al., 2001).

For Black male adolescents, socialization of gender and race promotes the importance of a sense of connection to status-conferring social groups generally and to Black Americans specifically. Gender socialization for boys in the U.S. places heavy emphasis on connections to social groups and affiliations (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Cross et al., 2011; Eagly, 2009; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999), reflected in boys having typically larger peer networks (Belle, 1989; Gest et al., 2007) and in the types of prosocial behaviors adolescent boys prefer to display (i.e., helping behaviors enacted in front of others; Xiao et al., 2019). Importantly, the status associated with a group may increase the

extent to which belonging and behaving interdependently with the group is valued. In schools, this focus on status and managing reputation (Carroll et al., 1999) strongly influences how boys prioritize social behaviors in adolescence (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), including reducing effort put into academics to preserve social acceptance among peers (Workman & Heyder, 2020).

For Black male youth, managing gendered reputation often centers on concerns about being *cool* (Harris et al., 2011; Majors & Billson, 1992); the risk of being perceived as a "brainiac" is a particular threat to one's reputation and status as *cool* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013). These gendered expectations and identity concerns should differentially influence the consequences of academic identification on Black students' sense of social fit in schools by gender. For example, while a sense of connectedness to one's racial in-group is important for Black students broadly in academic contexts (Brannon et al., 2015; Oyserman et al., 2003; Scottham et al., 2008), it is particularly important for Black male youth's academic engagement (Altschul et al., 2006; Chavous et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2018; Oyserman et al., 2003, 2006). In a study of Black high school students from low-income backgrounds, Oyserman et al. (2006, Study 1) found that signals of "fitting in" with one's racial in-group predicted greater social acceptance for both Black female and male students. However, these signals of inclusion were only found to be a protective factor for Black males' academic outcomes. It was argued that Black male students' sense of racial in-group identification buffered against concerns about fitting in (e.g., being cool, not a nerd) and allowed for greater focus on school (Oyserman et al., 2006).

For Black male adolescents, being associated with sports is also suggested to buffer against the threat of being perceived as a "brainiac" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). While sports, as a broad social identity in schools, has long provided a sense of peer status and popularity (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989), more mainstream and celebrated high school sports, such as basketball and football, are also associated with Blackness (Harrison et al., 1999) and heteronormative masculine norms of toughness and status (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Messner, 1989). Consequentially, identification with athletics for Black male high school students provides a sense of *Black* masculine status and identification (Wilkins, 2014). In particular among Black males who are highly academically identified, also identifying with athletics should elicit a greater sense of social fit (e.g., reduced concerns about coolness, greater perceived peer acceptance) and connection to one's race and gender in-group.

The Proximal and Distal Academic Outcomes of Valuing Both Academics and Athletics

While an academically identified Black male student may derive a sense of social and cultural inclusion in high school due to also identifying with athletics, it may come at a cost to one's academic performance (e.g., high school GPA). Given greater ascription to stereotypical masculine norms, more potential diversity in the academic achievement of close peers, as well as the entrenched negative association between athletic and academic ability

¹ Requirements Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/interath.html>.

(Stone et al., 1999, 2012), Black male students who identify strongly with athletics may exacerbate the already predominant negative expectations of their academic ability. Given this potential cost of athletic identification, it is important to understand the longitudinal implications of feeling a greater sense of sociocultural fit as a Black male student who also strongly identifies with academics. In particular, how might a greater perceived connection to in-group members benefit adjustment to new academic contexts such as college?

Although high school grades are important for college achievement, the content and centrality of one's racial identity can influence all Black students' sense of belonging on college campuses and academic success (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Sellers et al., 1998). Recent research suggests that a sense of identification with and belonging among one's specific race and gender (i.e., intersectional) in-group may be especially important for both Black women and men's college adjustment (Edwards et al., 2019; Harper, 2012). For example, among Black male undergraduates, a sense of unease around other Black men can undermine trust within Black male populations on campus and impact engagement with Black undergraduates as a whole (Harper & Nichols, 2008). As engagement with one's ethnic campus community is critical for Black students' belongingness and academic achievement (Brannon et al., 2015; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007), if identifying with school and sports uniquely promotes intersectional identification among Black male students upon entering college, this process should facilitate positive adjustment across the college transition.

The Present Research

In two studies, I investigate the role of being both academically and athletically identified among Black female and male students in high school and across the transition to college. Athletic identity is expected to play a larger role in the sociocultural experiences and academic outcomes of Black male students compared to Black female students. Specifically, I hypothesize that athletic identity will buffer against academically identified Black male high school students' social fit concerns and facilitate identification with other young Black men. Among academically identified Black female students, due to qualitatively different experiences with athletics and given that valuing academics is not expected to arouse social fit concerns, I do not expect athletic identity to buffer social fit concerns or facilitate identification with other young Black women. Longitudinally, however, I expect greater identification with one's race and gender in-group at college entry to benefit critical college sociocultural and academic adjustment outcomes for Black female and male students.

Thus, in Study 1, I examined the effect of identifying with both academics and athletics in high school on perceived social fit (peer acceptance, coolness concerns) and academic outcomes (GPA) in high school and racial/intersectional in-group identification at college entry; in Study 2, I examined the indirect effect of high school athletic identity on sociocultural fit (number of close Black friends, interdependent studying behaviors) and academic outcomes (GPA, number of classes dropped) outcomes at the end of the first year of college. In the research presented here, the role of being academically and athletically identified is examined among Black students who are attending highly selective colleges and universities. Given the highly academic nature of this college-going sample, gendered

concerns about being identified with academics in high school should be relevant for all Black males regardless of their self-reported academic identity. Thus, this sample feature provides a highly conservative test of the role of academic and athletic identification for Black males in high school, and its distal importance at selective institutions of higher education.

This research uses data drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF; National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, 2016). Respondents were assessed at baseline at college-entry (Wave 1, Fall 1999) and at five additional time-points, including a postgraduation follow-up. Respondents were either U.S. citizens or legal residents and were drawn from a total of 28 highly selective colleges and universities across the U.S., including one Historically Black College and University (HBCU). The original data set included Asian, Black, Latino, and White respondents; however, given the interest in intersectional identity processes within Black students, the set of analyses presented here focused on Black respondents only. This sample provides an optimal opportunity to test the proximal and distal benefits of athletic identity among students in various high school and college contexts.

Study 1

Study 1 examines the impact of high identification with both academic and athletic identity on perceived social fit, in-group identification, and academic achievement outcomes among Black female and male high school students. Gender is hypothesized to moderate the effect of identifying high in both academic and athletic identity on the sociocultural outcomes, as athletic identity is expected to operate as a sociocultural buffer for Black male students, but not Black female students. Finally, I examine whether Black students high in both academic and athletic identity report lower high school GPA than Black students high in academic identity only, and whether this effect, if any, is moderated by gender.

Method

Design and Participants

A sample of Black American male and female students was drawn from the NLSF Wave 1 baseline data set (NLSF, 2016). Respondents assessed at Wave 1 were entering first-year undergraduate students. Utilizing face-to-face interviews for baseline data collection, students were retroactively asked about their neighborhood, educational, and home experiences at age 6, age 13, and in their senior year of high school (the previous year). Respondents were also asked questions relevant to their current perceptions and attitudes. All respondents signed a written consent form, which had received Institutional Review Board approval. This data set provided a large sample ($N = 1,051$) of Black male ($n = 368$) and Black female ($n = 683$) respondents. Of these respondents, 55% reported that their maternal parent/guardian had graduated from college ($n = 582$). Regarding the type of high school respondents attended, 70% attended a public high school ($n = 739$), 15% attended a private religious school ($n = 154$), and 15% attended a private nonreligious school ($n = 157$). Of the colleges respondents entered after high school, 9% attended a liberal arts college ($n = 92$), 56% attended a private research university ($n = 586$), and 36% attended a public research university ($n = 373$).

Measure

Academic-Athletic Identity Group in High School

Two single items were used to capture the extent to which respondents identified with academics and athletics in their senior year of high school. Respondents separately rated how well being a “good student” and “good athlete” described themselves using 3-point scales (0 = *Not at all true* to 2 = *Very true*). To maintain statistical power given imbalanced cell sizes due to the college-going nature of this sample (i.e., 77% of respondents selected 2 = *Very true* for “good student”), respondent scores on these two variables were classified to create a 3-level categorical variable to examine the effect of highly identifying with academics and athletics in high school.² Respondents classified as high in both academic and athletic identity (i.e., HB: 32% of sample) reported the highest values (i.e., selected 2 = *Very true*) on both being a good student and good athlete. Respondents classified as high academic identity-only (i.e., HA: 49% of sample) reported the highest value on being a good student, but not on being a good athlete (i.e., did not select 2 = *Very true*). Respondents classified as low academic identity (i.e., LA: 19% of sample) reported less than the highest value on being a good student (i.e., did not select 2 = *Very true*), regardless of the value indicated for good athlete.³

Perceived Social Fit in High School

Perceived Peer Acceptance. Four items were used to measure respondents’ sense of general social acceptance by same-age peers in their senior year of high school (e.g., “To what extent do you agree that you felt comfortable around other people your age last year?” 0 = *Strongly disagree* to 4 = *Strongly agree*), $\alpha = .68$.

Coolness Concerns. Four items measured respondents’ concerns about being “uncool” in their senior year of high school (e.g., “How often did you find yourself worrying about being called a “nerd” or “brainiac” last year?”; 0 = *Never* to 4 = *Very Often*), $\alpha = .70$. Perceived peer acceptance and perceptions of coolness are distinct factors important for adolescents’ perceived social fit in educational contexts (Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Yun & Graham, 2019). For each measure, responses were summed, so possible responses on each measure ranged from 0 to 16.

In-Group Identification at College-Entry

Identification with one’s racial in-group and one’s intersectional (race and gender) in-group were measured with single items. Respondents rated their current “feelings of closeness to groups of people in terms of one’s ideas and feelings about things” for both their racial in-group (i.e., “African-American”) and their intersectional in-group (e.g., “young African-American men” for Black male respondents only) from 0 = *Very distant* to 10 = *Very close*. These two components provided a test of whether athletic identity served as a broad source of connection to other African-Americans generally and/or a specific connection to young African-American men/women in particular, and are operationalized consistent with prior research (Brookins et al., 1996; Tropp & Wright, 2001).

Self-Reported High School GPA

Respondents self-reported their high school grades. Respondents’ answers to, “Did you get mostly A’s, mostly B’s, mostly C’s, mostly

D’s, or mostly grades below D” for the following school subjects were analyzed: English, History, Maths, Natural Sciences, and Foreign Languages. Respondents’ answers were coded so that *Mostly A’s* = 4, *Mostly B’s* = 3, and so on. Scores on each subject were averaged to create a GPA composite.

Covariates

Sports Participation. Frequency of participation on sports teams during senior year of high school was measured using two items (“How often did you participate in organized sports at school last year?” and “How often did you participate in sports outside of school last year?”; 0 = *never* to 4 = *very often*). These two items ($r = .39$, $p < .001$) were summed, giving a possible participation range from 0 to 8.

Leadership Identity. Respondents rated how well being a “class leader” described themselves using 3-point scales (0 = *Not at all true* to 2 = *Very true*). Leadership identity was included as a covariate to examine the unique effect of athletic identity over and above any derived leadership benefits (e.g., Yeung, 2015).

Neighborhood and School Context Ethnic Composition. The average ethnic make-up of one’s neighborhood and school was included as a covariate to account for the potential effect of variability in high school ethnic context on Black students’ racial identification (Stevenson & Arrington, 2009). Respondents retroactively estimated both their neighborhood ethnic demographics (e.g., estimated percentage of African-Americans living in a three-block radius of where you lived; 0–100%) and school ethnic demographics (estimated percentage of African-Americans that make up your school population; 0–100%) at age 13 and during their senior year of high school, which provided four separate estimates, $\alpha = .89$. These four items were averaged.

Results

Analysis Overview

Cases with missing data were excluded list-wise, which resulted in a final sample of $N = 1,011$. The proportion of Black male (3%, $n = 11$) and female (4% or $n = 29$) students excluded was comparable. Tables 1 and 2 display descriptives and zero-order correlations between outcomes and covariates, respectively. Of note, actual participation on a sports team was positively correlated with peer acceptance for both Black female and male students ($ps < .05$). However, while sports participation was positively correlated with intersectional in-group identification for Black male students, a negative correlation was found for Black female students ($ps < .001$). Also, high school GPA was associated with multiple variables for Black male students only: Higher level of coolness concerns, lower frequency of sports participation, and less

² Supplementary analyses were conducted treating academic and athletic identity as continuous predictors and similar effects of athletic identity were found. These analyses can be found in the [Supplemental Materials](#).

³ Due to the small proportion of the sample that reported being relatively low on academic identity, we did not distinguish between high and low athletic identity within the low academic identity group. Supplementary analyses examining the effect of athletic identity among respondents low on academic identity overwhelmingly support the collapsing of this group across athletic identity. These analyses can be found in the [Supplemental Materials](#).

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics for Black Male (n = 357) and Black Female (n = 654) Students in Study 1*

Variables	Black male		Black female		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Coolness concerns (0–16)	3.58	2.82	2.95	2.40	3.57***
Peer acceptance (0–16)	9.30	3.72	9.16	3.81	.57
Race IG identification (0–10)	7.19	1.98	7.34	2.02	-1.11
Intersectional IG identification (0–10)	7.17	2.03	7.70	1.96	-4.07***
Self-reported high school GPA (4.0)	3.49	0.42	3.59	0.34	-4.05***
Leader identity (0–2)	1.35	0.70	1.36	0.67	-.24
Sports participation (0–8)	3.70	2.61	2.73	2.59	5.69***
Context ethnic composition (0–100%)	38.2	28.9	40.2	29.0	-1.08

Note. IG = in-group; GPA = grade point average. Independent samples *t* tests were used to determine the statistical significance of the observed gender differences. *** $p < .001$.

identification with one's racial and intersectional in-group were all associated with greater GPA (all $ps < .05$).

Given the categorical nature of the predictors, I first tested whether a significant association existed between respondent gender and academic-athletic identity group to explore whether more Black male respondents than should be expected identified as high in both academic and athletic identity. A chi-square test of independence was used to investigate whether the observed proportion of Black male and female respondents in the three athletic-academic identity groups significantly differed from expected proportions given the actual proportions (35% and 65%, respectively) in the sample. Next, multiple regression analyses were employed to test the key effect of being high in both academic and athletic identity on high school sociocultural and academic outcomes over and above relevant covariates and whether this effect differed by respondent gender. Covariates were grand mean centered before being entered into the regression model in the first step. To test the main effects of respondent gender and academic-athletic identity group, respondent gender and two dummy-coded variables that represented the relevant comparison between athletic-academic identity groups (reference group: HB group) were also entered in this first step along with covariates. To test whether identity group is uniquely predictive for Black male respondents, two higher order terms representing the interaction of respondent gender and the two academic-athletic dummy variables were simultaneously entered in the second step of the model. If adding the interaction terms significantly increased the variance explained by the model, simple effects were tested to examine differences between identity groups for male and female

respondents. Unless noted, adding the interaction terms significantly increased the variance explained in all models ($ps < .05$).

Association of Academic-Athletic Identity Group and Respondent Gender

The overall chi-square test of independence indicated a highly significant association between respondent gender and identity group, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,011) = 32.68, p < .001$ (Table 3). This significant association was largely due to Black male respondents: More respondents than expected identified as high in both academic and athletic identity and fewer than expected identified as high in academic identity only (61.5% of cell dependency, standardized residuals = 3.16 and -3.18, respectively). However, the reverse pattern was found for Black female respondents: Fewer respondents than expected identified as high in both academic and athletic identity and more than expected identified as high in academic identity only (33.6% of cell dependency, standardized residuals = -2.33 and 2.35, respectively).

Testing the Effect of Academic-Athletic Identity Group and Gender on School Outcomes

Perceived Social Fit in High School

First, I examined whether being high in academic and athletic identity buffered against threats to perceived social fit and if this effect depended on respondent gender. For Black females, there were no significant differences in coolness concerns among identity

Table 2*Correlations for Key Outcomes and Covariates by Respondent Gender in Study 1*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Coolness concerns		.02	-.05	-.01	.06	-.11*	.07	-.03
2. Peer acceptance	.00		.05	.08*	-.03	.03	.09*	-.07
3. Race IG identification	-.14*	.14*		.67***	-.08	.04	-.05	.23***
4. Intersectional IG identification	-.21***	.18***	.70***		.00	.03	-.11***	.16***
5. Self-reported high school GPA	.11*	.01	-.13*	-.16***		.19***	.01	-.07
6. Leader identity	-.06	-.01	.05	.07	.17***		.10*	-.13
7. Sports participation	-.13*	.15*	.14*	.22***	-.18***	.09		-.13***
8. Context ethnic composition	-.02	-.21***	.16***	.16***	-.06	.02	-.09	

Note. IG = in-group; GPA = grade point average. Black male = below diagonal ($n = 357$), Black female = above the diagonal ($n = 654$). * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Identity Profile by Respondent Gender in Study 1

Academic-athletic identity profile	Black male	Black female
High academic/high athletic (HB)	42% (149)	27% (177)
High academic only (HA)	37% (133)	56% (363)
Low academic (LA)	21% (75)	17% (114)

Note. Percentages indicate proportion of respondents within each vertical gender category. The number of respondents in each cell is in parentheses.

groups, $ps > .73$. Yet, consistent with the hypothesis that athletic identity functions as a sociocultural buffer for academically identified Black male students, HA Black males (i.e., high in academic identity only) reported more coolness concerns than HB Black males (i.e., high in both identities), $B = 1.22$, $SE = .32$, $t(1002) = 3.78$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.59, 1.86]. There was no difference in coolness concerns between HB Black males and LA Black males (i.e., low in academic identity), $B = -.04$, $SE = .37$, $t(1002) = -.12$, $p = .91$, 95% CIs [-.77, .68]. This pattern of results was mirrored when examining perceived peer acceptance. For Black females, there was no effect of identity group on perceived peer acceptance, $ps > .51$. But, among Black males, the HA group reported less peer acceptance than the HB group, $B = -1.11$, $SE = .48$, $t(1002) = -2.33$, $p = .02$, 95% CIs [-2.04, -.17], and there was no difference between the HB and LA groups, $B = -.48$, $SE = .54$, $t(1002) = -.88$, $p = .38$, 95% CIs [-1.54, .59].

In-Group Identification at College-Entry

I next examined whether being high in academic and athletic identity facilitated identification with one's racial or intersectional in-group and if this effect depended on respondent gender. First, the effect of identity group on identification with African-Americans

generally was tested. No main effects or interactions of identity group and gender emerged, all $ps > .08$. Next, identification with one's intersectional in-group was examined. Again, patterns consistent with the hypothesis that athletic identity operates as a sociocultural buffer for academically identified Black male students emerged. Among Black females, no differences in intersectional in-group identification emerged between identity groups, all $ps > .92$. However, among Black males, the HA group reported lower intersectional in-group identification than the HB group, $B = -1.23$, 95% CIs [-1.72, -.74], $SE = .25$, $t(1002) = -4.97$, $p < .001$, yet there was no difference between the HB and LA groups, $B = -.34$, $SE = .28$, $t(1002) = -1.23$, $p = .22$, 95% CIs [-.90, .21] (Figure 1).

High School GPA

Next, I examined whether academic-athletic identity group predicted high school GPA and if this effect depended on respondent gender. Across gender, respondents in the LA group reported lower GPA than respondents in the HB group, $B = -.27$, $SE = .03$, $t(1004) = -7.97$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [-.34, -.21]. Additionally, respondent gender played a role in GPA differences between the HB group and HA group. For Black females, there was no significant difference in GPA between the HB and HA groups, $B = -.02$, $SE = .04$, $t(1002) = -.55$, $p = .58$, 95% CIs [-.09, .05]. However, HA Black males reported higher GPA than HB Black males, $B = .13$, $SE = .04$, $t(1002) = 2.93$, $p = .004$, 95% CIs [.04, .21] (Figure 2).

Discussion

Given gendered social concerns about being associated with academics, identifying with athletics played an important role in the sociocultural experiences of Black male students who identified most with school, however, athletics was not observed to play this same role for Black female students. For Black males high in

Figure 1
Reported Identification With Race and Gender In-Group by Gender and Academic-Athletic Identity Group in Study 1

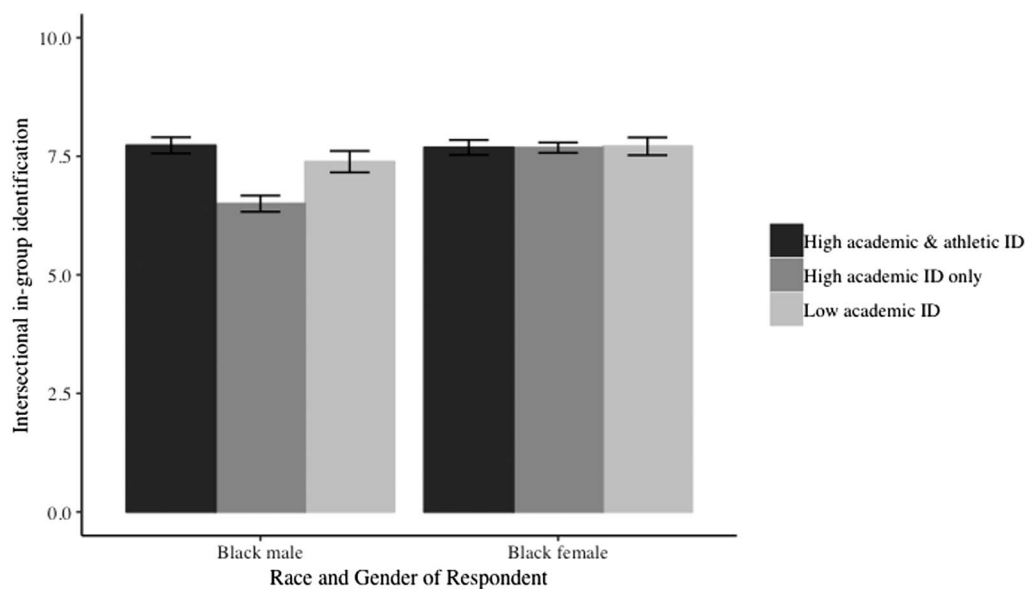
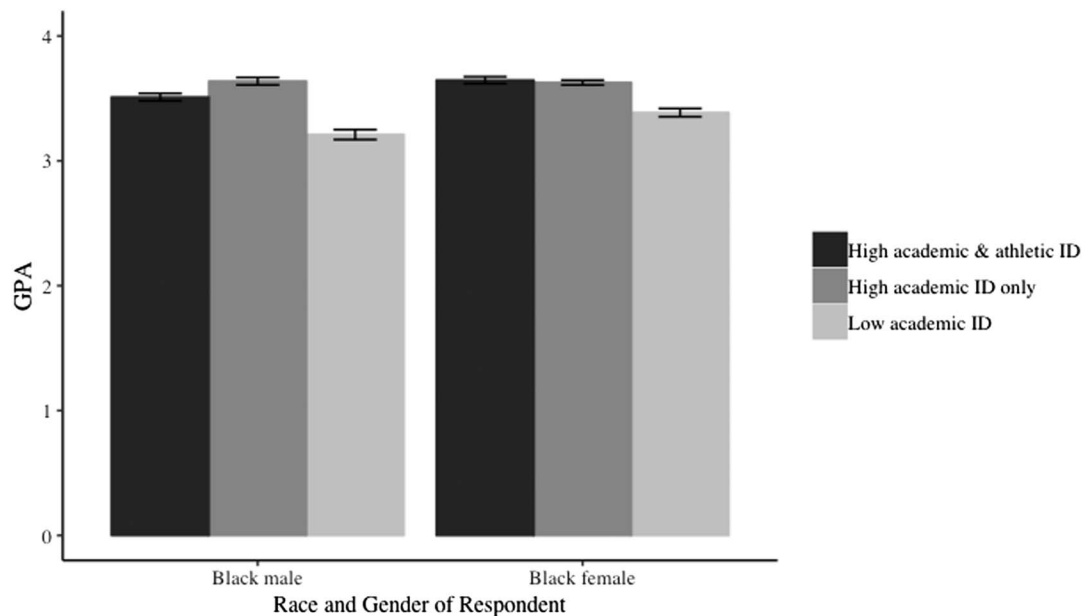


Figure 2
Self-Reported High School Grade Point Average by Gender and Academic-Athletic Identity Group in Study 1



academic identity, being athletically identified was associated with fewer concerns about coolness, a greater sense of peer acceptance, and greater in-group identification as a young Black man. Of note, Black males who identified as high on both academic and athletic identity reported similar sociocultural outcomes as did Black males who reported low academic identity. Thus, among Black males highly identified with academics, highly identifying with sports afforded a similar level of “coolness,” peer acceptance, and identification with one’s race and gender in-group as was reported by Black males who were less identified with school. In contrast for Black female students, identifying highly as academic did not appear to evoke a threat to social fit and intersectional in-group identification nor did athletic identity provide a boost for these same sociocultural perceptions. Black female students who identified as both athletic and academic reported no difference in perceived social fit and in-group identification than Black female students who reported being high in academic identity-only or low in academic identity.

This pattern of results both highlights how identifying with academics can serve as a threat to a sense of social fit and in-group identification for Black male students, yet athletic identity can function as a sociocultural buffer against this threat among academically identified Black male students. Corroborating the protective and socioculturally adaptive function of identifying with sports for academically identified Black male students, the exploratory chi-square analyses showed that Black male respondents were overrepresented in the high academic and athletic identity profile and underrepresented in the high academic-only identity profile.

Given the more positive sociocultural experiences that Black males who identified with both school and sports report having in their senior year relative to Black males who identified only with school, how might this have longer term implications across the

transition to college? While not observed among Black female students, Black males high in academic and athletic identity did report lower GPA than Black males high in academic identity only. Therefore, although being athletically identified provided sociocultural benefits for highly academically identified Black males, the results suggest this may come at a cost to academic performance in high school. Yet, do the sociocultural benefits, such as feeling more identified with one’s intersectional in-group, facilitate positive adjustment into a new academic context given the relatively lower academic performance of this group? This question is tested in Study 2. Specifically, I examined whether the positive sociocultural experiences of athletically and academically identified Black male high school students may be beneficial across the transition to college, even given slightly lower high school academic achievement.

Study 2

In Study 2, I sought to understand whether greater athletic identity in high school may have an indirect, positive effect on academically identified Black male students’ adjustment in their first year of college. For Black male students, given that being identified with both school and sports was related to lower academic achievement in high school but greater identification as a young Black man at college-entry, analysis of an indirect effect of high school athletic identity on first-year college outcomes can shed light on the longer term importance of being identified with academics *and* with one’s intersectional in-group at college entry.

Past research on Black male college students found that their successful first-year adjustment was positively impacted by building a network of Black peers (e.g., number of Black close friends) and by having peers whom one can rely on for studying and navigating college coursework (e.g., interdependent studying behaviors; Harper & Newman, 2016). Specifically, I examine how athletic identity may

operate through greater identification with one's race and gender in-group to facilitate this positive sociocultural fit and academic performance in the first year of college. Although athletic identity is expected to play a primary role in facilitating identification as a young Black man for academically identified Black male students, identifying with one's intersectional in-group is also found to play a role in positive college adjustment of Black female students (Edwards et al., 2019). In other words, while athletic identity is not expected to increase a sense of intersectional in-group identification among Black female students, feeling more identified as a young Black woman at college entry should facilitate positive sociocultural fit and academic outcomes in college for Black female students, too.

This question is tested among Black female and male respondents in college who reported high identification with academics in high school. It is hypothesized that greater intersectional in-group identification at college-entry will be associated with more positive sociocultural fit, operationalized as *number of close Black friends* and *interdependent studying behaviors*, and academic performance, operationalized as *number of classes dropped* and *first-year GPA*, at the end of the first year for both Black female and Black male students. However, only among Black male students is greater athletic identity in high school expected to have an indirect effect on college adjustment outcomes mediated through greater intersectional in-group identification. Therefore, gender is expected to moderate the relationship between high school athletic identity and intersectional in-group identification. I test these hypotheses using data from the first three waves of the NLSF data set to fit a moderated mediation multilevel model to account for clustering within schools (Bauer et al., 2006).

Method

Design and Participants

Using the sample of Black American students in Study 1, data from Waves 1 through 3 of the NLSF data set was examined. To examine the role of athletic identity among highly academically identified Black students, these analyses only included respondents who identified as high in academic identity regardless of their level of athletic identification. This method also permits a conceptual replication of Study 1 findings when treating athletic identity as a continuous variable. Focusing on this highly academically identified group provided a sizeable sample of Black male and female students ($n = 282$ and $n = 540$, respectively; 78% of Study 1 sample).

Measure

Athletic Identity in High School

Similar to Study 1, athletic identity was operationalized using the same single-item collected in first-year fall (Wave 1). Respondents retrospectively rated how well being a "good athlete" described themselves during their senior year using 3-point scales (0 = *Not at all true* to 2 = *Very true*). In these analyses, athletic identity was treated as continuous.

Intersectional In-Group Identification at College-Entry

As in Study 1, intersectional in-group identification was operationalized as perceived closeness to race and gender in-groups at

college entry (0 = *Very distant* to 10 = *Very close*), using the single-item collected in first-year fall (Wave 1).

First-Year Sociocultural Adjustment Outcomes

Number of Black Close Friends. During first-year spring (Wave 2), respondents indicated how many of the 10 closest friends made since entering college were Black ("Thinking about the 10 closest friends you have made since coming to college, how many are African-American or Black?"), using a 0–10 scale.

Interdependent Study Behaviors. Respondents' reported level of interdependent studying behaviors were measured in first-year spring (Wave 2) using three items that assessed orientation to study and confer with peers about academic work. Respondents' frequency with which they engaged in the following three behaviors, answered on a 0–10 point scale, were averaged: "study with other students," "organize study groups with other students," and "seek academic help from a friend or classmate," $\alpha = .75$.

First-Year Academic Adjustment Outcomes

For fall term academic adjustment data, student self-report data collected in first-year spring (Wave 2) was utilized, and for spring term academic adjustment data, student self-report data collected in second-year fall (Wave 3) was utilized.

Number of Courses Dropped. The number of courses dropped in the first year was calculated by summing the number of courses that respondents listed as "Did not complete" in both the fall and spring terms.

Self-Reported First-Year Cumulative GPA. For classes that were taken for a letter grade, an unweighted grade point average was calculated for courses taken in the fall and spring term. All grades were self-reported on a 4.0 (A+/A) to 0.0 (F) scale.

Covariates

The three covariates of *Sports Participation*, *Leadership Identity*, and *Neighborhood and School Context Ethnic Composition* from Study 1 were retained to maintain consistency across the two studies. Finally, prior academic achievement, operationalized as high school GPA from Study 1, is included as a covariate.

Results

Analysis Overview

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all measures separately by gender. The proposed tests of moderated mediation for each of the four college adjustment outcomes were conducted using hierarchical linear modeling to account for the nested structure of the data (students nested within colleges/universities) following the method described in Bauer et al. (2006) for a 1-1-1 moderated mediation structure (Figures 3 and 4). A two-level random coefficients model, in which students were nested within 28 colleges and universities, was tested by estimating within and between component variance. Examining the intraclass correlation coefficients, the college/university attended (i.e., grouping variable) accounted for 15.2% of the variance in number of close Black friends, 0.6% of the variance in interdependent academic behaviors, 2.4% of the variance in classes dropped, and 9.9% of the variance in

Table 4*Descriptives and Correlations of Predictor, Mediator, and Outcome Variables by Respondent Gender in Study 2*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Athletic identity (HS)	1.35	0.76		-.04	.00	.02	.06	.00	0.95	0.84
2. Intersectional IG identification (C1)	7.13	2.08	.28***		.36***	.10*	-.01	-.06	7.71	1.96
3. Number of Black friends (C2)	5.22	3.37	.26***	.34***		.08	.07	-.07	6.13	3.29
4. Interdep. study behaviors (C2)	4.16	2.13	.12	.14*	.19**		-.01	-.15**	4.34	2.26
5. Number of classes dropped (C2)	0.53	0.83	-.03	.08	.00	.09		-.10*	0.46	0.76
6. First-year GPA (C2)	2.97	0.47	-.07	-.13*	-.07	-.07	-.20*		3.03	0.46

Note. IG = in-group; GPA = grade point average. Black males = below diagonal ($n = 282$), Black females = above the diagonal ($n = 540$). HS = Indicates high school variable. C1 = Indicates first-year fall variable. C2 = Indicates first-year spring/cumulative variable.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

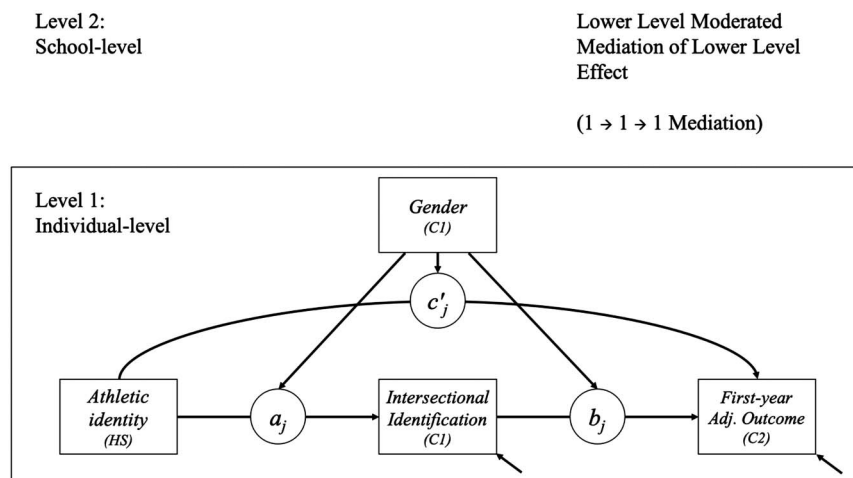
freshman GPA. After correctly specifying each model for the inclusion of random slopes and inclusion of gender as a moderator of the *a* and/or *b* paths, I examined the effect of gender on the appropriate paths, and finally tested for the presence of an indirect effect of athletic identity on the specified outcome moderated by gender.

Model Specification

For each college adjustment variable, a full multilevel mediation model was initially tested using a deviance change test for the inclusion of random slopes on the *a* path, which represents the association between athletic identity and intersectional in-group identification, and the *b* path, which represents the association between intersectional in-group identification and college adjustment outcomes (Figure 3). In models where random slopes did not significantly increase overall model fit, the random slope was dropped. In all models, specifying a random slope on the *a* path did not significantly increase model fit. Thus, *a* path estimates in all models were specified with fixed slopes, which assumes the relationship between athletic identity and intersectional in-group

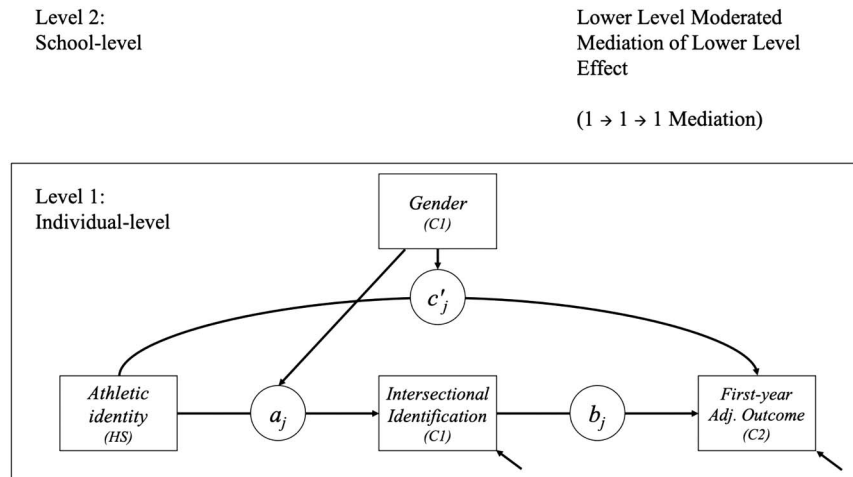
identification is similar regardless of school membership. In the models testing interdependent study behaviors and number of dropped classes, *b* path estimates were specified with fixed slopes. In the model testing first-year GPA, *b* path estimates were specified with fixed slopes due to model convergence issues when the *b* path was specified with random slopes. All model estimates of the *c'* path, which represent the direct association between athletic identity and the relevant outcome after accounting for the mediator effect, were estimated with random slopes. All paths were estimated with random intercepts.

After the appropriate model specification was determined, moderation of gender was tested on both the *a* and *b* paths. Gender only significantly moderated the *a* path for each model (all $ps < .001$), and not the *b* path (all $ps > .10$). In other words, consistent with the hypotheses, the effect of athletic identity on intersectional in-group identification statistically differed by respondent gender, while the effect of intersectional in-group identification on the college adjustment outcomes was statistically similar across respondent gender. Consequently, as illustrated in Figure 4, the interaction term specifying gender as a moderator on the *a* path (and *c'* path) was retained in all models and the gender interaction term on the *b* path was

Figure 3*Full Path Model of 1-1-1 Moderated Mediation to be Tested (Initial Model)*

Note. Nested frames indicate levels of sampling, boxes indicate variables, arrows with circles represent random effects, and arrows not originating from variables indicate residuals. The arrows from *W* to the random effects indicate moderation of the hypothesized causal effects. Predictions of *M* and *Y* by *W* are not shown on the diagram but are included in the model. HS = Indicates high school variable. C1 = Indicates freshman fall variable. C2 = Indicates freshman spring/cumulative variable.

Figure 4
Reduced Path Model of 1-1-1 Moderated Mediation to be Tested (Final Model)



Note. Nested frames indicate levels of sampling, boxes indicate variables, arrows with circles represent random effects, and arrows not originating from variables indicate residuals. The arrows from W to the random effects indicate moderation of the hypothesized causal effects. Predictions of M and Y by W are not shown on the diagram but are included in the model. HS = Indicates high school variable. C1 = Indicates freshman fall variable. C2 = Indicates freshman spring/cumulative variable.

dropped from all models. The final level 1 structure to be tested is shown below in Equation 1:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{INTid}_{ij} &= d_{Mj} + a_j \times \text{Athl}_{ij} + f_{Mj} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} \\ &+ W_{aj} \times \text{Athl}_{ij} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} + h_{Mj} \times \text{HSgpa}_{ij} \\ &+ j_{Mj} \times \text{Leader}_{ij} + k_{Mj} \times \text{Sport}_{ij} + l_{Mj} \times \text{Context}_{ij} \\ &+ e_{Mij} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ij} &= d_{Yj} + c'_j \times \text{Athl}_{ij} + f_{Yj} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} + b_j \times \text{INTid}_{ij} \\ &+ W_{c'j} \times \text{Athl}_{ij} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} + h_{Yj} \times \text{HSgpa}_{ij} \\ &+ j_{Yj} \times \text{Leader}_{ij} + k_{Yj} \times \text{Sport}_{ij} + l_{Yj} \times \text{Context}_{ij} \\ &+ e_{Yij}. \end{aligned}$$

The data were reformatted to permit specification of the model in a single Level 1 equation (Equation 2; Bauer et al., 2006).⁴

$$\begin{aligned} Z_{ij} &= S_{Mij} \times (d_{Mj} + a_j \times \text{Athl}_{ij} + f_{Mj} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} \\ &+ W_{aj} \times \text{Athl}_{ij} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} + h_{Mj} \times \text{HSgpa}_{ij} \\ &+ j_{Mj} \times \text{Leader}_{ij} + k_{Mj} \times \text{Sport}_{ij} + l_{Mj} \times \text{Context}_{ij}) \\ &+ S_{Yij} \times (d_{Yj} + c'_j \times \text{Athl}_{ij} + f_{Yj} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} \\ &+ b_j \times \text{INTid}_{ij} + W_{c'j} \times \text{Athl}_{ij} \times \text{Gender}_{ij} \\ &+ h_{Yj} \times \text{HSgpa}_{ij} + j_{Yj} \times \text{Leader}_{ij} + k_{Yj} \times \text{Sport}_{ij} \\ &+ l_{Yj} \times \text{Context}_{ij}) + e_{Yij}. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Testing Moderation of Gender on Effect of Athletic Identity on In-Group Identification

First, the moderating effect of gender on athletic identity (primary predictor) and intersectional in-group identification (primary

mediator) was examined. Consistent with the hypothesis that athletic identity predicts intersectional in-group identification for academically identified Black male, but not female, students, the a path was significant and positive in all models for Black males ($bs > .70$, $ps < .001$), and was not significant for Black females ($ps > .21$).

Testing Indirect Effect of Athletic Identity on College Adjustment Outcomes

Next, the presence of an indirect effect of athletic identity on the key adjustment outcomes was tested using the Sobel test (Equation 3). To examine the indirect effect separately for Black males and females, two models were tested for each dependent variable, each specified to test one level of the gender moderator on the a -path. As shown in Table 5, the Sobel test indicated no significant indirect effect of athletic identity in high school on any college

$$\text{Sobel test for indirect effect} = \frac{a \times b - 0}{\sqrt{b^2 s_a^2 + a^2 s_b^2}}, \quad (3)$$

adjustment outcome for Black females (Sobel test $|z| < 1.96$, $ps > .05$). In contrast, for Black males, the Sobel test indicated significant indirect effects of high school athletic identity on reported number of close Black friends ($ab = .414$, $SE = .104$, Sobel test $z = 3.984$, $p < .001$) and interdependent study behaviors ($ab = .085$, $SE = .037$, Sobel test $z = 2.293$, $p = .02$). However, no significant indirect effect of athletic identity

⁴ As outlined in Bauer et al. (2006), through use of indicator variables (S_M & S_Y), all paths in the mediation model (a , b , and c') can be modeled in a single equation, which provides output of the full covariance matrix of random effects and asymptotic covariance matrix of fixed effects estimates and variance components.

Table 5
Mediated Effects by Intersectional In-Group Identification on College Adjustment Outcomes in Study 2

Variables	Black males			Black females		
	Mediated effect	Standard error	<i>z</i>	Mediated effect	Standard error	<i>z</i>
Black friends	0.414	0.104	3.984***	0.006	0.065	0.092
Interdep. study behaviors	0.085	0.037	2.293*	0.001	0.013	0.076
Classes dropped	0.007	0.011	0.642	0.000	0.001	0.053
First-year GPA	-0.009	0.006	-1.340	0.000	0.001	-0.092

Note. GPA = grade point average. Mediated effect is unstandardized.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

emerged on number of classes dropped or GPA in Black males' first year (Sobel test $|z| < 1.96$, $ps > .05$).

Of note, as the *b* paths tested were not moderated by gender, intersectional in-group identification thus predicted a greater number of close Black friends and interdependent study behaviors for all Black respondents, $B = .52$, $SE = .07$, $t(1,570) = 7.82$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.39, .65], and, $B = .11$, $SE = .04$, $t(1,570) = 2.64$, $p = .008$, 95% CIs [.03, .19], respectively. Intersectional in-group identification did not predict first-year academic adjustment outcomes ($ps > .16$). All regression estimates are displayed in supplementary analyses.

Discussion

Employing longitudinal analyses to examine the effect of high school athletic identity on critical first-year college adjustment outcomes, we find that athletic identity indirectly impacts later sociocultural, but not academic, adjustment outcomes among academically identified Black male students. For these Black male students, greater athletic identity in high school indirectly predicts having more close Black friends and engaging in more interdependent studying behaviors by the end of the first year of college through increasing identification as a young Black man at college entry. Importantly, Black female students who were more identified as a young Black woman reported more close Black friends and more interdependent studying behaviors at the end of their first year of college as well. This result speaks to the importance of intersectional in-group identification for Black students broadly. However, Black female students' level of athletic identity in high school did not play a role in this relationship.

It is important to highlight that, although there was no indirect effect of athletic identity on academic outcomes at the end of the first year of college (i.e., classes dropped, first-year GPA), this result is still meaningful particularly for Black male students. Among academically identified Black male students in Study 1, being athletically identified was associated with a relative lower high school GPA. Thus, a failure to detect a significant, negative direct, or indirect effect of athletic identity on first-year college academic outcomes suggests that the short-term academic cost of identifying with athletics in high school may not persist through the first-year college transition—while the positive sociocultural benefits are observed through the transition.

General Discussion

Given the racialized and gendered experiences of Black male students in education, Black males may face questions of belonging

in academic spaces, yet experience a sense of connection and identification with athletics. These results highlight the longstanding importance of athletics for Black male identity that can be traced back throughout U.S. history (Ashe, 1988). Importantly, athletic identity is found to be important for the school experiences of young Black men in a sample of college-going students. More broadly, these results point to the long-term academic importance of Black female and male students who identify strongly with academics to also feel identified with their intersectional in-group.

In two studies, identifying with athletics is found to be particularly important for the sociocultural adjustment of Black male students, especially among those that highly identify with school. In high school, Black male students who identified with both academics and athletics reported greater perceptions of social fit and greater identification as a young Black man. Critically, although identifying with both academics and athletics was associated with short-term costs to academic achievement, greater identification with athletics indirectly contributed to more distal positive sociocultural adjustment outcomes in college that are important for Black students' long-term postsecondary academic achievement (Brannon et al., 2015). This pattern of results, at once, demonstrates the prevalent, gendered social costs of identifying academically while speaking to the sociocultural meaning and utility of athletics among Black male adolescents among a college-going sample of Black students in which one may expect relatively small variance in academic orientation.

The observed pattern of results for Black female students complements research that suggests identifying academically is perceived as less socially costly for female students (Workman & Heyder, 2020) while providing relevant insights about the nature of athletic and intersectional in-group identity for Black female students. Among Black female students, level of identification with other young Black women did not differ between identity profiles. As expected, identifying with athletics in high school did not provide a boost to perceived social fit or identification as a young Black woman. Interestingly, identifying with athletics also did not incur costs to these same sociocultural outcomes and, different from Black male students, did not negatively impact academic achievement in high school. Given that past research finds that female high school sports participants report greater gender discrimination (Knifsend & Graham, 2012), future research should examine whether any costs of athletic identification in high school—sociocultural or academic—for Black female students may depend on if the specific sports/activities one identifies with are perceived as socially acceptable for women (e.g., identifying with volleyball vs. basketball; see, Hoiness et al., 2008). Further, understanding the specific sports/activities with which Black adolescents identify will provide nuance on whether the sociocultural

benefits observed in this study also require identifying with sports with predominant Black representation and participation.

This research also provides insight into the importance of considering athletics as a sociocultural identity with broader relevance to sports team participants and nonparticipants. Consistent with past research on *jock* identity (e.g., Miller et al., 2005), identifying with athletics was found to have implications for how young Black youth perceived themselves outside of the athletic context. Specifically, identifying with athletics impacted how academically identified Black male students perceived their own social fit in the school context and their connection to other young Black men in general. By including all Black students and instead controlling for the extent to which they participated on sports teams, I was able to better isolate and understand how athletics as an identity plays an important role in young Black men's sociocultural and academic adjustment. Thus, future research seeking to understand the interplay of athletic identity and race broadly will benefit from the inclusion of participants regardless of their actual participation on a sports team.

Finally, these findings also implicate the importance of feeling identified with one's race and gender in-group *and* with academics, while highlighting the potential tension that exists for young Black males given gendered ideas about school (Oyserman et al., 2003). Again, identifying with athletics provided a pathway to greater perceived social and in-group fit for Black males who identified with school, regardless of actual participation in sports. In line with research on how markers of in-group belonging are protective of Black male's school engagement (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2006), identifying with athletics provided a sense of in-group belonging for young Black men and buffered against general social fit concerns. Thus, these results provide evidence that broader social domains, such as athletics, can be imbued with specific cultural value given culturally specific experiences and history, such that identifying with the domain can facilitate an important sense of connection and belong to the culturally relevant in-group. However, given that Black male students who were highly identified with academics but not athletics reported less peer acceptance, more concerns about coolness, and lower identification with other young Black men, it is critical to understand the experiences of this population. In particular, stereotypical and societal ideas about Black masculinity as *cool* and *tough* (Harper, 2004; Harris et al., 2011; Hooks, 2004) can constrict Black males youths' sense of masculinity to narrowly defined standards with implications for those who identify with groups or domains not stereotypically associated with these ideas, such as school.

Limitations

To test these hypotheses, I used a publicly available data set of Black students who were enrolled in highly selective colleges and universities across the U.S. Correspondingly, as shown in Study 1, a majority of Black students in this college-going sample reported high academic identity. Given this sample feature, the observed importance of athletic identity may be exacerbated or mitigated for Black students who did not attend college or see college as relevant to their long-term goals. Although students who may not see college as relevant to their future goals may report similar high school experiences as those Study 1 respondents who reported relatively lower academic identity, future research should test this explicitly. Additionally, while our single-item measures of academic and

athletic identity were reasonable proxies given the nature of the secondary data, future research should include more holistic measures of these identities (e.g., Academic and Athletic Identity Scale; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014).

A second limitation is the age of the secondary data set, given data collection began in 1999. Future research should seek to replicate the found relationships in the current racial, gendered, and educational climates. As athletics still plays a modern role in the socialization of Black male youth (e.g., Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013), Black male adolescents continue to endorse traditional racial stereotypes about athletic dominance (Burnett et al., 2020), and feeling connected to same race and gender peers is still important for college success (Edwards et al., 2019; Harper, 2012), this research should be a fruitful area of investigation.

Directions for Future Research

Although for both Black female and male respondents, identification with one's intersectional in-group was associated with positive sociocultural adjustment in college, what it means to identify strongly as a young Black woman and young Black man may be distinguishable given the social context and have implications for broader cognition. For example, as Black women on average have higher academic attainment than Black men (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), identification as a young Black woman may more automatically incorporate ideas of academic success into one's self-concept than would identification as a young Black man. However, given the prevalence of racism and sexism in academic contexts (e.g., Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math fields; Burnett et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2019), the positive or negative implications of stronger intersectional identification likely vary heavily depending on the academic context (Jones & Day, 2018). Future research should continue to explore the meaning and nuances of feeling identified with the intersection of multiple identities compared to a single superordinate identity in academic contexts.

Further complicating the role of intersectionality, the divergent pattern of results observed by gender also motivates future inquiry into how sexual orientation, gender expression, and/or motivations to conform to hetero-masculine/feminine norms within Black student populations shape the consequences of academic and athletic identity. For example, gendered concerns about being academically identified for Black males are often rooted in heteronormative and restrictive ideas of what it means to be a Black man (Howard & Associates, 2017; Wade, 1996). Thus, the extent to which academic identity is a threat to and athletic identity buffers concerns about sociocultural fit for Black male students may depend on motivation to conform to hetero-masculine norms within this student population (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Further examining the complexity of gender and sexuality within Black students broadly would contribute important nuance to the current findings.

In addition to continuing to look within individuals to understand the nuanced effects of intersectional identification, future studies should also investigate how aspects of the school context, such as a change in one's school racial/ethnic context across the college transition, also matter. For example, Black students who attend predominantly White high schools report easier transition into colleges with similar demographics than Black students who do not attend predominantly White high schools (Harper & Newman, 2016). Thus, future inquiry should examine the effect

of intersectional in-group identification both at HBCUs and Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Greater inclusion of Black students who attend HBCUs would allow for exploration of how changes in racial/ethnic contexts, including relative decreases *and* increases in the Black racial make-up of one's school context across the college transition, may affect the importance of feeling identified with one's intersectional in-group at college entry.

Relevant to high school curriculum, given the sociohistorical ties of athletics with the Black cultural experience and advancement of Black Americans in the U.S. (National Museum of African American History & Culture, 2016), future research should also examine whether the academic incorporation of the sociopolitical histories of Black female and male athletes in U.S. sports may increase a sense of classroom belongingness for Black high school students. As high school ethnic studies courses have been shown to improve the academic outcomes of ethnic minority students, with substantial improvements found among ethnic minority boys (Dee & Penner, 2017), this type of culturally relevant curriculum may be particularly impactful for Black male students. For Black male students, the inclusion of Black sports history may help buffer against typical gendered concerns about academic effort and highlight the academic nature of a domain (i.e., athletics) that, for some, may be tied to more positive race and gender experiences (Nasir & Hand, 2008). In supplementary analyses, I find evidence suggesting that Black male students who value sports, but not school reported the lowest high school GPA.⁵ Including exemplars of Black male athletes who were academically and athletically engaged (e.g., Charles Drew, Paul Robeson) may provide a source of academic content that mitigates coolness concerns and provide positive academic role models with whom Black male students who identify with sports, across levels of academic identification, can connect.

Not All Black Male Adolescents Like Sports, but All Contend With Athletic Assumptions

In acknowledging the benefits of valuing a culturally valued identity like athletics, it is vital to highlight that not all Black male adolescents like sports. Yet, regardless of their preference for the domain, they are likely to have to contend with both in-group and out-group members' assumptions about their athletic interests. For example, given the strong in-group cultural value placed on athletics, there may be pressure to feel knowledgeable about, identified with, or willing to participate in sports to gain acceptance in predominantly Black male contexts (e.g., barbershops). This pressure has particular importance, as definitions of masculinity are found to be relationally constructed among Black male adolescents (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013). From an in-group perspective, these pressures may affect attention to and prioritization of sports to feel socially included, at the risk of feeling excluded or derogated by in-group members for not valuing a culturally normative identity.

In addition, due to out-group stereotyping of Black men as athletic from an intergroup perspective (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013), athletic identity may be imposed upon Black males because dominant stereotypes contribute to the perception that all Black men must like sports (Wilkins, 2014). Although sports may be a culturally valued identity for some Black men within Black communities, the assumption that *all Black men* like sports among non-Black individuals who have little contact with or involvement in Black

cultural contexts serves as a shallow stereotype and is interpreted negatively (Czopp, 2008). On college campuses, Black male students frequently report being assumed to be on campus primarily to play sports (Harper, 2015). And emerging research supports that people are biased to categorize Black male undergraduates as student-athletes instead of nonathlete students (Higginbotham et al., 2021). Given these in-group and out-group pressures, future research should examine how athletic assumptions are managed in Black male youth's day-to-day interactions to facilitate in-group cohesion and combat out-group stereotyping.

Conclusions

Affiliation with social groups can provide a sense of belonging for individuals broadly. However, the interplay of group histories and modern socialization practices relevant to an individual's multiple identities can imbue broader social identities with unique cultural value. These studies provide evidence that for Black male youth in the U.S., athletics serves as a culturally valued identity with important benefits for experiences in secondary and postsecondary contexts. Although centered on athletics, these findings more broadly offer insight and motivate further inquiry into the importance of academically engaged Black youth being able to feel secure in their intersectional Black identities.

⁵ Analyses included in Supplemental Materials.

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