

How race and touchdown celebrations affect football player rewards

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The post-touchdown celebration is a familiar part of many football games. However, new research from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University suggests that black players may be more likely than white players to be penalized for putting their feelings on display.

As a part of the study, Kellogg Ph.D. candidate Erika V. Hall and Professor Robert Livingston first analyzed all of the unsportsmanlike conduct penalties by NFL athletes during the entire 2010-2011 NFL season. Unsportsmanlike conduct includes the excessive celebration penalty. They found that although the percentage of black and white players in the NFL was 65 percent and 31 percent, respectively, 92 percent of the unsportsmanlike conduct penalties during that season were against black players.

To explore the potential [causal relationship](#) between race and penalty, the authors conducted a series of experiments presenting [participants](#) with the scenario of a football play. In the play, a fictional wide receiver (Malik Johnson, the perceived black athlete, or Jake Biermann, the perceived white [athlete](#)) makes an incredible touchdown, and either celebrates or does not. Participants were then asked to rate arrogance and how much of a financial bonus the player should receive for the play.

The results of the experiments revealed that players who celebrated after a touchdown were seen as equally arrogant, regardless of whether they

were black or white. Yet, Hall and Livingston found a significant difference between compensation recommendations for the two players. When Jake Biermann celebrated, his compensation recommendations by participants remained relatively unchanged. However, when Malik Johnson celebrated, his bonus recommendations were 21 percent lower than those in the situation when he did not celebrate. If the [players](#) did not celebrate, then it did not matter whether they were black or white – both were rewarded.

"The study shows acts of cockiness or self-promotion are more acceptable when a member of a high-status group performs it than when one of a low-status group does," said Livingston, associate professor of management and organizations at Kellogg. "In previous studies, we find that displaying humility and docility resulted in a higher success rate for black CEOs, while it actually lowered the success rate of white CEOs who were most successful when they displayed arrogance or cockiness."

Hall and Livingston's research suggests that since black people have been viewed as a low-status group historically, expressing confidence and [arrogance](#) – traits that are characteristic of high-status group members – will often result in much harsher judgment and severe penalty when possible as compared to their white counterparts.

"The current results provide robust evidence of a 'hubris penalty' against black athletes, but no such penalty for the same behavior from white athletes," the authors write. "Consistent with prior literature, these results confirm that the acceptability of an act will depend, not only on how positive or negative the behavior is, but also on who is performing it."

More information: The study, "The hubris penalty: Biased responses to 'Celebration' displays of black football players," is published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Provided by Northwestern University

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