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Sports Knowledge is Power

Reinforcing Masculine Privilege Through Fantasy Sport League Participation

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As of August 2003, 15.2 million American adults participated in fantasy sports. Fantasy sport allows online participants to assume the roles of owners, managers, and coaches of professional teams, building franchises and experiencing every phase of the process (i.e., drafting athletes, trading players, signing free agents, submitting lineups). Despite its great popularity, there is a paucity of research investigating fantasy sports. Taking a pro-feminist approach, the current study examines the appeals and experiences of participants and the audience to whom fantasy sport leagues are directed. Using personal observations, textual analysis, and focus group responses of three male fantasy leaguers, the current study indicates that fantasy sports reinforce hegemonic ideologies in sport spectatorship, emphasizing authority, sports knowledge, competition, male-bonding, and traditional gender roles.

Keywords: *fantasy sport leagues; rotisserie leagues; masculinity; hegemony; Internet; media; mediated sport; White male backlash politics*

As of August 2003, some 15.2 million adults participated in fantasy sports leagues nationwide (Hu, 2003), making 7.2% of all American adults fantasy sports participants (*St. Louis Business Journal,* 2003). Fantasy sports leagues (previously called "Rotisserie sports leagues") allow online participants to assume virtually the roles of owners, general managers, and coaches of professional sports teams. Participants build their franchises and experience every phase of the process including drafting athletes, trading players, signing free agents, and submitting lineups.

Considering the remarkable growth of the Internet since the early 1990s (Boyle & Haynes, 2002), it is not surprising that this 1980s sports hobby has created a stronghold in today's sports society. According to *St. Louis Business Journal* (2003), "The Internet has allowed more people to get involved in fantasy sports and it is easier than ever to become a part of it," said Greg Ambrosius, president of the Fantasy Sports Trade Association. "Fantasy sports is now big business and all of the major sports Web sites are making it easy to transition from sports fan to fantasy sports fan" ("Fantasy Sports," 2003). Due to the explosion of popularity in fantasy sports participation and the dearth of research about it, there is a need for investigation into this relatively new form of spectatorship.

The purpose of this study is to examine this new electronic medium that offers a different kind of sport spectatorship. What are its appeals? How are fantasy sports experienced? To whom is fantasy sport directed? Using naturalistic inquiry and qualitative methods, the current study examines the phenomenon of fantasy sports leagues from a pro-feminist approach. Data collected are triangulated through the use of personal observations of the behaviors of fantasy sports participants, a textual analysis of the Yahoo Fantasy Sports Web site, as well as focus group responses of three male fantasy sports participants, altogether providing a rich interpretation of the social processes used by fantasy sports aficionados.

Literature Review

Sociological studies have frequently presented the sport domain as a major site for reinforcing hegemonic masculinity by creating and recreating what it means to be a man through masculine interaction (Curry, 1998; DiIorio, 1989; Mean, 2001). Because sport spectatorship is how most adult men participate in sports (Hartmann, 2003), it is imperative to examine sport spectatorship as a milieu in which masculinity can be affirmed. Studies have proposed that several different media, particularly television, offer the opportunity for men to emphasize masculine ideals in sport by providing viewing pleasures for male spectators (Duncan & Brummett, 1989), emphasizing empowerment through sports knowledge (Duncan & Brummett, 1993; Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Kennedy, 2000) and reinforcement of masculinity through hypermasculine sport fanship choice (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Sargeant, Zillman, & Weaver, 1998; Sullivan, 1991). Though sport is readily consumed through television, one medium that has not been thoroughly investigated is the Internet, particularly Internet fantasy sport leagues.

The Internet as a Medium for Sport

Since the dawning of the Information Age in the early 1990s, the Internet has become an increasingly important form of media. In particular, the great popularization of the Internet has spawned some rather remarkable growth in the sports media domain. In their essay focusing on the dynamic nature of the sports media industry, Boyle and Haynes (2002) suggest that "new media, particularly the Internet, digital television and mobile telephony, are introducing new distribution platforms and services for the delivery of sports content" and are "transforming the way in which breaking news about sport is gathered, selected, and disseminated" (pp. 95-96).

Boyle and Haynes (2002) argue that one unique aspect of sports media on the Internet is the capability for interactivity, helping to break away from one-way sports information dissemination. Presently, the Internet offers online interactivity through sports chat rooms and discussion groups (Malec, 1995), exercise and sports team

Web sites, network and multiplayer sports gaming (Sydnor, 2001), and online sports gambling (Boyle & Haynes, 2002; Sydnor, 2001). It might be reasonable to assume that the interactive nature of sports media thus creates another means by which males can exercise their dominance and masculinity in the sport domain (Duncan & Brummett, 1993). The Internet provides spectators with a fast and accurate means for generating sports knowledge. For instance, male sports fans can join chat rooms with individuals who share their desire to gain and exchange knowledge of several hypermasculine contact sports, thus reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. One Internet-based form of sport spectatorship that has increased greatly in popularity during the past few years is the phenomenon of fantasy sport leagues. In the following section of this literature review, we explore and discuss the nature of fantasy sport leagues and the implications of such participation.

Fantasy Sport Leagues

Fantasy sport leagues were started in the United States in the early 1980s by American journalists Glen Waggoner and Daniel Okrent (Hu, 2003). The league began with a handful of owners who would draft from a pool of active baseball players. For the duration of the season, the owners would track the statistics of each player on their team and those with the best statistics in certain categories would be considered the victor. Early in its inception, Fantasy Baseball League or Rotisserie League ("Fantasy Baseball," n.d.) participants often used the box scores published weekly in *USA Today*; however, with the introduction of high-speed computers and the Internet, Fantasy Baseball Leagues were revolutionized ("Fantasy Baseball," n.d.). Today, scoring can be done completely over a high-speed Internet connection, allowing participants to build a deeper knowledge and track more statistics to give a real-life understanding of how the game works ("Fantasy Baseball," n.d.).

Fantasy Baseball Leagues typically operate by first drafting active players before the beginning of the season ("Fantasy Baseball," n.d.). Drafts take place by either holding an auction in which each owner has a fixed amount of money to spend on players, or owners can participate in round-robin drafting of players ("Fantasy Baseball," n.d.). During the season, some leagues make it possible to trade players among fantasy participants and replace athletes that have gotten injured, allowing each participant to be as competitive as possible. Statistics are compiled for each player by the fantasy participants. Each participant's statistics are ranked and the team boasting the strongest statistics wins the league. Quite often, fantasy league participants play for money. Owners often pay an entry fee which is pooled and paid out at the end of the season to the winner, ("Fantasy Baseball," n.d.; Magee, 2003), adding a gambling incentive for creating the strongest, most competitive team.

Baseball is no longer the only fantasy league being played in the United States. In fact, fantasy football has become by far the most popular fantasy sport league to participate in ("Fantasy Sports," 2003; Hu, 2003; Isidore, 2003). In a 2003 survey conducted by the St. Louis-based Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 7.2% of all

American adults play fantasy sports, with 78% of participants playing football ("Fantasy Sports," 2003). In addition to football, other masculinized sports such as hockey and basketball are growing in representation as well. Despite growing rapidly worldwide and having more than 15 million participants in America alone (Hu, 2003), there is a paucity of empirical explorations of fantasy sport leagues.

The very nature of participation in fantasy sports suggests that it is a haven for affirming masculinity in the sport domain. By developing a wealth of sports knowledge, individuals attempt to outsmart opponents by drafting players that will create the best statistics during the season, helping them to create the most competitive team possible to win the league. Participants act as front office members of multi-million dollar sports teams, wheeling and dealing commodified players and allowing owners to experience the thrill of competition and victory. As Hartmann (2003) argues, perhaps "sports' most vital social function . . . is to provide a separate space for men to discuss—often indirectly, through evaluations of favorite players or controversial incidents—what it is to be a real man" (p. 19).

It's worth pointing out that "what it is to be a real man" implies a particular version of masculinity, as well as a particular form of sexuality. Messner (1988) and others have suggested that sport produces and reproduces hegemonic masculinity, of which gender difference is a key part. There is extensive research showing that sport as an institution privileges dominant heterosexual masculinity. For this reason, it is important to consider both the gender and sexuality of fantasy sport participants. Drawing on the work of contemporary theorists (Birrell, 1990; Jamieson, 2000; Laurendeau, 2004), we also take into account other markers of difference. Such social markers do not exist in isolation. For this reason, it makes sense to consider how class, race, and sexuality intersect and are mutually constitutive.

In the case of fantasy sport league participants, a particular constellation of social axes warrants investigation. According to an online survey conducted by Levy (2005) with a sample size of 1,179, 97.9% of the fantasy sports enthusiasts were male, 93.7% were White, and 68.7% were college graduates or postgraduates. No less than 73% of the sample earned at least $50,000 per year. Thus, the typical profile for a participant is a young, well-educated, White, and relatively affluent man; in short, fantasy sport players occupy the most privileged rung on the social ladder.

Intuitively, this makes sense. As a leisure experience, fantasy sport league participation requires access to resources that not everyone has. Fantasy league play requires discretionary time, easy access to a computer with high-speed Internet connections, or one's own personal computer with high-speed Internet connections, proficiency in computer skills, and experience surfing the Web. These requirements in turn imply a high level of education and a professional or managerial position, both characteristic of members of the middle class. Class is often intertwined with race, as individuals' life chances (e.g., getting into good schools, college, graduate, law, or medical school; having sufficient money to pay tuition costs; making the right social connections to get ahead in the working world) may be circumscribed by one's race.

For these reasons, it seems important to consider the social axes that enable a player to enter the fantasy sports world.

What is interesting, however, is that gender is not implicated in the digital divide,[1] meaning that gender is not a variable in itself that would account for lack of access to computers or lack of use, although race and class certainly are. Computer use remains a proxy variable for most other status markers, including race (especially Latino), disability, age, rural or urban, education, and income (Fox, 2005; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). So the fact that women are excluded from fantasy sport league gaming is not attributable to less access to high-speed computer networks or the lack of skill needed to use them. Why women so rarely take part in fantasy leagues is a question worth posing and one we shall revisit at the conclusion of this article.

Methodologically, it may be beneficial to take a qualitative approach to investigating this phenomenon. By participating in group interviews, subjects can provide a rich explanation into how fantasy sport leagues cater to the needs of young, White, middle-class male sports spectators. In addition, personal observations and textual analysis of fantasy sports Web sites may provide a more focused view of how men affirm their masculinity through their participation in these leagues.

Methods

In this section, we discuss the overall design of the proposed study. Subsequently, we describe the data sources (i.e., Yahoo Fantasy Sports Web site, personal observations, and fantasy sports focus group participants) and explain the data collection protocol. Finally, we illustrate how the data were analyzed and interpreted.

Design-Naturalistic Inquiry

Given the purpose of this investigation, to examine the experience of fantasy league participants, naturalistic inquiry is most appropriate. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the "purpose of a [naturalistic] inquiry is to 'resolve' the problem in the sense of accumulating sufficient knowledge to lead to understanding or explanation" (p. 227). Because few researchers have examined fantasy sport leagues, the body of knowledge relating to such sport spectatorship is inadequate. For this reason, we consider our research exploratory and view our fundamental goal as gathering sufficient data to understand the experience and the appeals of fantasy sports.

Textual Analysis

Because most, if not all, fantasy sports participation occurs over the Internet, it was essential to conduct a textual analysis of the Web site itself. Textual analysis offers a particularly important perspective that provides an understanding of who is

being targeted by a given text. According to Berger (1982), "the basic assumption implicit in [textual] analysis is that an investigation of messages and communication gives insights into the people who receive these messages" (p. 107). By examining the pictures and text visible on the Web site, we provide examples of how the nature of the Yahoo Fantasy Sports Web site (i.e., pictures and discourse) reinforces hegemonic masculinity in the sport spectatorship domain.

Personal Observations

In addition to textual analysis, personal observations were gathered through field-notes, offering insight into the language and social behaviors that reinforce hegemonic masculinity in sport. For the purpose of this study, the first author's role as observer was that of complete observer (Cresswell, 2003), allowing him to observe entirely without participating in the actual fantasy sports league.

Focus Group

The third method of gathering data relied on the discussion of the participants themselves in a small-scale focus group. For the purpose of this study, participants were recruited based on their demographic profiles (i.e., college-educated, White, male) and their behaviors (i.e., fantasy sport league participation). By conducting a focus group, we were able to obtain a better understanding of the behaviors and perceptions participants have about fantasy sport leagues.

In brief, these three methods (i.e., textual analysis, personal observations, and focus group interviews) each provided a different kind of information, yet each contributed to the overarching purpose of the investigation. Altogether, these qualitative methods served as a way to triangulate the data, giving the analysis more depth and breadth.

Data Sources

Participants and Procedures

All participants were from the Midwest region in a university town within the United States. Initially, participants were recruited from a convenience sample of fantasy sport participants known to the first author through his personal relationships. For the purpose of this exploratory study, three college-educated, White, male fantasy sport league participants (i.e., 21 to 23 years of age) took part in the focus group. During the contacting of these participants, the focus group members were assured of their confidentiality, allowing them to express any concerns they may have had about the study. The first author again explained the study prior to the group interview, reiterating that the focus group discussion concerned their fantasy sport league participation. This description remained somewhat vague so as not to lead participant responses, thus limiting potential research biases.

The focus group took place in a convenient location at a suitable time for all participants, as well as the first author. The focus group contained semistructured, open-ended questions, soliciting thought and discussion from the participants. Semistructured format allowed the participants the opportunity to elaborate, adding richness to each individual's perspective of how masculinity relates to fantasy sport participation. The first author's role as moderator of the focus group allowed him to "facilitate the group in such a way that the objective of the research was accomplished" (Greenbaum, 2000, p. 27). Through eliciting detailed conversation about reinforcement of masculinity in fantasy sport participation, he led a discussion that created a strong understanding of how and why men use sports as a means of reaffirming their manhood.

The focus group concluded by answering questions that the participants had about the study and thanking them for their time and participation. Altogether, group discussion lasted approximately 80 minutes. Following termination of the focus group, the first author reviewed his fieldnotes to uncover areas of ambiguity or uncertainty in the information received. As soon as these ambiguous areas were discovered, the participants were asked for clarification via telephone. By contacting the focus group participants in case of uncertainties, credibility was demonstrated through "having the researcher's constructions of the data approved by the people who created the data" (Hanson & Newburg, 1992, p. 35). With the permission of the participants, the group interview was audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and each focus group member was assigned a respective pseudonym.

Analysis and Interpretation

Transcriptions and fieldnotes were analyzed and reanalyzed to ensure clarity and decrease ambiguity. Drawing from transcriptions and fieldnotes, the first author broke down the data into emergent themes or meaning units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These meaning units consisted of relevant statements pertaining to the purpose of the study. Meaning units were then coded, collated, and organized into larger and more encompassing categories. This was done by attaching code words to each meaning unit, allowing the first author to compare and group meaning units into more complex categories. To facilitate transferability, the data collection and analysis had a thick description and was well documented, both of which provided the reader with the "context and conditions under which the study was conducted to allow the reader to make an informed decision about whether the information presented is relevant to his or her situation" (Hanson & Newburg, 1992, p. 37).

Due to the exploratory nature of this investigation as well as its small sample size, the authors feel it is important to note that the reader should exercise caution when considering this investigation's results so as not to make totalizing assumptions concerning fantasy league participation in other geographical regions outside the United States.

Results and Discussion

Results of the current study suggest that participants did indeed use fantasy sport participation as a means of reaffirming their masculinity. Participants described several ways in which fantasy sport allowed them to maintain and reinforce hegemonic masculine ideals. In addition, it became clear that through the harsh, sexist vernacular used by participants in the league on message boards and common interaction, as well as the nature and relative paucity of female participation, fantasy sport leagues have become a site for reinforcing traditional gender roles in a patriarchal domain of American society—the sport domain.

Two major themes emerged from the data, helping to provide a rich understanding of fantasy sport leagues and how they are used in sport spectatorship to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. First, the masculinity inherent in fantasy sport becomes evident when considering the ways in which participants were "doing gender" within fantasy sport leagues. Second, traditional gender roles in sport are reinforced through fantasy sport texts and participants' responses, actions, and behaviors, suggesting that fantasy sport is another way in which men symbolically bolster their superiority over women in the sport domain.

Within these sections, previous literature is linked to the results of this study, strengthening the relevance of the findings. In addition, implications of the results are discussed.

"Doing Gender" in Fantasy Sport Leagues

For an understanding and explanation of how fantasy sport leagues reaffirm and fortify masculinity, one needs to look no further than the ways in which men "do gender" in fantasy sport leagues. Sports are often considered to be inherently masculine because of the emphasis that is placed on strength, aggression, competition, and winning (DiIorio, 1989). In addition, sports have been presented as a means for men to display sports knowledge as well as bond in social settings (Duncan & Brummett, 1993). Results of the current investigation provide reinforcement for the significance of these characteristics (i.e., sports knowledge, competition, and bonding) as they pertain to displaying masculinity within the sport spectatorship milieu. However, the results also point to the reinforcement of another hegemonic ideal which has rarely been discussed in spectatorship of sport literature—the masculine characteristic of control and authority. Data highlighting these masculine characteristics of fantasy sport participation are presented further on in the article.

Control

Because participation entails the drafting of a team as well as the structuring of a starting roster, fantasy sport leagues offer the vicarious satisfaction of being in control.

James, a focus group participant, explained this feeling of control by appointing himself to a pseudo front office job:

> Well, you're an owner, so it's not everybody out there who gets to start their own team. This way, you know, you can pay 20 bucks to get in the league and feel like you're controlling all these players, you know. It gets you even more into the game. You can sit down and watch like, you know . . . I'm not a Toronto Raptor fan, but I was watching Chris Bosh tonight because he was playing on my team for me.

James further explained his thoughts and feelings about having control over players and his team:

> You feel, like, you know, like, "This guy sucks. I'm gonna take him out and I'm gonna put this guy in who's doing better. I'm gonna cut this guy because he is injured so I'm going to pick up [trade for] somebody else." You feel like you can control the sport, the team, and stuff.

These responses illustrate how James feels he can symbolically manipulate the athletes who, in a sense, play for him. This sense of control, provided by fantasy sports, allows men to experience the social power that predominantly White, male owners of professional sports teams possess on a daily basis. In addition to the responses earlier expressed, the medium of a league-specific message board, by which fantasy participants can send messages to one another about trading players, further strengthens this experience of control. Next is a posted message from one of the participants in the league concerning some proposed wheeling and dealing of basketball players:

> Hey, I'm giving up Elton Brand who is a shot blocker and just a stat stuffer and Tinsley gets assists and 3s. If you have a better trade let me know.

These results reinforce Prisuta's (1979) findings in his investigation of spectators of televised sport. Prisuta found that the majority of spectators (i.e., mostly male) were found to be more authoritarian in nature, meaning that these individuals were accepting of "the legitimacy of those in power" (p. 95). With the help of this message board, participants reinforce their masculinity by placing themselves in the shoes of authoritative and affluent team owners. Through businesslike ventures, masculinity is fortified by accepting and exercising social power over players as well as by challenging other participants to trade athletes to create the best team possible. Acquisition of players brings to light a very important component of successful fantasy sport participation—the necessity of sports knowledge.

Importance of Sports Knowledge

In addition to control, another emergent masculine characteristic of fantasy sport participation is an emphasis on displays and generation of sports knowledge. Personal observations suggest that a large amount of time is spent gathering and memorizing statistical sports information. Being a roommate of a fantasy sport participant, the first author often observed his roommate repeatedly checking Web sites for statistics on several different players, bordering on the compulsive. These personal observations are consistent with Gantz and Wenner's (1995) findings that suggest men more frequently add to their sports knowledge by reading sports media. To assist the sport knowledge generation process, the Yahoo Sports Web site offers the latest news for fantasy sport participants, taking a facts and figures approach, which Kennedy (2000) suggests appeals to males because of its "plain statement of truth without obvious personal bias" (p. 72). Here, the sports buff can be privy to recent injuries and statistics, allowing him to display this sports knowledge in ways that are often overtly masculine and vocally aggressive. For instance, Chris, a fantasy participant, was observed aggressively voicing his pleasure for a player he drafted by reciting his statistics verbatim:

> [Allan] Iverson had 38 points, 12 assists, 5 steals and only 4 turnovers. I can't believe I picked him up in the fourth round. He kicks so much ass for me!

Chris showed that men's sports knowledge and successful moves with player acquisitions act as a source of pride and empowerment, which is communicated in an overtly aggressive, masculine way.

In contrast to the empowerment of displaying a strong knowledge of player statistics, individuals who are less well informed are often openly ridiculed for poor draft, trade, and roster structuring decisions. For instance, Tyler, a participant of the focus group, recalled the annual football draft when a participant made a poor drafting choice in the first round:

> I was like, "Oh, nice pick, idiot." Like, Mark picked Tony Gonzalez in the first round and everybody was laughing. Like people come in that aren't prepared you can just tell and it's really funny. I mean Mark knew that Tony Gonzalez is the best tight end, or one of. But he didn't understand that tight ends probably score like nothing compared to quarterbacks and running backs.

Consistent with Tyler's response was James's explanation of how his brother is ostracized in his family's fantasy football league:

> Like, my brother was first in it [fantasy football league] when he was in high school. He picked somebody and, like, that guy was, like, injured, like, it was like all over the news and he didn't know it. So he picked him and like they still give him shit now for, like, . . . the whole time we're there, they're all standing there ripping on him, like, all my uncles and my grandpa. He's like 27 now.

The earlier responses provide useful insight into the role that sports knowledge plays in displaying masculinity. As Hartmann (2003) suggests, displaying sports knowledge offers men the chance to indirectly evaluate what it means to be a man, reaffirming masculinity in sport spectatorship. As the previous responses demonstrated, a lapse or deficiency in sports knowledge leads to overt disparagement, questioning the participant's masculinity on a public stage. By the same token, those taking part in taunting strengthen their own masculinity by boasting their sports knowledge superiority. Because the typical fantasy sport league player is already at the top of the status hierarchy, it is not surprising that he would do everything possible to maintain his sense of being the best and the brightest. One way to keep his feelings of superiority intact is by putting others down, as Tyler and James demonstrate. This drive for superiority becomes even more apparent when considering the next masculine characteristic of fantasy sport leagues—the role of competition.

Competition

Perhaps one of the most readily available forms of masculinity in fantasy sports is the characteristic of competition among league participants. As DiIorio (1989) argued, competition with an emphasis on winning is inherently masculine. The basic nature of fantasy sports allows for frequent competitive experiences; one owner's team battling the other's. Week in and week out, participants go head to head with another member's team. Although expressing how fantasy sports may offer a chance for males to reinforce their masculinity, Tyler mentioned competition as a means for doing so:

> Well, it's like the whole competitive thing. It seems like a lot of men just have to be really competitive at something, whether it be a basketball league that they're in, you know, recreationally, or just fantasy sports. Yeah, I definitely think it reinforces their, you know, "I'm a man."

Tyler also explained competition as it pertained to the league in which he participates in:

> The group that we have, it's all friendly competitiveness, but it gets . . . it gets the best of you sometimes. It gets you kind of riled up when his team's doing a little bit better and you think you got the guys.

These two responses provide insight into how competition is quite often an important part of fantasy sport participation. Competition allows men the opportunity to exercise dominance over each other, emphasizing winning as a means of bolstering one's masculinity and pride.

Consistent with the responses earlier, textual analysis of the message board as well as observations also indicate competition as a mode of fortifying masculinity. In particular, the message board offers members the ability to trash talk with one another without having to be physically present. In fact, textual analysis of the Web site also reveals a "trash talk" option that has been recently added to the fantasy sport system, allowing participants the opportunity to openly ostracize fellow fantasy leaguers through message boards specifically designed for this purpose. This fantasy sports tool facilitates reinforcement of masculinity by allowing men to explicitly and harshly verbalize their dominance over other competitors. The following are examples of message board postings that use trash talking and crude, misogynistic, and heterosexist vernacular as a means of articulating supremacy:

> I got you this week. I'm gonna beat your stacked team with my pussy team. I'm gonna bite your ear off and eat your children. Remember when Evander had two ears??

> Hey fuck faces, hey I couldn't play Garnett because he wasn't on my team until after I left for the cruise so fuck off. Now, you're all in big, big trouble.

> Eat Shit!!! I will beat your ass 9-0 . . . just wait!

These messages, though perceived as humorous and not taken literally by participants, are explicit instances of how competition is used as a mode of reinforcing masculinity. One mode men use to heighten their masculinities is the use of demeaning language to establish their dominance over other participants. These participants do so by putting fellow fantasy leaguers down, referring to them as women, subordinating them and objectifying women in the process by calling these inferior participants pussies. This is often a systematic strategy of reinforcing hegemonic ideals. By sending these messages, participants also threaten other players and their families. Physical harm is often implied when describing upcoming competitions that participants have against each other, exercising the importance of supremacy over one another. The use of strong, aggressive language also demonstrates the hypermasculine heterosexist nature of fantasy sport communication, making it a safe house for males to recreate and strengthen hegemony that might not be acceptable in other instances. That said, it may seem rather ironic that these off-color and threatening comments often lead to a form of camaraderie among fantasy sport participants.

Bonding

Despite the earlier-mentioned comments meant to present a tough, dominant persona in a competitive sense, male fantasy sport participants often mentioned a bonding component. Just as Duncan and Brummett (1993) suggested about televised sport, results from this investigation demonstrate fantasy sport as a pleasurable

social experience for the focus group participants. Tyler explained how he feels that the initial draft was a bonding experience:

> I do like a night of research for who I want to draft and Chris and I have draft note-books for who we want to pick. We have, like, our top 50 players that we want to pick and then we divide them up in to quarterbacks, running backs, wide receivers. We just rank everything. That's what we've done for 2 years in a row. In a way, it's kind of a . . . I don't know, for all three of us . . . I think it's kind of bonding cause we are all like "Who are you gonna pick first? I don't know, who are you gonna pick first?"

Chris, another focus group participant, confirmed the importance of bonding by recalling a time when he was helped by another focus group member:

> The 1st year, you dropped, like, you dropped some tight end and you were like, "Go pick him up man, he's really good. I got a good tight end so you can have him."

These two responses signify the opportunity for males to bond through fantasy sport participation. These responses are congruent with observations of the participants as well. Often members were observed forming friendly alliances to help those with whom they were close friends. It was particularly significant that the focus group participants in this study were a part of one of these alliances. This alliance extended outside of fantasy sports and into recreational times. Often conversations would strike up among participants while they were enjoying free time at local taverns. For instance, fantasy sports were used as a form of comic relief and male bonding. Here, Tyler recalls a time when he used fantasy sports to strike up a conversation with a well-known professional basketball player who happened to be present at a bar these individuals often frequented:

> Like, I met Richard Jefferson at the bar [laughs]. I was like, "Hey, Richard Jefferson," I had a few in me so I got some courage [everyone laughs], "Hey man, you're on my fantasy team and you did really well." And he was, like, "Yeah, man, I do what I can everyday." And I was, like, "Well, good game tonight and thanks a lot" and I just walked away [laughs].

In the earlier response, it becomes apparent that fantasy sports bleeds into every-day conversation and leisure time. This experience was often recalled by the participants as a source of hilarity, adding to the bond that fantasy sports had provided for these individuals. This result remains consistent with the literature (Duncan & Brummett, 1993) in that by creating this social environment in which men can discuss and laugh about fantasy sports, they create an outlet to display their masculinity to others through vocal exchanges as well as acts that facilitate male bonding. As Hartmann (2003) states, "sports' most vital social function with respect to masculinity is to provide a separate space for men to discuss" (p. 19).

Gender Differences in Fantasy League Participation

Drawing from personal observations, we realized that more men participated in fantasy sports than women. The league that was observed contained no female participants. In fact, when asked about female participation in fantasy sports, the focus group participants all agreed that men more frequently participate in fantasy sports. This finding is not surprising given that fantasy sports polling and online survey studies have demonstrated a dramatically higher instance of participation in males (Hu, 2003; Levy, 2005). The focus group participants were particularly candid while articulating why they believed fantasy sports to be aimed toward a male demographic. Tyler explained why he thought this might be:

> It's kind of bad, but it's, like, the typical, how you would see men and women. I mean, men watching the sports and women, for the most part, baking me some cookies [laughs]. Not like that, but you know. It's just more pigheaded.

When asked how he thought a man would feel if a woman beat him in a fantasy sport competition, Tyler suggested that it would be hard to take:

> I actually think it would be kind of weird. I would be kind of weirded out if a girl knew more about this shit than I did. I don't know. It just doesn't seem like that should be [everyone laughs]. I'm stuck in the Stone Age kind of. It's like, "Oh man, Vince Carter had a really good game today. He had like 32 points." [Speaking as a female fantasy participant] "Actually no, he had 34 points, 9 rebounds, and 7 assists." I would be like "Holy shit, girl! What the hell is that about! You're psycho!" [everyone laughs]. A lot of us guys are behind the times. I'm trying to be less pigheaded. I try not to generalize as much, but it still happens sometimes.

In this response, Tyler admits that he is being sexist because he believes that it would be unusual if a woman beat him in what he feels is a man's role in society. This finding is consistent with literature in the area (Hartmann, 2003; Messner et al., 2000). As Hartmann (2003) explains, sport spectatorship is the means by which most individuals participate in sports, serving as a way for men to "reinforce, rework, and maintain their masculinity" (p. 17). When this avenue for masculinity maintenance is threatened by women, men feel vulnerable. On the other hand, when women participate in a way that reaffirms masculinity and male supremacy, participation is not considered threatening. For instance, Chris recalled a time when he asked his girlfriend and her friend to participate in a past league:

> Her top quarterback was Joey Harrington. I was like, "Okay." So then I picked first in the draft for her [laughs]. And then she never, barely, hardly ever looked at her team. When she did, I was with her. I'm sure it was the same thing when Mary had other friends help her, right?

This statement is particularly powerful in illustrating gender roles in this fantasy sport league. Chris admitted that the two women were only asked to participate because two more people were needed to complete the league. This response demonstrates how women took on a subordinate role in the participation of this person's past fantasy league. These women did not participate because of their knowledge or enjoyment of the sport; rather, they participated to support their boyfriends' fantasy football league. The fact that other men helped them to draft and play certain athletes during the season demonstrates and reinforces the symbolic superiority that men have over women in fantasy sport leagues. This result reinforces ways in which men keep women in a socially inferior position in the sport domain (DiIorio, 1989).

Men's Sports Used More Than Women's Sports

In addition to the gendered participation rates inherent in fantasy sport leagues (Hu, 2003; Levy, 2005), it is imperative to consider the sports that are featured in fantasy league competition. Drawing from textual analysis of the Yahoo Fantasy Sports Web site, it is obvious that fantasy sport leagues are intended to cater to the male sports fan. For instance, the home page of the Yahoo Fantasy Sports Web site bombards the fantasy leaguer with the latest updates from such sports as: football, baseball, basketball, hockey, golf, auto racing, and college football. Not a single update is given for women's sports. Similarly, Yahoo fantasy sports does not offer entry into any women's fantasy sports leagues. These results demonstrate how fantasy sports are shaped and targeted toward a male demographic. Similar to the television media and their portrayals of female athletes (Duncan & Brummett, 1989), fantasy sport leagues neglect or ignore women's sports. In this way, fantasy sport leagues construct a privileged place for males to indulge in narcissistic pleasure (Duncan & Brummett, 1989), whereas it "symbolically annihilates" (Tuchman, 1978) women. This helps explain how men are offered a chance to strengthen hegemony through sport, maintaining the wide gender gap in the spectatorship of sport.

Consistent with these findings was that of focus group responses regarding the reasons for the disproportionate use of men's sport in comparison to women's sport. When asked about why they believe men's sport is more popular in fantasy sport leagues, Chris explained that it is because of talent level:

> Well, like, 'just cause they are better. Like in track, for example, would you rather watch a girl long jump 18 feet or watch a guy jump 23? You know, there are longer distances and faster times. Guys who play football are friggin' not human, they are huge.

Here, Chris explains that men's sport is used instead of women's because of the obvious athletic superiority of males. Invoking the oppositional binary (Kane, 1995) (e.g., that men are strong and women are weak), this statement suggests that men maintain superiority in the sport domain due to their superior physical ability in

sports. What is left unsaid is that, as a culture, we pay homage to the most extreme possibilities of the body (Messner, 1988) while ignoring other components of athleticism. James took this finding a step further in his explanation of why he believes football to be the most frequently used sport for fantasy participation:

> For football, you got, like, 300=plus–pound guys running like 4 something, like low, like not low but high 40s, and like 40=inch verticals and like . . .they're athletes. Their athletic ability is just awesome. Chad Johnson, like Terrell Owens—most of those guys make like awesome catches every week.

In this statement, James argues that football is used the most in fantasy sports because of its emphasis on masculine characteristics such as strength, power, and speed (DiIorio, 1989). In this regard, fantasy leagues become celebrations of masculinity by emphasizing attributes such as size, strength, speed, power, and aggression, all qualities that privilege the stereotypical male. Note, however, that there are other ways to define athleticism (i.e., endurance, agility, grace) in which many women can be thought to be superior to men, yet these athletic qualities are routinely ignored (Duncan, 2006; Messner, 1988).

These findings are also consistent with previous research regarding preferences in sport spectatorship. According to these studies, males enjoy more physical and aggressive sports than women (Sargent et al., 1998; Sullivan, 1991), which may provide another explanation as to why 93% of fantasy sports participants engage in fantasy football leagues ("Fantasy Sports," 2003; Hu, 2003; Isidore, 2003). Due to increased male participation, it is no surprise that fantasy leagues maintain the gender gap in the enjoyment of sports, strengthening sports as a site of masculine reaffirmation.

Furthering the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in fantasy sport leagues are the focus group responses offered by participants when asked what women's sports they would use for fantasy leagues:

> I would compete in fantasy sports that girls could do better than guys. You know, like gymnastics, umm . . . like diving. You know, guys can do a little better but it's just, they [women] look way more sleek, way more professional when they do it, I think.

Another participant mentioned gymnastics and figure skating as two sports worthy of fantasy league participation. These results affirm traditional gender roles because, in this case, men are choosing gender-typed sports as potential female fantasy sports they would participate in. Women are unable to transcend the stylistic and subjectively judged sports (Sargent et al., 1998) that their participation is often limited to. Also, the nature of these aesthetically judged sports may add a sense of voyeuristic pleasure (Duncan & Brummett, 1989) for male spectators due to the revealing uniforms (i.e., swimsuit, leotard, short-skirted ice-skating costume) these women wear during competition. In any case, it is evident that gender roles are fortified and preserved through the actions and beliefs of these fantasy sport participants.

Summary and Conclusions

The results of the current study indicate that fantasy sport leagues do facilitate reinforcement of hegemonic ideologies in the spectatorship of sports. Feelings of control, the necessity and importance of sports knowledge, the role of competition, and the opportunity for male bonding are important ways of reinforcing masculinity in fantasy sport participation. Control and authority emerged as characteristics of fantasy sport participation that allowed males to reinforce their masculinity. By allowing participants the opportunity to control rosters and trades, fantasy sport allows participants to experience the unique social power that predominantly White, male owners of professional sports teams possess on a daily basis.

In addition to control, fantasy sport participants reinforce masculinity by using sports knowledge as empowerment. An emphasis is placed on maintaining a solid knowledge base of statistics and sports news. Sports knowledge is also used against others who are not statistically knowledgeable, in an attempt to emasculate them by ridicule or taunts.

Competition arises as another important mode of fortifying masculinity through fantasy sport participation. Analysis of fantasy league message boards as well as focus group responses indicated competition as an important component of the masculinization of fantasy sport participation. Competition fosters an ideology of male supremacy by allowing men to celebrate their masculinity through verbal acts of aggression, emphasizing power and strength. This assists in creating an ideological terrain for men to become immersed in what Messner et al. (2000) call "The Manhood Formula," allowing men to learn what it is to be real men.

Finally, fantasy sport participation demonstrated a means for individuals to bond. Through masculine forms of male exchange, or banter as defined by Kennedy (2000), males formed friendly alliances within fantasy leagues. In addition, fantasy sports often became a topic of conversation when men engaged in leisure activities. By treating fantasy sports as a social experience, participants reinforced previous research by increasing their enjoyment of sport spectatorship (Duncan & Brummett, 1993).

Results from the current study also reinforced traditional heterosexual gender roles in the domain of sport. Based on the relative dearth of female participants as well as the cursory nature of female participation in past leagues, men in this fantasy sport league were able to display their dominance over women. In addition, focus group responses indicated that competition with women who were serious about fantasy sport leagues would create uneasiness, challenging the male's masculinity and supremacy in sport. However, the relative absence of female participation allows males to create what Hartmann (2003) calls a separate space for men in the sport domain. Results further reinforce traditional heterosexual gender roles in the sport domain by demonstrating the absolute vacuum in women's sports in fantasy sport leagues on the Yahoo Fantasy Sports Web site.

However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that women are challenging the sport domain. Informal observation suggests that increasing numbers of women participate and watch sports, joining the ranks of men as athletes and sport spectators. As their masculine stronghold on sport is challenged, men separate themselves from women, allowing them to "reclaim their 'natural' roles as leaders" (Messner, 1997, p. xiv). Messner (1997) suggests that "groups that have organized their discourse and practices around 'men's issues' or 'men and masculinity' have done so as a response to current shifts and crisis tendencies in the relations of power between and among women and men" (p. 13). It is our suggestion that fantasy sport leagues have become another "separate space" for men to practice masculinity.

In many respects, fantasy sport leagues act as an "Old Boy's Club" that allows men to communally meet, bond, and redefine what it is to be masculine. Within this space, men can act like men without fear of feminization. Although on a less extreme scale, fantasy sport leagues may be compared to such movements as the Promise Keepers and the mythopoetic men's movement, insofar as they allow men the opportunity to reconstruct hegemonic masculinity in a safe environment, free from feminine influence.

These conclusions also suggest one possible answer to the question of why the number of women participants in fantasy sport leagues is so low. Although women may have as much access to computers as men as well as the requisite computer skills, the construction of the young, White, middle-class, heterosexual male domain of fantasy sport leagues creates a climate that is actively hostile to women. The fact that most male players are accustomed to a secure position at the top of the status hierarchy may account for men's obvious belief in their own superiority. It is that sense of superiority and the vying for masculine dominance occurring in this space that may be so off-putting to many women. The trash talking in which women are referred to as pussies and the construction of femininity as synonymous with weakness would surely be offensive to many women. The pigheaded attitudes about women's place (baking cookies) while the guys watch the game may contribute to women's sense that fantasy sport leagues are inhospitable.

When women are recruited to participate in fantasy sport leagues, it is because there are not enough men to fill out the ranks; thus, they are seen as placeholders for men, who are judged to be far more knowledgeable. In addition, sports in which women have an advantage over men (i.e., sports stressing agility and long-term endurance) are absent from fantasy leagues. It's even possible that some women also find the prospect of owning and managing a professional sports team so unimaginable (given the low number of female owners and managers in actuality) that they cannot engage with it.

Fantasy sport leagues also appear to be a site where privileged White males try to resecure their stronghold on sport culture. Kusz (2001) suggests that in the past decade, White males are making an effort to take sport away from Black men whose athleticism, according to the well-worn stereotype, is superior to that of White men.

By constructing themselves as disadvantaged and underprivileged, White men stand to resecure their privilege in American sport culture.

It is no surprise to the authors that fantasy sport participation has increased dramatically since the late 1990s, which Kusz (2001) suggests spawned the beginning of "White male backlash politics" (p. 391). Given this movement, it is quite possible that White males have taken these discourses and created a privileged space—separate from feminization but also from Blacks. Within fantasy sports, Whiteness remains invisible as White participants model the work of predominantly White coaches, general managers, and owners in the big three professional sports (football, baseball, basketball), whereas their Black counterparts lay themselves on the line game in and game out in an attempt to create a successful outcome for their teams. As coaches, managers, and owners, White male participants exercise hegemonic ideologies by wheeling, dealing, exploiting, and victimizing their predominantly Black players (i.e., running backs, receivers, guards) for their own financial betterment and sense of masculinity.

Perhaps the invisibility of Whiteness in fantasy sport leagues stems from the fact that most of its operations are housed and conducted via the Internet. As discussed earlier, fantasy leagues cater to those who are well-educated professionals, (Levy, 2005), making enough disposable income to be able to afford computers, the Internet, and cable television (e.g., ESPN), to increase their chances of successful outcomes in fantasy leagues. Though it is not within the scope of this investigation to answer the question of White privilege in this particular cultural space, we believe that this reflection provides an intriguing starting ground for future research into issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality in fantasy leagues.

Note

1. According to Wikipedia, the term *digital divide* was coined by Simon Moores and refers to "the socio-economic difference between communities in their access to computers and the Internet" "Digital & Divide," n.d.). The term also refers to gaps between groups in their ability to use information and communications technologies effectively due to differing literacy and technical skills and the gap in availability of quality, useful digital content. The divide is seen as a social and political problem. It became an issue among concerned parties, such as scholars, policy makers, and advocacy groups, in the late 1990s.

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