Sports in the Media: Perceptions of Athletic Activities and Their Influence on Leisure

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The current study examined relationships between sports consumption, values, and media use. In particular, the authors considered relationships between athletic or physical values, perceptions of their portrayal in the entertainment media, sports media use, athletic behaviors (attending events, playing sports), and general media use. A probability survey in a major metropolitan area revealed that sports fandom is related to the importance of being healthy, athletic, and physically fit. These findings suggest that the “passive” leisure allocations commonly ascribed to sports viewing do not displace “active” leisure in the form of actual attendance at sporting events and programs. With regard to sports competition generally, then, the authors see little support for Putnam’s (1995, 2001) metaphor of “bowling alone” (or media-induced malaise) among our sports fans.

Keywords: leisure, sports consumption, media, values

As we enter the new millennium, obesity levels in the general population have risen to 20%, while public participation in various leisure activities, as consumers and audiences, continues to shift (Spors, 2003). More than half of American adults still do not meet the government-recommended 30 min of moderate activity (e.g., playing sports) at least 5 days a week (Spors). As public participation in sports declines, media and other revenue streams for professional sports continue to rise in the United States, and the presence of a local professional sports franchise is even seen as a plus for civic pride (e.g., St. John & Kane, 1998).
Putnam (1995, 2001) points to the decline of collective forms of participatory sports leisure, particularly bowling leagues, as being symptomatic of a larger societal decline in civic life in the United States since the 1960s.

As these trends indicate, few areas of human activity have undergone as much change in recent years as public leisure allocations. Even among more traditional households, sports or other group activities no longer provide the primary focus for audience leisure. Instead, people are spending more time with media than with any other waking activity, as new channels such as the Internet compete for a fixed pool of audience leisure time (e.g., Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 2003; Robinson & Zill, 1997). For that reason, it is useful to investigate the link between media exposure, values, and participatory, as well as nonparticipatory, forms of leisure. The current study examined relationships between sports consumption, values, and media use in the United States. In particular, we considered relationships between athletic or physical values, perceptions of their portrayal in the entertainment media, sports media use, athletic behaviors (attending events, playing sports), and general media use.

**Literature Review**

The literature on televised sport has developed rather unevenly from a number of disparate domains. In the American context, research focuses on shifting perceptions of and audience tastes for various sports. For instance, baseball’s perennial status as the national pastime is undermined by recent public-opinion data suggesting that only 67% of teenagers call themselves baseball fans, compared with 78% who call themselves football fans and 82% who call themselves basketball fans (St. John & Kane, 1998). Changing audience tastes in sports have been influenced by media coverage patterns, as when television coverage of professional American football helped elevate the sport’s standing in the public consciousness during the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Abelman & Atkin, 2002).

Commentators (e.g., Altheide & Snow, 1979; Ericsson, Talreja, & Jhally, 2002) thus suggest that television exerts a new “media logic” that favors more violent, action-oriented sports, while slower-paced sports have been relegated to secondary status in the United States. To wit, the Superbowl has replaced the World Series as the top-rated sportscast in recent decades, with individual telecasts of the football championship accounting for nearly half of the top-20-rated telecasts of all time (see Biagi, 2007; Mullen & Mazzocco, 2000). Whannel (1992) documented the availability of over 2,000 hr of sports fare broadcast annually in the United Kingdom, outlining the ways in which it informs a larger cultural transformation.

This mediated sports “agenda setting” can work against minor sports, however. For instance, Tuggle (1997) found that ESPN’s *SportsCenter* and CNN’s *Sports Tonight* devoted about 5% of their time to women’s sports, with stories about women focusing on individual competition and almost no attention given to women’s team sports. Moreover, Hallmark and Armstrong (1999) found that coverage of women’s games featured fewer camera shots and graphics, used camera shots and graphics of longer duration, and took up significantly less
broadcast time. In cultural terms, these portrayals of sport contribute to changing conceptions of gender, often including hypermasculine males (e.g., Ericsson, Talreja, & Jhally, 2002; Whannel, 2002) or sexualized female athlete archetypes (e.g., Alper, 2002).

Focusing on the consumption of sports programming in the United States, Gantz and Wenner (1991) examined gender differences in the audience’s experience of televised sports in a survey of Los Angeles and Indianapolis residents. Men responded more like fans, even when the analysis controlled for interest in watching TV sports and their favorite sport. Similarly, Perse (1992) found that attention to sports news was correlated with male gender. Abelman and Atkin (2002) discuss the ways in which networks factor these gender tastes into their programming strategies, as when CBS countered ABC’s *Monday Night Football* with a lineup of women-oriented programs (e.g., *Murphy Brown*) during the 1990s.

Research in the uses and gratifications tradition (e.g., Rubin & Bantz, 1987) suggests that the consumption of media fare is related to the strength of audience motivations for viewing such content (e.g., diversion, arousal). When examining the consumption and influence of sports portrayals, Sullivan (1991) found that men enjoy player hostility more than women do and fans were as likely to be affected by commentary as were nonfans. Schweitzer, Zillmann, Weaver, and Luttrel (1992) discovered that fans of a losing football team were more pessimistic than fans of a winning team. Interest in sports programming also has been related to the need for stimulation in various contexts. Krcmar and Greene (2000), for instance, found that exposure to contact sports on television was associated with risk taking among adolescents age 11–22. Moreover, in a study suggesting a link between this need for stimulation to new-media adoption, Dupagne (1999) found that the intention to purchase HDTV was positively related to sports viewing. Klopfenstein, Spears, and Ferguson (1991) explored another dimension of audience activity with new media, finding that the longer people own a VCR, the more likely they are to record news, as well as sports fare.²

Interest in sports thus represents an emerging motivation for television viewing, according to research conducted in the uses and gratifications tradition. Walker (1990), for instance, looked at viewing gratifications during the 1987 NFL players’ strike, finding that active viewing gratifications were related to strike saliency and poststrike viewing but passive gratifications were not. Walker found that social demographics mediate the influence of sports coverage, however, as race and support for unions were related to support for the players (and not for the owners). Jeffres, Neuendorf, Bracken, and Atkin (2003) note that interest in sports was related to a media-use index (particularly newspaper reading) and use of new media (e.g., chat rooms, sports Web sites). The influence of media on actual selection of sports leisure activities, however, has received relatively little attention in the communication literature. It is useful, then, to craft an integrated theoretical framework, one that draws from the disparate literatures addressing audience media uses and gratifications (Walker), the values that sports viewing can cultivate (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), and their larger relationship to audience leisure activities (Massey & Baran, 1990).
Media Determinants of Sports Leisure Allocations

Past work (e.g., Tinsley & Tinsley, 1986) suggests that public allocations of time and money for various leisure pursuits might be determined, in part, by such dimensions as social locators. To that we can add other reciprocal factors, including nonmedia leisure and media and/or communication technology adoption and use. Given the dearth of work addressing the specific intersection of participatory, spectator, and mediated sports options, we will review literatures relevant to these theoretical components in turn.

Jeffres, Neuendorf, and Atkin (2000) underscore the utility of focusing on media for two reasons: Media themselves represent primary leisure activities, and they can stimulate patronage of public leisure activities (e.g., radio promotion of a local sporting event). Leisure has been defined as an “attitude or state of mind in which the individual subjectively believes that he or she is pursuing an activity for personal idiosyncratic reasons rather than as a result of external coercion” (Tinsley & Tinsley, 1982, p. 105).

To wit, communication behaviors can be viewed as “external factors affecting activities as well as leisure behaviors themselves” (Jeffres, Atkin, & Neuendorf, 1995, p. 69). Even so, not all media-use activities consistently fit the purposive dimensions associated with leisure (Tinsley & Tinsley, 1986). Leisure considerations might well determine media habits, especially given evidence of displacement of traditional mass media by newer media (e.g., Lin, 1992). The average consumer spends more time engaged with media than with any other activity except sleep, including roughly 4 hr a day with television—accounting for 40% of leisure time—along with 3 hr for radio and 30 min for newspapers (e.g., Robinson & Zill, 1997; Biagi, 2007).

In theoretical terms, then, it is useful to conceptualize sports or other public culture and entertainment activities from the perspective of leisure studies, which assumes that leisure choices are motivated by certain internal needs and motives (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 2000). Following those intentions, audiences can fashion their own leisure selection and media-use patterns for the purposes of fulfilling various expectations. In the realm of sports consumption, we might expect the selection of these activities to be driven by underlying values about physical fitness, as well as sports entertainment motivations.

As Jeffres and Dobos (1995) found, the strength of leisure expectations can be determined by one’s quality assessment of various leisure domains. Only a handful of studies (e.g., Jeffres et al., 1995; Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 2003) focus on the relations between nonmedia leisure activities and media exposure. Drawing from past work on media substitution (e.g., Henke & Donohue, 1989), we might expect that media compete with nonmedia activities for audience leisure. These activities might also be competitive or orthogonal.

The arrival of media has also enriched available media leisure modalities (e.g., Lin & Atkin, 2007), having increased the significance of program options in the overall media-consumption process (Jeffres et al., 1995; Lin, 1992; Rubin & Bantz, 1987; Williams, Phillips, & Lum, 1985). This expanded repertoire of media offerings (Reagan, Pinkleton, Chen, & Aaronson, 1995) might enhance the desirability of media leisure activities relative to other leisure options.
Biagi’s (2007) review of aggregate data indicates that media account for the bulk of one’s time during a typical year (42%, or 3,661 hr), followed by sleep (33%) and time not spent using media (25%). In one of the few media studies investigating corollary impacts of media on other leisure activities, Jeffres et al. (1995) found that TV viewing is a functional substitute for such activities as going on dates, spending time with family, and the like. More recent work (Jeffres, Neendorf, & Atkin, 2003) reveals a positive relationship between time spent with media and with other leisure activities; that is, those who make greater use of media leisure are also more likely to be “busier” with nonmedia leisure activities (e.g., sports) and place a higher value on them. The only exception to that trend was TV viewing, leading the authors to conclude that it is a functional substitute for the diverse leisure activities that a community offers.

The pervasiveness of sport fare can influence perceptions and values in the larger culture, according to cultivation theory (see Gerbner, 1990), which suggests that the media help shape (or cultivate) the audience’s larger worldview. That is to say, more frequent viewers are more likely to think that the world is like that portrayed on television. Although cultivation scholars have yet to fully investigate cultivation influences with sports programming, research indicates that the media are instrumental in shaping audience values in domains ranging from fear of crime to gender perceptions (e.g., Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Attendance at live and mediated sporting events might thus cultivate audience values that are consistent with the value of sports (e.g., physical fitness), such that heavier exposure is related to greater agreement with such values.

The choice of leisure activities might, itself, be influenced by the quality of various media and nonmedia leisure options. Our interest in sports-related leisure encompasses such activities as going out to sporting events, playing sports, or patronizing sports programming. Based on the theoretical framework we have outlined, which draws from several interrelated literatures, we posited that values of being physically fit, healthy, active, and athletic would be related to participation in sports activities. More formally,

Hypothesis 1: Level of agreement with sports-related values (i.e., being physically fit, athletic, and active) is positively related to participation in sports-related media and leisure activities.

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of the prevalence of sports-related values in the media are positively related to participation in sports-related media and leisure activities.

Although the media-substitution hypothesis posits a competitive relationship between media and outside leisure options, these external social activities could also be stimulated by media promotions (e.g., for a 10K run). That is, in addition to serving as a competing leisure source, media are also an instrumental means of learning about the sports leisure opportunities available and how to find them. Because leisure has become such a significant component of both print and broadcast media, exposure to TV, newspapers, and other media also could be linked to greater participation in these sport and public leisure opportunities. We thus posited the following:
Hypothesis 3: The consumption levels of sports content across media modalities are interrelated.

Our review of past work finds a dearth of research addressing the relations between nonmedia leisure activities and media exposure (e.g., Massey & Baran, 1990). Of particular import here, Jeffres and Dobos (1995) note that (a) the strength of people’s leisure expectations is determined by their quality assessment of various leisure domains, which (b) depends on surveillance of the environment, including both media use and personal observation. The question of whether attendance at mediated sports encourages or displaces actual participation remains unanswered. Because past work provides no clear direction on the media versus nonmedia leisure dichotomy with sports, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: How is media exposure related to audience participation in sports activities?

Given that perceptions of sports programming and its influence can be shaped by social locators—along with and audience beliefs, interests and values—we posed a second research question:

RQ2: What is the relative influence of social locators, sports variables, and media use on participation in sports-related media leisure activities?

Methods

Study data are based on a telephone survey of respondents in a major Midwest metropolitan area as part of an annual survey (see Jeffres, Lee, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 2007). Respondents were selected using traditional random-digit dialing techniques and a computer-aided telephone interviewing system. The survey, presented as a general poll about current issues, contained items tapping respondents’ opinions on a wide variety of items and took about 8–12 min to complete. The response rate was about 45%, which is acceptable for contemporary surveys (Kempf & Remington, 2007), yielding a total of 305 respondents. The sample was composed of 43.4% men, and the average respondent was between 40 and 50 years of age.

Variables used in this article, outlined in the tables, were operationalized as follows.

Importance of Values Assessment

The key values for this study were embedded in a list of 30 values rated in terms of their importance. We followed procedures used by Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht (1997), who asked respondents to use a 0–10 scale to “rate how important each of the following values are to you personally,” where “0 means it’s totally unimportant, 10 means it’s extremely important and 5 is neutral.” Key individual measures included importance and portrayal of several physical values. Respondents were asked to rate (on a 0–10 scale) the importance of being physically fit, being
healthy, being athletic, and being active. These items were combined to form a “sports values held” index ($M = 31.8$, $SD = 6.2$, $\alpha = .70$). A companion set of measures assessed perceived portrayals of these values in the media: the portrayal of being physically fit, portrayal of being healthy, portrayal of being athletic, and portrayal of being active ($M = 29.0$, $SD = 7.4$, $\alpha = .80$).

**Sports Variables**

Several measures were constructed from measures of sports patronage and perceptions concerning the importance and portrayal of several physical values. The operationalizations were based on items used in other work (see Jeffres, Neuen-dorf, & Atkin, 2003; Jeffres et al., 2007). The four items were combined for an index of sports fandom, the Sports Fan Index. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they watch sports events on TV, listen to sports on talk radio, play sports, and attend sporting events using a 0–10 scale ($M = 15.3$, $SD = 9.9$, $\alpha = .72$).

**Knowledge of Popular Culture**

Respondents were asked how much they agreed with the statements about celebrities in the news, the particulars of which are outlined in our appended notes (index $M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.7$, minimum = 0, maximum = 6).5

In addition, media use was measured using the standard set of items for several traditional media:

- **TV Viewing**—Respondents were asked for the number of hours of television they watched “yesterday.” The scale ranged from 0 to 11 for more than 10 hr ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 2.3$).

- **TV News Viewing**—Respondents were asked how often usually watch the news on television: several times a day, about once a day, 5 or 6 days a week, 3 or 4 days a week, 1 or 2 days a week, or less often than that ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.6$).

- **Radio Listening**—Respondents were asked how many hours they listened to the radio “yesterday.” Coding was done using the same scale used for television ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 2.5$).

- **Newspaper Reading**—Respondents were asked how many days last week they read a newspaper, and responses were coded from 0 to 7 ($M = 3.398$, $SD = 2.9$).

- **Magazine Reading**—Respondents were asked how many different magazines they read regularly. Responses were coded into nine categories: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6–10, 11–20, and 21 or more ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 2.0$).

- **Book Reading**—Respondents were asked how many books they had read in the past 6 months. Responses were coded into the same categories used for magazines ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 2.8$).

- **Video Viewing**—Respondents were asked how many borrowed or rented videos they had watched in the past month. Responses were coded into the same categories used for magazines ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 2.6$).
• **Film Viewing**—Respondents were asked how many times they had gone out to see a movie in a theater in the past month. Responses were coded into the same categories used for magazines \((M = 1.3, SD = 1.6)\).

• **Traditional-Media Use**—Traditional-media use was factored into a measure of overall media use, in which responses to the use of traditional media were standardized and the scores summed \((M = .01, SD = 3.3)\).

### Media Use

Use of emerging media was also reflected, including the following modalities:

• **Computer Access**—Respondents were asked if they had a personal or laptop computer in their household, and responses were coded yes or no (yes = 59%).

• **Internet Access**—Respondents were asked if they had access to the Internet at home, at work, or both. Access was coded two ways, as a dummy variable where access anywhere = 1 and no access = 0 and as a continuum on which access at both home and work = 2, access at either alone = 1, and no access = 0.

• **Internet Use**—Respondents were asked if they had ever gone on the Internet (yes = 71%). Those who said “yes” were asked how often they go on the Internet at work, using a 0–7 scale ranging from several times a day to almost never. They also were asked how often they go on the Internet at work using the same scale. Several variables were constructed: (a) a simple usage measure where 1 = has gone on the Internet before and 0 = has never gone on the Internet, (b) Internet access (access = 1), (c) frequency of use of the Internet at work (those without access = −1), (d) frequency of use of the Internet at home (those without access = −1), and (e) overall Internet use combining the scores for usage at home and work \((M = 4.8, SD = 5.0)\).

• **Media Web-Site Use**—Respondents were asked how often they visited media Web sites such as one of the TV networks or a newspaper or radio site, using a 7-point scale ranging from almost never (1) to several times a day (7). Those not using the Internet were assigned a value of 0 \((M = 1.4, SD = 2.6)\).

• **Chat Room Use**—Respondents were asked if they had ever visited a chat room on the Internet to talk with people about something. Those who said yes were asked how often, using the following categories: every day (6), a couple times a week, about once a week, a couple times a month, or less often than that (2). Those who had never visited a chat room were assigned a 1, and those who had never gone on the Internet were assigned a 0 \((M = .33, SD = 1.7)\).

### Social Categories

Finally, social categories were measured using commonly accepted items including marital status (43% married, 13% divorced, 10% widowed, 3% separated, 27% never married), the number of people in one’s household \((M = 2.64, SD = 1.5)\), age (median in 40–50 age category, with 26% 30 and younger, 20% 31–40,
22% 41–50, 14% 51–60, 8% 61–70, and 11% older than that), level of formal education completed (6% some high school or less, 20% high school graduate, 32% some college, 24% college graduate, 14% advanced degrees), ethnic or racial background (21% African American, 64% White, 15% other), household income (median in $30,001–50,000 category, with 21% $30,000 or less, 15% $50–75,000, 11% $75,001–100,000, and 10% over $100,000), and gender (45% male, 55% female). Dummy variables were constructed for being married, being White, being Black, and being other race or ethnicity.

Pearson’s product–moment correlations were computed to examine the interrelationships among our various measures. Multiple-regression analysis was then used to further assess the influence of our background variables on attendance at sports-related media and leisure activities. The order of entry for predictor blocks in the prediction equation was (1) social locators; (2) the indices assessing respondent agreement with physical values, as well as their perception of media portrayals of said values; and (3) media exposure. Inspection of correlation analyses and indicators of variance inflation factors reveals that multicollinearity is not a concern.

### Results

By way of profiling relationships across the larger scope of variables included in the study, bivariate correlations between the media-use variables and sports variables are outlined in Table 1. Per the importance of physical values, the only value consistently related to all of the sports variables is being athletic, which is positively related to watching TV sports \((r = .22, p < .001)\), sports-radio listenership \((r = .18, p < .01)\), and the Sports Fan Index \((r = .38, p < .001)\). Similarly, relationships involving being active are also positive, albeit weaker in magnitude, and include linkages with watching TV sports \((r = .14, p < .05)\) and the Sports Fan Index \((r = .16, p < .01)\). The values of being physically fit and being healthy are generally unrelated to the dependent measures, however. On balance, then, these findings provide mixed support for Hypothesis 1’s prediction that sports-related values held by audiences would be related to their participation in sports-related media and leisure activities.

Because recognition of values in the media might be related to the sports variables, we tested for relationships involving media use and sports-based leisure. Viewership of sports on television is positively related to seeing three values portrayed in the entertainment media: being physically fit \((r = .13, p < .05)\), being athletic \((r = .15, p < .01)\), and being active \((r = .14, p < .05)\). The latter two values are positively related to sports talk-radio listenership, namely, being athletic \((r = .15, p < .01)\) and being active \((r = .15, p < .05)\). The Sports Fan index is related to the values of being athletic \((r = .17, p < .01)\) and being active \((r = .16, p < .05)\), as well as physically fit \((r = .11, p = .10)\). Perceptions of the value of being healthy are negatively correlated with knowledge of popular culture \((r = -.11, p < .05)\). On balance, these findings provide mixed support for Hypothesis 2.

In terms of media use, time spent watching sports on television is positively related to overall TV viewership \((r = .15, p < .01)\) and TV news viewership \((r = .18, p < .01)\). TV sports viewership is also related to newspaper readership \((r = .16,
Table 1  Relationships Between Sports Variables, Values, and Media Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of physical values</th>
<th>Watch TV sports</th>
<th>Listen to sports talk radio</th>
<th>Sports Fan Index</th>
<th>Popular-culture knowledge</th>
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<tr>
<td>being physically fit</td>
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<td>.09</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
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<tr>
<td>being healthy</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>being athletic</td>
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<td>.18***</td>
<td>.38****</td>
<td>.13**</td>
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<tr>
<td>being active</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.16***</td>
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<th>Sports Fan Index</th>
<th>Popular-culture knowledge</th>
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<td>being physically fit</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<td>-.18***</td>
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<tr>
<td>freq. visits media Web sites</td>
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<td>.11*</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.28****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Entries are zero-order bivariate correlations between the media-use variables and sports variables based on a sample size deviating slightly from 300.

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01. ****p < .001.
but inversely related to book readership ($r = -0.20, \ p < 0.01$), as well as radio listenership ($r = -1.3, \ p < 0.05$). Sports talk-radio listenership is linked with TV news viewership ($r = 0.13, \ p < 0.05$) and newspaper readership ($r = 0.11; \ p < 0.10$), but book reading is inversely related ($r = -0.18, \ p < 0.01$) and no relationship was found with overall radio use. On balance, we see a fairly consistent pattern of relationships involving sports and overall media use in the realm of traditional media, but this does not extend to newer media (e.g., video and Internet adjuncts). This leaves Hypothesis 3—which predicted interrelationships in attendance to sports content across media—with only a modest level of support.

The larger relationship between media exposure and audience participation in sports leisure activities is addressed in Research Question 1. Three of the four values (in an almost rotating fashion) are related to specific variables—watching sports on television and the Sports Fan Index. Thus, those for whom being physically fit, being athletic, and being active are important also engage in more sport-related behaviors. Only being athletic as a value is correlated with listening to sports talk radio. The values pertaining to sport generally are unrelated to knowledge of popular culture.

Finally, the Sports Fan Index is inversely related to book readership and positively related to newspaper readership and Internet use. The index tapping knowledge of popular culture is correlated with reading more magazines, watching films at the theater, and visiting media Web sites more frequently, as well as all the Internet access and use indicators. In particular, the number of significant relationships between the index and sports or traditional-media use variables is little more than we would expect from chance alone; only the Internet-use variables demonstrate a consistent pattern of relationships with knowledge of popular culture.

Per Research Question 2, a regression equation predicting participation in media and sports-related leisure is included in Table 2. The model was able to explain 25% of the variance in sports-media and leisure behaviors ($F = 5.0, \ p < 0.001$). Each of the predictor blocks—social locators, sports values, and media-use variables—significantly predicted sports-related media and leisure activities. Focusing on individual variables, age is an inverse predictor (standardized beta ($\beta$) = -0.22, $p < 0.05$), as is female gender ($\beta = -0.18, \ p < 0.05$). The index of sports-related variables held by the audience (i.e., health, activity, fitness, athleticism) is also a predictor ($\beta = 0.15, \ p < 0.05$), as is the index gauging the perceived prevalence of those values in the media (although the latter is not statistically significant). Media use is a predictor of sports-related media activities, with news viewership ($\beta = 0.14, \ p < 0.05$) and newspaper readership ($\beta = 0.26, \ p < 0.05$) emerging as unique predictors. Book readership, however, is an inverse predictor ($\beta = -0.20, \ p < 0.05$) of use of media and other sports leisure.

**Discussion**

The current study set out to examine the relationships between sports variables, values, media use, and sports leisure allocations. We worked from the assumption that a measure of personal utilities can be derived—across media and external sports leisure options—much like organizational measures of utility have been used in economics. Although there is no comprehensive measure of personal utility across all domains of one’s life, we can obtain clues to the larger whole by
aggregating a series of limited measures of leisure options, as presented here. The integrative framework proposed here suggests that individual media use and sports entertainment motives are linked to sports-media-related and leisure activities, which helps in turn cultivate values and behaviors that are central to sport (e.g., being physically fit).

Our results generally disconfirm past work (e.g., Mindich, 2005) suggesting that the media deplete social capital, given their potential to displace participatory forms of leisure (e.g., social gatherings). But where media treatment of government was indicted for creating a “videomalaise” in the 1970s (Robinson, 1976)—replete with public disillusionment over government and declining civic involvement—the ubiquity of mediated sport does not encourage an “armchair malaise” among the would-be athletes surveyed here. Given that sports fandom is related to the importance of being healthy, athletic, and physically fit, the “passive” leisure allocations for sports viewing do not displace “active” leisure in the form of actual attendance at sporting events and programs.

With regard to sports competition generally, then, we see little support for Putnam’s (1995, 1996, 2001) metaphor of “bowling alone” among our sports fans.

### Table 2  Multiple-Regression Model Predicting Sports-Related Media and-Leisure Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social locators</th>
<th>Final beta</th>
<th>$R^2$ change</th>
<th>$F$ change</th>
<th>Sig. $F$ change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>−.220**</td>
<td>6.680</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>−.033</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income</td>
<td>.109</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender (female)</td>
<td>−.176**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sports variables</th>
<th>Final beta</th>
<th>$R^2$ change</th>
<th>$F$ change</th>
<th>Sig. $F$ change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sports values held</td>
<td>.145**</td>
<td>5.450</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sports values portrayed</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media use</th>
<th>Final beta</th>
<th>$R^2$ change</th>
<th>$F$ change</th>
<th>Sig. $F$ change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>television use</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news viewership</td>
<td>.135**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radio listenerhip</td>
<td>−.010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspaper readership</td>
<td>.261**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>magazine readership</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>book readership</td>
<td>−.200**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>video viewership</td>
<td>−.005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>film viewership</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>computer use</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Total model: $R = .50; R^2 = .25; F(15, 227) = 5.0; p < .001. The dependent measure is the Sports Fan Index, a sum of four standardized items.

**p < .05.
Differences in individual sports notwithstanding, individuals involved in such community activities as sporting events might realize the kinds of organizational ties that Putnam sees in decline of late. And to the extent that media generally encourage rather than displace such activities, as we found with news media here, these outlets might actually encourage the formation of social capital, at least in the sporting realm. Consistent with work on cultivation theory (e.g., Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), our study results suggest that exposure to sports-media-related and leisure activities is associated, albeit modestly, with values such as athleticism.

At the intersection of media-use and -cultivation perspectives investigated here, it is important to realize that media-exposure motivations and values cultivated might constitute a feedback loop. Broader conceptions of mediated sport, investigated from a cultural perspective, see media as part of a larger social structure (e.g., Whannel, 1992). Similarly, Gerbner’s earliest formulations of cultivation (c. 1969) cast it as a theory of social influence or control, one that is consistent with more theoretically based critical-cultural conceptions involving the mass media (see, e.g., Gerbner, 1990). Later work might profitably investigate possible feedback loops between audience exposure and the strength of sports values held, in order to investigate the media’s role, both as influence agent and as mirror, with respect to values held in the larger culture.

Consideration of competing media leisure outlets is also critical, especially given the increased potential for audience activity presented by new video technology (in terms of viewing options, determining viewing schedules, and controlling viewing conditions). Again, the positive relationships with Internet or chat use and the Sports Fan Index reinforce leisure conceptions stressing complementarity. This finding also contradicts stereotypical notions of bookish, nonathletic “computer nerds” who shun outside leisure in favor of virtual online communities (e.g., Lin & Atkin, 2002). Even so, given the potential for new media to further fragment audiences—and perhaps diminish any cultivation or other effects stemming from exposure to mainstream media—it will be important to repeat this work over time. Preliminary work by Jeffres, Atkin, Bracken, and Neuendorf (2004) suggests that online modalities might well appeal to narrower audience segments, although audience losses in a national context might well be offset by increases afforded by the increasing globalization of media and sports marketing (e.g., the NBA’s recent forays into China).

Researchers would be hard pressed to demarcate these media-use dynamics in an orthogonal fashion, however, because the functions of many communication technologies are converging rather than diverging. Because outside sports leisure is related to home entertainment, it reflects a close parallel of reasons for engaging in those activities. Past work (Jeffres et al., 1995; Lin, 1992) suggests that media use alone does not obviate other leisure activities or generate social functions; perhaps additional utility-driven motives are a necessary catalyst for action. In the case of new-media use, this expectation is similar to past findings, which show that both gratification and utility-driven motives determine leisure (e.g., Lin; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgren, 1985) and might dictate why audiences use technologies like the VCR or DVDs for various purposes. It will be interesting to see, over time, if this continued fragmentation in the media environment weakens the media influences on the formation of sport-related values.
On balance, our study results offer support for the hypothesis that one’s leisure allocations for sports or media activities are related to sports-related values held by audience members (e.g., being athletic). Because perception of the portrayals of those values does not predict sports-related media and leisure behaviors, however, media influences figure only in the margins. A devoted fan might, for instance, use newspapers, radio, or even the Internet to follow a favorite team. But exposure to those media is not likely, in itself, a primary catalyst for sports fandom.

Because the current study was largely exploratory, findings should be regarded as preliminary; our analyses uncover a middling level of media influence reminiscent of other media-effects work (e.g., Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Across the bulk of film, video, magazine, and radio modalities, the number of significant correlations observed with sports leisure were relatively few (i.e., no greater than would be generated by chance alone). Television, favored by many as the dominant messenger of our time, is only a distant third to newspapers and the Internet in generating relationships with various sports leisure measures. That said, TV viewing accounts for one of the few negative relationships we observed with playing sports ($r = -.12$) in a separate analysis (not tabled), albeit the relationship is weak in magnitude. The lack of any consistent relationship involving TV and other forms of external sports leisure suggests that fragmented offerings might have reduced such effects, consistent with past work involving cultivation effects in the newer media environment (Perse, Ferguson, & McLeod, 1994). Later work might profitably address the extent to which our increasingly segmented media environment (e.g., Lin & Atkin, 2007) prompts a corollary fragmentation in sports patronage.

Exploring other relationships involving mass media, it is interesting to note that newspaper readership is most strongly suggestive of sports leisure evaluations. Linkages between reading and participating in sports as a spectator, viewer, or listener seem logical given that newspapers provide information, and perhaps even stimulate interest, for local events that can enrich one’s life (e.g., block parties; see Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Neuendorf, Jeffres, Skalski, & Atkin, 2000).

It is important to recognize the limitations of the current study, which is based on a one-shot survey that was conducted in a metropolitan area as part of an annual public opinion poll that, perforce, incorporated a limited range of items. The literature reveals few extant batteries tailored to this particular topic, and, importantly, time constraints prevented us from probing respondents further on their sports-attendance motivations, activities, and values. Study findings are limited by the fact that several demographic and media-use measures are ordinal level, so regression results involving such variables (e.g., education, income) should be interpreted with caution. Further work would be strengthened by matching content analyses, which could further verify the content structures to which audiences are exposed and enable researchers to explore cultural influences implicated in studies of sport.

Across our bivariate analyses, then, the fact that social categories were only weakly related to sports leisure measures reinforces the need to move beyond demographics and explore components of leisure and personal happiness (e.g., Jeffres et al., 2000). The youthful male profile of sports fandom uncovered here seems consistent with past work, as the pursuit of this demographic continues to push television bidding wars for sporting events generally (Abelman & Atkin, 2002).
On balance, our study results offer mixed support for the notion that participation in sports leisure activities is a function of media use and values related to sport. Although the magnitude of these relationships is not comprehensive, the large role played by underlying values in relation to sports reinforces the need to conceptualize audience leisure preferences in a larger domain considering the influence of sports leisure value and image assessments as more media options emerge.

Endnotes

1. Putnam recounts that in 1975, for instance, 236,000 single women with children under 18 were working in the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By the late 1980s, that number had quadrupled.

2. For a discussion of the empirical challenges associated with the audience consumption of sport, see Whannel (1992, 2002).

3. Those authors note that men have the greatest amount of free time when they’re at the youngest and oldest ends of the age scale (ages 18–29 and 65–69). Moreover, media behaviors take a larger share of leisure time at the top of the age ladder, where men and women age 60–65 spend 63% and 50% of their free time with mass media, respectively.

4. A random sample of phone numbers was drawn from the metropolitan telephone book. Then the last two digits were randomly assigned using a random-numbers table.

5. Items on popular culture included the following: “Can you tell me which of the following is the cohost of the Howard Stern Show on the radio?” (choices included Robin Williams, Robin Givins, Robin Swoboda, and Robin Quivers [correct]), “In the popular musical group TLC, what does TLC stand for?” (Tender Loving Care, T-Boz, Left Eye, & Chilli [correct]; Tina, Lolita & Carlota, T-Red, Lita, & Candy), “A recent movie being filmed in the Cleveland area is set in which of the following neighborhoods?” (local neighborhoods listed), and “Which of the following recently won the Tony award for the best musical on Broadway?” (The Lion King, The Producers [correct], The Full Monty, The Rocky Horror Show). Correct answers were summed to form a popular-culture-knowledge index.

6. Although using categorical variables in the model is not the best choice, gender and educational level are among the most commonly used variables in multiple regression for studies of this sort.

References


