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African American Student Athletes and Sports Media Consumption

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This study measures the use of media for sports information among African American student athletes. Television was indicated as the primary source of sports information by about one third of the target group, whereas newspapers were used much less as a source. About one fourth got their information from multiple sources. A somewhat unexpected finding was the limited use of sports radio as a source. Female respondents used media less frequently for sports information compared to male athletes.

Keywords: *sports media consumption; African American athletes; gender and sports media; sports television*

Recent studies suggest that young people in the United States are spending more time “multi-tasking” with the various forms of media. They often use media in tandem, alternating between foreground and background consumption. For example, individuals may watch a televised sporting event while surfing ESPN.com on their laptops to get more sports information or talk to each other via cell phone while simultaneously surfing the same Web site (Greenspan, 2004; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005).

The Kaiser Family Foundation study found that this generation of 8- to 18-year-olds truly is a media generation, devoting more than one fourth of each day to media. It also predicts that as media devices become more portable, media messages will become even more ubiquitous in an already media-saturated world. A Pew study suggested that most teens who were not previously online get connected by junior high school.

In terms of television, however, media consumption is far smaller than the number of channels available, which accelerates audience fragmentation (Webster, 2005). In fact, Brown and Pardun (2004) pointed out that

television channels and programs that have been developed primarily to appeal to young people are segmented further by race and gender. They found found that Black and White boys and girls in middle schools are living in largely different television worlds.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine a special segment of the African American population, student athletes. The study attempts to determine how Black student athletes use traditional and new media to fulfill their sports information needs. Very limited academic research exists that focuses on sports media use among African American athletes in a rapidly changing media environment.

Previous research has suggested that athletes are personally involved in sports media when media coverage is relevant. Armstrong (2002) found that African Americans are more avid fans of professional football, basketball, and tennis than are Whites or Hispanics. He suggested that African American sports consumers are apparently motivated to relinquish their financial resources to partake in the ethnically and culturally relevant sport experiences offered at historically Black colleges and universities. According to Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005), although African Americans have achieved equality in their participation in professional and intercollegiate sports, the coverage of these events gives a negative image of African American athletes as player-as-person.

Studies have also found significant gender differences because broadcast and print media under-represent and marginalize female athletes in their coverage (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Creedon, 1994; Cunningham, 2003; Duncan & Messner, 2000; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Hardin, Walsdorf, Lynn, & Hardin, 2004; McDaniel, 2003; Pedersen, 2002; Pedersen, Whisenant, & Schneider, 2003; Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, & Asley, 2000; Tuggle, 1997). Despite the fact that women's competition sports account for 40% of all sports in the United States, women garner only about 7% of the total sports coverage in newspapers (Hardin, 2005). Although about 3 million high school girls participate annually in sports and more than 150,000 women play college sports (Brand, 2003), Hardin (2005) found that some newspapers do not give adequate coverage to women's sports in part because editors believe women are less athletic and less interested in sports than are men.

Dutta-Bergman (2004), who developed a complementarity theory of media use, found that an individual interested in a topic such as sports is likely to be interested in the coverage of that topic on television, on radio, in newspapers, and on the Internet to optimize information gathering. In other words, the underlying interest of the individual in sports takes him or

her from the sports section of the newspaper to ESPN's Web site to ESPN's cable channel, depending on the particular medium available to him or her at that time. Hiestand (2004) describes that new technologies give sports fans even more ways to enjoy sports.

Given the limited research on African Americans as sports media consumers, the following research questions were formulated for the present study:

1. What types of sports media do African American student athletes use?
2. Is there a significant gender difference on sports media use among these student athletes?
3. Is there a significant age difference?
4. Do students' attitudes toward professional sports affect their sports media use?

Method

Sample Selection

A total of 256 Black track and field athletes participated in a study in spring 2004. These athletes were competing in the 53rd TSU Relays, an annual event that brings together some of the top high school and college athletes from around the country.

The mean age of the sample was 17.86, with a range of 14 to 24. About 67.0% of the students were high school students, and 33.0% were college students. The sample consisted of 51.0% males and 49.0% females. About 52.0% of the athletes were participating in multiple running events, 9.7% in multiple field events, 17.0% in a single running event, and 12.0% in a single field event. Another 7.3% were competing in both running and field events.

Measures

The first section of the survey included questions regarding the demographics and athletic experiences of the students. The demographic information from each student included the athlete's age, race, gender, major if in college or grade if in high school, and name of the school he or she was representing.

Participants also completed several track and field-specific questions. The questions regarding athletic experience asked the number of years of

participation in track and field, whether they play other sports, the amount of practice time per day, and whether they were on athletic scholarships if in college.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the amount and types of media used for sports information and news. The media choices included more traditional media—such as newspapers, sports radio, sports TV, and magazines—and newer media such as the Internet. Interpersonal channels, including coaches as well as parents or family members, were also listed. The survey measured the amount and frequency of viewing sports on TV on a 5-point scale, ranging from *every day* to *never/seldom*. Respondents were asked to identify their favorite sports TV network. Alternative media preferences for sports news and information were determined by several items: (a) reading the sports section of newspapers, (b) listening to sports radio, and (c) reading sports magazines. The utility of the Internet as a sports information source was measured by the availability of a PC at home, the accessibility of the Internet, and favorite sports Web sites.

The final section of the survey contained questions on the athletes' role models and attitudes about sports in the future. Students indicated their attitude toward their future involvement in professional sports by *yes*, *no*, or *maybe*.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

One month before the 2-day TSU event, coaches informed their teams about the survey during practice. Athletes chose to participate in the study when it did not conflict with their events schedule. The administration of the survey was done by its authors and graduate assistants trained in survey research. Response time for the self-administered questionnaire averaged 20 minutes.

The researchers included only Black students for the data analyses. Using SPSS 13.0 for Windows, frequencies and cross-tabulations were carried out to examine the amount and nature of sports media use among Black athletes.

Results

The central question of the study was how Black athletes use traditional and new media to fulfill sports information needs. Findings from the survey are presented according to major research questions.

Table 1
Favorite Source for Sports Information and News

	<i>n</i>	%
Newspaper	24	9.4
Radio	3	1.2
TV	87	34.0
Magazine	11	4.3
The Internet	25	9.8
Parent or family	12	4.7
Coach	26	10.2
Multiple sources	62	24.2
Other	6	2.3
Total	256	100.0

Table 2
How Often Do You Watch Sports on TV?

	<i>n</i>	%
Every day	84	33.6
Almost every day	52	20.8
3 to 4 times a week	26	10.4
1 to 2 times a week	50	20.0
Never/seldom	38	15.2
Total	250	100.0

Research Question 1: **Amount and Types of Sports Media Use**

About 34.0% of the students chose TV as their favorite source for sports information, 10.0% said coaches, 9.8% said the Internet, and 9.4% chose newspapers. About 24.0% of the respondents, however, indicated multiple sources, as shown in Table 1.

The amount of sports viewing was measured on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing *every day* and 5 representing *never/seldom*. Table 2 suggests that 33.6% of the sample watch sports on TV every day, whereas 20.8% said almost every day. The data also reveal that 15.2% of the student athletes rarely watch sports on TV. Nevertheless, about 73.5% of the sample reported that they watch local TV news for sports results, whereas 26.5% do not.

Table 3
How Often Do You Read Newspaper for Sports Results?

	<i>n</i>	%
Every day	16	6.3
Almost every day	31	12.3
3 to 4 times a week	30	11.9
1 to 2 times a week	77	30.4
Sundays only	31	12.3
Never/seldom	68	26.9
Total	253	100.0

Only 54.9% of the respondents indicated a favorite sports TV network, and 45.1% did not. Nearly 78.0% of the athletes who had a favorite sports TV network indicated ESPN; also, 6.6% indicated ESPN2; 2.5% indicated Fox Sports Net; and 13.1% said other.

These results indicate that newspapers are not reaching a very large percentage of Black athletes. Only 17.6% of the respondents said that they read a newspaper for sports results the previous day, whereas 82.4% did not. Newspaper reading was further measured by asking the number of days they regularly read newspapers, as summarized in Table 3.

Our findings are clearly in agreement with previous studies that have shown declining newspaper readership among young people. More than 97% of the sample reported no favorite sports reporter or columnist. Our data suggest that much of the sports coverage in newspapers is of little interest to young Black athletes. Thus, a racial disparity in newspaper readership exists in addition to an age disparity.

One of the most striking findings from the study was related to all-sports radio. The level of personal relevance of all-sports radio was extremely low for our sample, as illustrated in Table 4. Of those responding, only 2% of the student athletes listen to all-sports radio stations every day. Although we did not measure online radio listening, it does not appear that commercial radio stations with an all-sports format are reaching Black student athletes.

In addition, only 9% of the students have called sports talk shows, whereas 91% have not. Although radio stations cover athletics at all levels, the majority of our sample did not interact with station personalities.

About half of the sample do not regularly read sports magazines. Among those who do, 44.6% reported *Sports Illustrated* as their favorite sports magazine, 22.3% indicated *ESPN Magazine*, 5.4% indicated *Slam*, and 27.7% indicated other specialty magazines including *Runner's World*.

Table 4
How Often Do You Listen to All-Sports Radio?

	<i>n</i>	%
Every day	5	2.0
Almost every day	7	2.7
3 to 4 times a week	10	3.9
1 to 2 times a week	37	14.5
Never/seldom	196	76.9
Total	255	100.0

Given the growing importance of online sports information among young people, respondents were also asked about the availability of a PC and the Internet access at home. More than 80% of the sample had a PC and Internet access at home. The online users often visited ESPN.com and foxsports.com, as well as sportingnews.com, trackshark.com, usatrackandfield.org, NBA.com, and NFL.com.

According to the complementarity theory of media consumption, users of online news and information in a specific content area are also more likely to seek out information from traditional media outlets (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Our data suggest that student athletes indeed use both traditional and new media for sports information.

Research Question 2: Significant Gender Differences on Sports Media Use

Our data strongly suggest that there is a significant gender difference in sports media uses. First, more male athletes participate in other sports in addition to track and field at school and plan to pursue a professional sport, as shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Many previous researchers have argued that sports media overwhelmingly minimize and stereotype female athletes. Glancing at a newspaper sports section or watching a sports update on TV would convince most people that sports operate mainly in the male domain. The meaning and effect of gender differences in sports media in our sample are open to speculation. However, the pattern of differences remains significant. The data presented in Tables 7, 8, and 9 show a significant gender difference in the use of TV and newspapers for sports-related information. As discussed in Gantz, Wang, Paul, and Potter (2006, p. 98), gender makes a difference in

Table 5
Do You Play Other Sports at School?

	Yes	No
Male	92	38
Female	57	67

Note: $n = 254$. $\chi^2 = 16.098$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$.

Table 6
Do You Plan to Pursue Your Sports to a Professional Realm?

	Yes	No	Maybe
Male	80	18	32
Female	37	52	36

Note: $n = 255$. $\chi^2 = 32.467$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$.

sports viewing. Most of the previous research strongly suggested that men were more motivated to watch televised sports and indeed spent more time watching those programs.

The percentage differences are somewhat smaller in terms of sports radio and magazine use and do not approach statistical significance. When asked about playing sports video games, however, a strong gender difference was evident, as presented in Table 10. It suggests that approximately 92% of male athletes play sports video games, whereas 55% female athletes do.

Research Question 3: Significant Age Differences Toward Sports Information

The level of commitment toward sports seems to be different between high school and college athletes. A higher percentage of high school track and field athletes were playing other sports at school, as shown in Table 11.

Intent to pursue a professional sport was also associated with age, as shown in Table 12. High school athletes displayed a more positive attitude toward a pursuing a professional sport than did college students.

Although TV was the favorite source of sports information for both college and high school athletes, older students relied more on the Internet and newspapers. Our data also show the importance of coaches among

Table 7
How Often Do You Watch Sports on TV?

	Every Day	Almost Every Day	3 to 4 Times a Week	1 to 2 Times a Week	Never/Seldom
Male	65	32	16	10	5
Female	19	20	10	40	33

Note: $n = 250$. $\chi^2 = 67.871$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$.

Table 8
Do You Have a Favorite Sports TV Network?

	Yes	No
Male	82	48
Female	58	67

Note: $n = 255$. $\chi^2 = 7.158$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$.

Table 9
How Often Do You Read the Sports Section in a Newspaper?

	Every Day	Almost Every Day	3 to 4 Times a Week	1 to 2 Times a Week	Sundays Only	Never/Seldom
Male	9	16	22	42	11	29
Female	7	15	8	35	20	39

Note: $n = 253$. $\chi^2 = 11.441$, $df = 5$, $p = .043$.

high school athletes regarding sports information and news. Many high school athletes consider their coaches to be their favorite source for receiving advice on sports skills and strategies. These coaches were also cited for providing information on physical conditioning, sportsmanship, and personal goals.

Research Question 4: Attitude Toward Professional Sport and Sports Media Use

The amount and frequency of viewing sports on TV and reading the sports section of a newspaper were significantly associated with intent to pursue professional sports among the Black student athletes surveyed.

Table 10
Do You Play Sports Video Games?

	Yes	No
Male	120	10
Female	66	55

Note: $n = 251$. $\chi^2 = 46.568$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$.

Table 11
Do You Play Other Sports at School?

	Yes	No
9th grade	20	7
10th grade	35	9
11th grade	37	9
12th grade	39	14
College freshman	3	15
College sophomore	10	16
College junior	2	15
College senior	3	20

Note: $n = 254$. $\chi^2 = 77.04$, $df = 7$, $p < .05$.

Table 12
Do You Plan to Pursue Your Sport to a Professional Realm?

	Yes	No	Maybe
9th grade	14	4	9
10th grade	26	6	12
11th grade	26	11	11
12th grade	25	12	15
College freshman	2	13	3
College sophomore	9	10	7
College junior	7	10	0
College senior	8	4	11

Note: $n = 255$. $\chi^2 = 45.276$, $df = 14$, $p < .05$.

Consistent with uses and gratifications theory, many student athletes who feel more involved in sports tend to seek more sports information and news. As shown in Tables 13 and 14, these students are more likely to read or listen to sports in other media.

Table 13
Viewing Sports on TV and Sports-Related Future Orientation

Pursue Professional Sports	Watch Sports on TV				
	Every Day	Almost Every Day	3 to 4 Times a Week	1 to 2 Times a Week	Never/ Seldom
Yes	49	24	17	14	11
No	14	11	3	20	20
Maybe	21	17	6	16	7

Note: $n = 250$. $\chi^2 = 31.753$, $df = 8$, $p < .05$.

Table 14
Do You Read Sports Section of the Newspaper Regularly?

Pursue Professional Sports	Read Sports Section in Newspaper	
	Yes	No
Yes	76	40
No	29	41
Maybe	41	26

Note: $n = 253$. $\chi^2 = 10.833$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$.

Conclusion and Discussion

The major objective of this study was to examine sports media consumption behaviors of African American student athletes. In this survey of Black student athletes competing in track and field, several trends emerged. Television was the favorite source of sports information for about one third of the respondents, whereas about one fourth used multiple sources of information. Just one third of the athletes watch sports every day, and just one half of all respondents had a favorite sports network. Newspaper readership was lower among the younger athletes, in accordance with surveys showing declining readership among the young in general (Bressers & Bergen, 2002; Schlagheck, 1998). Newspapers are also rated low among other media as a source of sports information among followers of news, suggesting there is a general reduction of interest for using newspapers for sports information (Radio-Television News Directors Association, 2000). Among those surveyed, sports radio reached a very limited audience. There is an indication, however, that African American and Hispanic audiences

listen to more radio than the general population. Most of that listening is to music stations, yet most of their news information is obtained from these stations (Radio-Television News Directors Association, 2000).

Male athletes were more likely to participate in multiple sports and to state an intention to pursue professional sports. Consistent with previous research, our results suggest significance gender differences in sports media consumption. The Online Publishers Association study reported that sports sites saw the highest increase in online usage by broadband male users (Greenspan, 2004). Accordingly, female athletes used TV and newspapers less frequently for sports information. Perhaps this is a result of the paucity of media coverage of women's sports, which may also account for a high percentage of females having little interest in pursuing sports professionally after completing high school.

High school athletes intended to pursue professional sports more than did college athletes. The implication here is that as college athletes realize the high demands of being a competitive professional athlete, they are less inclined to see it as a viable goal.

Among both high school and college athletes, intention to pursue professional sports corresponded with higher uses of TV and newspapers for sports information, suggesting that the need for information was motivated by the desire to pursue sports at a professional level. High school athletes also cited their coaches as a major source of sports information.

The current study was carried out with a number of limitations. The first was sample selection. Even though an effort was made to obtain a representative sample of African American student athletes, it is necessary to replicate the results with a large cross-sectional sample of student athletes who participate in other sports in other areas of the country. Second, some additional attention should be paid to the disparity of Internet access and usage among African American youth. Our findings also suggest very low readership of daily newspapers. Future studies may probe the reasons for nonreadership of daily newspapers, particularly sports sections. The study may also have implications for advertisers targeting young African American athletes.

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