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“It Just Makes Good Business Sense”

A Media Political Economy Analysis of *espnW*

SARAH WOLTER

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The first business subsidiary of ESPN, Inc. marketed specifically to female athletes and fans is *espnW*, asserting its mission is “to serve women as fans and athletes. *espnW.com* provides an engaging environment that offers total access to female athletes and the sports they play, takes fans inside the biggest events, and shares a unique point of view on the sports stories that matter most to women” (*espnW*, n.d.a, *espnW* . . .). Political economy analysis reveals that *espnW* is a manifestation of ESPN, Inc.’s spurious interest in women’s sports as a means to garner profit. Being part of the Disney Corporation sets up *espnW* as a revenue generator for its parent company. Participants in *espnW*’s planning retreats and the two women at the helm of *espnW* further reinforce that ESPN, Inc. is using *espnW* for profit, not for promoting women’s sports. Additionally, creating a website dedicated to anything related to women, with ESPN, Inc.’s history of discrimination, exploits women. Lastly, presenting *espnW* as a separate site for *female* fans yields women less respect as sports fans.

The first business subsidiary of ESPN, Inc. (hereafter “ESPN”) marketed specifically to female athletes and fans is *espnW*. Launched as a blog in December 2010 and converted to a website in April 2011, *espnW* features articles, blogs, videos, and statistics on both men’s and women’s professional and alternative sports as well as training tips designed specifically for female athletes from professional athletes, trainers, and “experts” (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.a). The site is designed as a “digital product suite,” which includes PC web, mobile web, and social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), because, according to vice president of *espnW* Laura Gentile, “it’s really indicative of the audience, the fact that women tend to share more online, comment more online, to be more active in social environments,” with no immediate plans to convert to a television presence (ESPN Media Zone, 2011; Lynch, 2011). Founding partners include Nike, Gatorade, Proctor & Gamble (specifically Venus razors and Secret deodorant), and the Women’s Sports Foundation (the “charity of choice” of *espnW*) (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.b).

In June 2009 *espnW* was launched after ESPN researchers talked with 2,000 girls and 2,000 women via home visits, one-on-one interviews, and surveys and learned, “Women see us [ESPN] as an admirable brand that has authority. But they see us as their father’s brand, or husband’s brand, or boyfriend’s brand. They recognize it’s not theirs . . . these female sport fans feel that they have to prove that they’re a fan” (Kane & LaVoi, 2010, pp. 11–12). ESPN research also showed that women consume media differently than men do, indicating storytelling as an important trope in sports reporting as well as a “thirst to go a bit deeper with these superstars” (Thomas, 2010, p. 19).

ESPN manifested *espnW* from a spurious interest in women’s sport as a means to garner profit. First, being part of the Disney Corporation sets up *espnW* as a revenue generator for its parent company. Second, creating a website dedicated to anything related to women, with ESPN’s history of discrimination, exploits women. Third, participants in *espnW*’s planning retreats and the two women at the helm of *espnW* further reinforce that ESPN is using *espnW* for profit, not for promoting women’s sports as it purports in its mission statement. Lastly, presenting *espnW* as a site for *female* fans sets women up to not be taken seriously as sports fans.

***espnW* Ownership**

At the 2010 *espnW* Women + Sports Summit, *espnW* vice president Laura Gentile asserted, “There has been a void for too long in creating a true culture that supports, embraces and celebrates female athletes and fans. Let’s work together to fill that void” (Gentile, 2010, para. 24). When Gentile says she wanted summit attendees to create a culture that supports, embraces, and celebrates female athletes and fans, she is obligated to do so with profit in the forefront of her mind, because *espnW* is owned by one of the largest corporations in the world: The Walt Disney Company. Corporations are legally obligated to make decisions that will garner the greatest dividends for shareholders (Legislative Counsel of California, n.d., section 309), so executives at *espnW* are interested in securing audience members who have disposable income that will fiscally benefit The Walt Disney Company and its affiliates. To illustrate the expanse of the Disney Corporation, it is important to profile ESPN to illustrate its influence on media coverage of sport. ESPN controls media content for most professional sports leagues and represents the strongest online presence of any sports-media organization.

The Walt Disney Company’s ability to influence popular culture is

enabled by its corporate structure. The Walt Disney Company is a “leading diversified international family entertainment and media enterprise” (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.a, para. 1) comprised of five business segments: media networks, parks and resorts, studio entertainment, consumer products, and interactive media (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b). The company employs about 156,000 people and reported \$45 billion in revenue and \$6.63 billion in net income for 2013 (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b).¹ An affiliate of ESPN, *espnW* is part of the Media Networks segment, which is comprised of both domestic and international broadcast, cable, radio, publishing, and Internet businesses, such as Disney-ABC Television Group, ESPN, Walt Disney Internet Group, and ABC-owned television stations (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b). Media Networks’ revenue was \$20.4 billion and the segment’s net income was about \$6.82 billion in 2013 (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b).²

ESPN, the Disney Corporation’s “multimedia, multinational sports entertainment company,” is *espnW* is housed. ESPN’s primary business entities include television (ESPN on ABC—broadcast; cable networks; regional, syndicated, pay subscription packages), radio (ESPN Radio, ESPN Deportes Radio, syndicated radio in 11 countries), online (ESPN.COM, ESPN Deportes.com, market-specific sites), multiscreen network (ESPN3), publishing (e.g., *ESPN The Magazine*, ESPN Books), wireless (ESPN Mobile Properties—scores, headlines, video highlights, games), event management (X Games and Winter X Games, ESPYS, college bowls and basketball games, high school competitions), multiplatform businesses (*espnW*, ESPNHS), location-based businesses (ESPN Wide World of Sports complex, ESPN Zones), and corporate outreach (Team ESPN, The V Foundation for Cancer Research) (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.d). Ninety-eight percent of Americans have heard of the ESPN brand, and 93% claim to be familiar with it (ESPN Customer Marketing and Sales, 2013).

The reach of ESPN is vast. In television, ESPN houses eight 24-hour sports networks, five high-definition television simulcast services, and the ABC Television Network (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b).³ The company owns, has equity interests in, or distribution agreements with 47 international sports networks that reach households in more than 200 countries and territories in 16 languages across all seven continents (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b). In addition, ESPN retains broadcasting rights for many professional and college sports leagues, including the NFL, NBA, WNBA, NASCAR, MLB, and WTA; and the SEC, ACC, and Pac 12 college football and basketball conferences as well as other notable sporting events (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b).⁴ As of September 28, 2013, 956,025 individu-

als own shares in ESPN (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b), and the company employs 3,900 domestic and 2,600 international employees (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.c). ESPN is controlled 80% by ABC, Inc. (an indirect subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company) and 20% by the Hearst Corporation (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.d).

ESPN.COM boasts 3.9 billion minutes viewed per month, with an 81% male demographic whose median age is 33 and median income is \$62,545 (ESPN Customer Marketing and Sales, 2013). The site is rated number one for time spent in the sports category, male composition, share of category audience, total minutes of usage, and total visits among the top 100 websites (Ota, 2013) and brings in an average of 40.4 million unique visitors per month (ESPN Customer Marketing and Sales, 2013).

Within ESPN, *espnW* is a multiplatform business.⁵ The entity operates solely as a digital presence with a website, streaming online video, online content for mobile phones, a Twitter feed, and a Facebook page. “Multiplatform” means “the secure delivery of rich media, information and applications to any device, regardless of transport, distribution system or user interface, providing the consumer with seamless, integrated and interactive access and management of their entertainment and communication services” (CTAM, n.d.). *espnW* utilizes content from multiple ESPN platforms, such as ESPN.COM, *SportsCenter*, and *ESPN The Magazine*.

The mission of *espnW* is, “to serve women as fans and athletes. *espnW*.com provides an engaging environment that offers total access to female athletes and the sports they play, takes fans inside the biggest events, and shares a unique point of view on the sports stories that matter most to women” (*espnW*, n.d.a, *espnW* . . .). The audience for *espnW* is,

Sports-minded women. There are approximately 50 million current and former female athletes (18–49) who consider themselves sports fans. They lead busy, demanding lives, and remain highly competitive. We will be *the* female-focused sport media entity to give them a voice and a role in the sports conversation. (*espnW*, n.d.b; emphasis in original)

Each month, *espnW* tallies 2.5 million unique visitors with 150,000 Facebook fans and Twitter followers (ESPN Customer Marketing and Sales, 2013). Laura Gentile, vice president of *espnW*, claims that *espnW* will bring girls and women together and will help girls transition into confident women:

espnW will help bring you together with your heroes, your friends, your children, and your family through the connectivity and social

currency of sports. Above all, we will help show girls how to channel their love of sports into the skills and opportunities that will make them strong, successful, confident women. (Gentile, 2010, para. 19)

Although the mission and vision of *espnW* is centered on empowering girls and women, the chief reason the company decided to create *espnW* is because it saw an untapped demographic in women as an audience and because pursuing women makes “good business sense” (Galas, 2011; McBride, 2011). Katrina Galas (2011), MBA student at the University of Oregon and 2011 *espnW* Women + Sports Summit attendee, reveals the purpose of *espnW* presented at one of the 2011 summit panels: “The tipping point in *espnW*’s initiation was recognizing that this is not just the right thing to do; it’s the smart thing to do and makes *good business sense*. Thus, *espnW* was born and is growing quickly every day” (para. 2, emphasis mine). Carol Stiff, vice president of programming and acquisitions at ESPN, does not hide that ESPN created *espnW* because women are “an underserved demographic. It’s a new set of eyeballs. . . . It makes a lot of business sense. Women spend all the money in the household. Why wouldn’t we go after that?” (McBride, 2011, para. 23).

The discord between what *espnW* says it does and what its corporate structure dictates it must do is the impetus for this study. Political economy analysis offers a framework for investigating the motives behind *espnW* in the context of the commercialization of sports.

Method

In critical media studies, it is essential to ascertain a comprehensive picture of the entities that create, distribute, and consume media content to ascertain the motives behind corporate initiatives. Political economy is a perspective for exploring these issues as they relate to *espnW*, especially in the broader trend of the commercialization of sports. The radical media political economies perspective, specifically the monopoly capital school largely influenced by Robert McChesney, is most fitting for this analysis of *espnW*.

The monopoly capital school of political economy is grounded on principles of free press and theories of democracy that argue everyone benefits from high-quality journalism and a rich media environment based on greater emphasis on the “public good” characteristics of media (Winseck, 2011). These principles are threatened by monopoly capitalism, however, when an oligopoly of corporations control what we see in the media,

overtaking competitive capitalism (Winseck, 2011). The study of political economy, then, is the study of “social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” as part of a broader “study of control and survival in social life” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2).

The monopoly capital school of political economy uses industrial organization theory to understand how corporations dominate the cultural landscape in two ways: through control of cultural production using actual media content and control of cultural production through advertising and sponsorship (Murdock & Golding, 2005). Media conglomerates serve the best interests of their shareholders, which often impedes democracy: “Concentration accentuates the core tendencies of a profit-driven, advertising-supported media system: hyper-commercialism and denigration of journalism and public service. It is a poison pill for democracy” (McChesney, 2008, p. 427). Free markets do not govern the media system; instead, particular laws, such as the 1996 Telecommunications Act; regulations; and subsidies open doors for corporations to conglomerate (McChesney, 2008). In light of these aims, this political economy analysis of *espnW* addresses one research question: “What is the goal of ESPN products marketed toward women from a political economy perspective?”

To address this research question, the researcher for this study examined feature photographs and feature articles “above the fold” (the first screenful of the web page when it is opened) of the *espnW* web page from April 26, 2011, to October 26, 2011, and December 27, 2013, to February 26, 2014. These dates represent the first six months *espnW* was published as a website (it was originally a blog) and three months of more recent posts on the site. This study also encompasses statements on the *espnW* homepage (such as the mission or vision statements), documents posted on the ESPN corporate page (such as financial reports), and media interviews with *espnW* stakeholders (such as Laura Gentile, vice president of *espnW*) to inform analysis.

The commercialization of the institution of sport influences the political economy perspective adopted in this analysis of *espnW*. In an era where the “bottom line has replaced the goal line” (Coakley, 2009, p. 354), conditions under which commercial sports grow and prosper combined with the political economy of *espnW* illustrate ways in which power plays out through the site. Coakley (2009) claims commercial sports flourish most in market economies where material rewards are highly valued by stakeholders in sport; in societies with large, densely populated cities (for po-

tential spectators); in societies where people have the time and resources to play and watch sporting events for enjoyment; in societies where stakeholders have the capital available to build stadiums or arenas; and in places where consumption and material symbols are important indicators of status. Within these conditions, the sports commercialized are those that are watched, played, or used for profit by those individuals who have power and control over economic resources (Coakley, 2009). The biggest connection to political economy, then, is that those sports that are commercialized are also those sports that are given *cultural significance* in our society (Coakley, 2009). Analysis of *espnW*'s ties to its parent company and to other corporations within the site reveals who wields power based on privileging the commercialization of sport on the site.

espnW is hypocritical, because claiming that they are supportive of girls and women is used as a means to bring in profit for the Disney Corporation. ESPN, who shapes the nature and goals of *espnW*, has a history of discrimination toward women, which reveals that *espnW* is an exercise in branding, not in promoting women's sports. Further, separately publishing sports content for women prompts sex discrimination.

Analysis

espn's History of Discrimination toward Women

Creating a website platform dedicated to women is exploitive given ESPN's history of discrimination against women. In his speech at the 2011 *espnW* Women + Sports Summit, George Bodenheimer, then president of ESPN, remarked,

espnW just represents the latest step in ESPN's more than 30-year commitment to women's sports. Women in sports, on-air personalities, behind the camera, in the executive suites. You name it; we have women [trails off]. Our company would not be such a success without the wonderful women that we have employed at our company . . . ESPN is a diverse company, and it will continue to be that and benefit businesses like *espnW* going forward. (Bodenheimer, 2011)

The opening headline on the 2010 *espnW* planning summit retreat web page reads, "There are precious few places that recognize and cheer for women who achieve great things in sport" (*espnW*, n.d.b). Ironically, ESPN has had an atrocious 30-year commitment to women's sports and is def-

initely *not* one of the “precious few places that recognize and cheer for women who achieve great things in sport.” ESPN’s *SportsCenter* covered women’s sports for 2.2% of its total airtime in 1999, 2.1% of its total airtime in 2004, and 1.4% of its total airtime in 2009 (Messner & Cooky, 2010). *ESPN The Magazine* featured only five female athletes on 168 covers from 2004–2009, and all five of these covers portray athletes in (skimpy) street clothes rather than athletic gear (LaVoi, 2010). A more recent cover from November 2010 features Lindsey Vonn—record holder for most World Cup victories by a US skier, first American skier to win three discipline titles in a single season, and first American woman to win a gold medal in the downhill at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games (Lindsey Vonn,” n.d.)—in a Sharon Stone *Basic Instinct* look-alike pose. The purpose for *espnW* as stated by its executives and the statistics on how the company covers women’s sports do not add up.⁶

ESPN has a history of discrimination against women. In the early years of the company, the number of women employees with ranks above production assistant could be counted on one hand (Miller & Shales, 2011). Women employees also endured sexual harassment ranging from propositions and groping in the newsroom to being followed home by male staffers interested in sexual relations (Miller & Shales, 2011). Although public reports of these issues have waned, the company is still associated with incidents like ESPN baseball analyst Steve Phillips being suspended and later fired for having an affair with production assistant Brooke Hundley in 2009 (Mangan, 2010). ESPN’s *Pardon the Interruption* host Tony Kornheiser was suspended also for two weeks because of derogatory comments about *SportsCenter* Hannah Storm’s outfit in early 2010 (Mangan, 2010). ESPN veteran broadcaster Ron Franklin was fired in early 2011 for calling sideline reporter Jeannine Edwards “sweet baby” and later an expletive after she tried to defend herself (Farhi, 2011). Even more recently, a contact form on the ESPN website included a category on the drop-down menu called “commentators—dislike female commentators” (Ryan, 2012). Although ESPN executives have treated recent incidents more seriously than they used to—for example, by firing the culprits in the midst of such a climate of sexual harassment—creating a website that is supposed to empower women actually exploits women in the name of earning profit. The company’s history and its current initiatives do not mesh. Stakeholders in charge of planning the direction and content for *espnW* further reinforce that the company’s primary goal is making profit, not supporting women.

Partnerships and Planning Retreats

espnW acts in the best interest of its own parent corporations and those corporations that support the site financially. Founding partners of *espnW* are Nike and Gatorade as the site's official "training partner" and "nutrition partner," respectively. Proctor & Gamble, specifically Venus razors and Secret deodorant, joined soon after the site's launch. Optics company Oakley was also added as the official "optics partner" of *espnW* in February 2011. Employees with Nike and Gatorade write content for *espnW* (ESPN Media Zone, 2011; Lynch, 2011), and Oakley enjoys quarterly social-media partnerships and photo galleries, on-site promotion at *espnW*-affiliated sports events, sponsored photo galleries, and a four-part web series with Oakley's star female athletes (Hudak, February 2, 2012). Additionally, *espnW* is branching out to partner with Colavita, an Italian olive oil company, to cosponsor a women's cycling team (Hudak, March 21, 2012). Laura Gentile, vice president of *espnW*, says, "Working closely with Colavita, a company committed to supporting female athletes in such a tangible way, is important to *espnW* . . . It's a great opportunity to support the development of women's cycling while expanding *espnW*'s reach in a creative way" (Hudak, March 21, 2012, para. 2).

Trying to pull in consumers, *espnW* partners with brands that have established themselves deep in the commercial sports landscape.⁷ When individuals affiliated with these organizations provide content for the site, however, they act in the best interest of the corporations they represent and not necessarily the users of the site or athletes. For example, in a July 20, 2011, *espnW* article titled "How to Stay Cool during Warm-Weather Workouts," Lisa Esposito, MS, RD, CSSD, LDN, suggests, "Consuming a sports drink that contains electrolytes, particularly sodium, will help you to absorb and retain the fluids you consume" (para. 12). Later, she explains, "Figuring out your sweat sodium concentration is a little more complicated than figuring out your sweat rate. It requires specific equipment found in specialized labs such as the Gatorade Sports Science Institute (GSSI)" (para. 14). And for those individuals with low sweat concentration, she suggests, "the sodium concentration in sports drinks, such as Gatorade, should be adequate" (para. 14). Esposito holds a master's of science in foods, nutrition, and dietetics and is a registered dietitian; a board-certified specialist in sports dietetics, the premier professional sports nutrition credential in the United States (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2014); and a licensed dietitian and nutritionist. Esposito is also conveniently employed by the Gatorade Sports Science Institute. In reality, water works just as well as sports drinks as a hydrating agent for most individuals (Cohen, 2012).⁸

Another method by which ESPN shapes the discourse of *espnW* to enrich both The Walt Disney Company and those entities that advertise on the site is through *espnW* planning retreats. The purpose of the retreats is to “help set the female sports agenda . . . [and] begin cultivating a sports conversation for women, highlighting the important role of sports in shaping their lives” (*espnW*, n.d.b, para. 1) as a means to plan content for *espnW*. Participants are supposed to “SHARE-LEARN-INTERACT-NETWORK-EXPLORE-INSPIRE” to “Be a part of our team. Be inspired. Be here—and help shape the future of Women + Sports” (2011 retreat materials). Participants “come together to strengthen the Women + Sports community” and “explore the keys to future success” (2011 retreat materials), through “thought-provoking dialogue geared towards advancing women in sports” (2013 retreat materials).

The 124 invitation-only 2010 retreat participants are characterized by *espnW* as “influential men and women in sports—athletes, business executives, doctors, nutritionists and coaches.” Gentile addresses them in her opening remarks as “people who are at the true heart of women’s sports. Whether it’s as competitors, executives, marketers, teachers, mentors—everything” (Gentile, 2010, para. 2). Informal analysis of the attendees shows that most are media executives or professionals, corporate executives or professionals, or professional athletes.⁹ About a quarter of attendees were directly employed by ESPN. Corporations that were represented included entities like Lululemon Athletica, Nike, Burton Snowboards, Cisco, Gatorade, Hampton Hotels, Harley-Davidson, Coca-Cola, Under Armour, Oakley, Pfizer, Champion, and Wilson Sporting Goods. The 2011 retreat participants were characterized in the website’s retreat materials as “a range of experts in business and advertising, professional sports, collegiate athletics, health and fitness, and representatives from the pro-social and educational arenas.” Informal analysis of the 174 participants again shows mostly corporate executives or professionals, media executives, and media industry workers.¹⁰ About a third of the attendees were employed by ESPN and such corporations as Coca Cola, Getty Images, Oracle, and Adidas.¹¹

Although *espnW* includes major stakeholders in the world of women’s sports such as professional athletes, “influential men and women in sports” are mostly influential men and women in the commercial sports landscape tied to ESPN and its corporate partners. Influential men and women in the commercial sports landscape are obligated to act in the best interest of their employers, so *espnW* is primarily about making money for corporations, including The Walt Disney Company, and (at most) secondarily about recognizing, cheering for, and aiming to inspire improvement or

greater future achievement for female athletes, as executives charge in Women + Sports Summit materials. If *espnW* provides content that does any of these things, it is in the context of a commercial sports website that makes decisions based on monetary gain. The company certainly puts up a front that the site is all about empowering athletes; however, this is but an exercise in branding to garner an audience who will financially support ESPN and its corporate partners. The leadership of *espnW* reveals even more of a profit-orientation for ESPN.

***espnW* Leadership**

Placing *espnW* in the hands of two women with an extensive work history catering to major corporations explains part of why *espnW* perpetuates a conceptualization of sport grounded in consumerism that benefits ESPN and its corporate partners. Laura Gentile, vice president of *espnW*, worked as a senior partner and management supervisor at Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide on the IBM account before joining ESPN (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.f). The team with whom she worked earned the 2002 GRAND EFFIE for advertising effectiveness, the first in the history of Ogilvy & Mather's campaigns (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.f). She joined ESPN in 2003 as director of advertising and marketing and worked on projects such as ESPN25, a 25th anniversary campaign that celebrated sports fans and created ESPN's first online fan communities; the development of "ESPN ON ABC"; and strategic marketing for partners such as the NFL, NHL, The ESPY Awards, and ESPNNEWS (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.f). Before being promoted to vice president of *espnW*, Gentile worked directly with George Bodenheimer, president of ESPN and ABC Sports, as vice president in the office of the president (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.f). ESPN designated as the vice president of *espnW* a woman with a work history rooted in strategic marketing and advertising, which provides the site's commercial orientation from its inception.

Content of *espnW* is also inevitably affected by editor-in-chief Tina Johnson's employment history. Johnson is the founding vice president and editor-in-chief of *Women's Health* (Spencer, 2011). Under Johnson's leadership, employees at the magazine tripled its readership (from 400,000 in 2006 to 1.35 million in 2009), earned the number-one spot on *Adweek's* "Hot List" and the number-two spot on *Advertising Age's* "A-List" for advertising in 2008, introduced seven international editions of *Women's Health*, and produced five fitness DVDs and two branded books (Spencer, 2011). Johnson also redesigned the *Women's Health* website and increased unique visitors by 82% and page views by 100% (Spencer, 2011). Additionally, Johnson

regularly appears on the *Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *CBS Marketwatch* to discuss nutrition, diet, fitness, lifestyle, and fashion (Spencer, 2011). Before starting *Women's Health*, Johnson served as the executive editor of *Teen People* and supervised multiple projects for Hearst Magazines in partnership with Wal-Mart, Procter & Gamble, Nike, Nivea, and McDonald's (Spencer, 2011). The employment history of executives in charge of *espnW* reveals they are no strangers to working in the best interest of corporations and ESPN.

Conclusion

espnW is a duplicitous initiative that sets up consequences for how individuals view female fans. The emphasis on commercial spectator sports and creating a separate space for female fans positions female fans as different than male fans. If sport operates as a hegemonic masculine institution that privileges men (Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005; Harris & Humberstone, 2004), female fans will not be taken seriously. Branding as a connection between *espnW* and consumers could facilitate the way the broader public thinks about female fans of sport.

From a political economy perspective, because ESPN controls so much of the sports-media market, ESPN controls the way the public thinks about sports (a) as commercial and (b) as dominated by male fans. Having control over broadcast rights of so many professional leagues and so many major sporting events grants ESPN an opportunity to shape the sports-media landscape more than any other commercial entity. Almost \$46 billion in revenue shapes what viewers and users see every day. Instead of supporting girls and women when deciding content, however, ESPN is required by corporate law to do what will garner the greatest dividends for its shareholders. Therefore, even though *espnW* "connects female fans to the sports they love and follow," "aim[s] to provide an engaging environment where women are an integral part of the sports conversation" about both men's and women's sports, and is women's "primary destination for women's sports" (*espnW*, n.d.a, para. 1), creation and maintenance of the site is ultimately about securing an audience with disposable income that benefits The Walt Disney Company and its affiliates.

ESPN chooses to attract audiences by emphasizing commercial spectator sports. Commercial spectator sports are played for profit and depend on revenue streams like gate receipts, sponsorships, and selling media-broadcasting rights (Coakley, 2009). Sports most likely to be commercialized are those watched, played, or used for profit by individuals who influ-

ence economic spending in our culture (Coakley, 2009). Elite, organized, competitive, commercial sports define most of the sporting world (Coakley, 2011), and the content of *espnW* follows suit. In a quantitative analysis of the first six months of photographs and articles on *espnW*, professional sports accounted for 73.3% of photographs of female athletes and 85.7% of photographs of male athletes (Wolter, forthcoming). Professional sport also dominated *espnW* article content for the first six months, with 77.7% of articles about female athletes and 89.2% of articles about male athletes (Wolter, in press). The four most popular sports presented in the first six months of photographs and articles (for female and male athletes) on *espnW* were basketball, soccer, tennis, and golf (Wolter, forthcoming), all of which are affiliated with professional leagues whose games or major events are showcased on some entity or affiliate of ESPN.

Privileging commercial spectator sports grants cultural significance to those sports that emphasize heroics instead of aesthetics (Coakley, 2009). A heroic orientation is correlated with a high need to entertain an audience and emphasizes danger and excitement of movement, style and mastery of dramatic expression, willingness to go beyond limits, and a commitment to victory and success of a team or sponsor (Coakley, 2009). An aesthetic orientation is correlated with a low need to entertain an audience and emphasizes beauty and pleasure of movement, ability and mastery of technical skills, a willingness to explore limits, and commitment to staying active and involved as a participant (Coakley, 2009). Interestingly, heroic orientations correlate with those sports that require strength, speed, and aggressiveness rather than technical skill. The former are typically attributed to male athletes because of corporeal advantages. Therefore, focusing on commercial spectator sports ultimately privileges male athletes.

Women Are Different than Men

If we concede that ESPN is “the worldwide leader in sports,” then *espnW* is different than or simply not “the worldwide leader in sports” and women are not sports fans in the same way men are fans. Executives identify the audience for *espnW* as “women 18+ . . . who once played organized sports and are passionate, competitive, and consider themselves sports fans” (Gentile, 2010, para. 13); but in other outlets, note that this target market is different than that composed of those women who visit ESPN for raw statistics and game scores. ESPN research spanning “athletes, coaches, moms, industry insiders, [and] journalists” (Gentile, 2010, para. 11) shows

that women want more behind-the-scenes access to players (Lynch, 2011). Discourse surrounding *espnW* positions this type of sports coverage as decidedly different from traditional male-centered sports coverage, however.

The issue is not that ESPN is reporting more behind-the-scenes access to athletes on *espnW*. The problem is that this type of access, “storytelling,” is tied to how *women* as a demographic view sports. Gentile claims, “We are creating a home for women athletes and fans—THE place for sports-minded women to go and stay. Let’s face it . . . men and women communicate in different ways.¹² We are creating digital content that attracts women and holds their attention” (2010, para. 9). If “men and women communicate in different ways” and sport still operates as a hegemonically masculine institution (Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005; Harris & Humberstone, 2004), then women can never be taken seriously as sports fans while the current conception of sport as masculine is privileged. George Bodenheimer, then president of ESPN, echoes these sentiments in his opening remarks at the 2011 *espnW* planning summit:

You are here this week because you believe women provide a unique and influential voice in the larger picture of sports and the sports conversation that we live every day. And of course you’re right. And we’re going to reward your participation in this with a continued growth and a continued vehicle for you in whatever angle you have within the wonderful world of sports and women in sports in particular. (Bodenheimer, 2011)

This, of course, assumes women are not part of “the sports conversation that we [men] live every day” or the “wonderful world of sports” already. Similarly, titling the *espnW* planning retreats Women + Sports Summits assumes that women and sports are two separate entities.

Gentile expects the growth of *espnW* to lead to more coverage of women’s sports on ESPN stations (Thomas, 2010), though only time will tell if this is true. In 2012 the NCAA women’s basketball page on ESPN was “re-branded” to *espnW* to “drive its mission of establishing *espnW* as the premier brand for coverage of women’s sports” leading up to the March Madness tournament (Chong-Adler, 2012, para. 1). Executives of *espnW* claim,

We’re giving fans, male and female, more of a good thing. We’re doubling our coverage so every region will be covered from the start, and we’re striving to give fans more of a behind-the-scenes look at the athletes they enjoy watching on the court . . . bottom line, *espnW* wants to

elevate athletes beyond the big stage of the tournament. They deserve the same coverage and platform as their male counterparts. (Chong-Adler, 2012, para. 5)

Instead of elevating coverage and matching a platform for women's basketball to men's basketball on ESPN, executives ghettoized women's basketball to *espnW*. Instead of addressing the issue of why women's basketball does not receive the same coverage as men's basketball on ESPN, they transferred coverage to a lesser site *affiliated with* ESPN, not the *real* ESPN. Providing extensive coverage on women's basketball leading up to the biggest tournament of the year is important. However, relegating it to a new site that cannot attract the number of viewers ESPN does (2.5 million versus 40.4 million unique users per month) sends the message that women's basketball is not as important as men's basketball, which is covered on ESPN, "the worldwide leader in sports."

The power that media organizations have in shaping the ways individuals think about sports is significant because the institution of sport privileges men and masculinity and is a primary means by which gender roles are constructed and maintained in our *entire culture*, not just in the world of sport (Coakley, 2009; Boulton, Earp, Morris, Young, & Earp, 2010). Sports are social constructions that reflect the values of dominant powers in the sociocultural system in which they are embedded (Brooten, 2009). Sports operate under particular social, political, and economic conditions (Coakley, 2009), often reflecting masculine ideals in favor of protecting hegemonic masculinity (Harris & Humberstone, 2004).

Branding

According to vice president Laura Gentile, *espnW* wants to "involve, mentor, coach, and guide the next generation of our young women" and "help show girls how to channel their love of sports into the skills and opportunities that will make them strong, successful, confident women" (2010, para. 5, 19)—but only so ESPN can make money from them. Branding is the connection between *espnW* rhetoric about empowering female athletes and what corporate law dictates *espnW* must do (earn profit). Executives want readers to feel good about what they read on the site so that readers establish a relationship with *espnW* and then buy products to support their company and its sponsors.

Brand management is about guiding the investments and affect of consumers (Arvidsson, 2006). ESPN wants its brand integrated into consumers'

lives so that consumers produce a feeling, social relation, or experience connected to the ESPN brand (Arvidsson, 2006). *espnW* positions itself as a community where women who feel alienated from ESPN can go to read and watch behind-the-scenes access to athletes. Feel-good stories on the site and the history of ESPN as the most popular brand in sports media promote an emotional connection with ESPN the brand. These emotions lead to a relationship with ESPN the brand, which eventually positions ESPN as the premier brand in sports and the premier way to cover sports.¹³ ESPN's motivation is to secure an audience that will *consume* sports via ESPN products.

ESPN has historically been very protective of the ESPN brand and pursues a business opportunity only when it directly benefits ESPN (Smith, 2010). In the 1990s, when ESPN was acquiring business and experiencing unprecedented growth, then-president Steve Bornstein quipped, "There were a lot of things we didn't do. My point to my guys was that the day I see the shoeshine guy outside of Grand Central Station wearing an ESPN T-shirt is the day I know we've failed" (Smith, 2010, p. 135). Attracting consumers to the ESPN brand is about securing an influential demographic with money to spend (typically young, white, affluent males), and apparently the "shoeshine guy outside of Grand Central Station" does not fit.

Brands have the power to influence individuals' conduct. Practical knowledge advanced using *espnW* as a technology of the self perpetuates the "conduct of conduct," of how readers perceive sport (Bröckling, Krasmann, & Lemke, 2011). ESPN is more visible than any other brand in sports media, but its presence prompts readers to use it as a "platform for action" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 248), for interpreting sport discourse as a commercial enterprise. ESPN is part of a "social factory where the informational environment (of which the brand itself is a part) functions both as a commonly available means of production and a ubiquitous means of surveillance and governance" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 130). ESPN guides readers to interpret sport from a commercial standpoint that benefits its parent company and ESPN affiliates. Emotional branding is the tool corporations use to ensure that corporations remain an integral part of our daily lives.

Future Research

Future research on *espnW* should analyze content and viewership of the site. Quantitative analysis of what types of sports and what types of athletes (sexes, levels) are portrayed on the site would provide insight into whether or not *espnW* is an outlet that portrays female athletes as compe-

tent sportswomen despite its commercial orientation. Additionally, qualitative and critical analyses would reveal how discourse sets readers up to think about athletes covered on the site. Viewership statistics and analyses could provide insight into who is the audience for *espnW* and whether or not that audience is different than audiences who visit other websites hosted by ESPN.

In his opening remarks at the 2011 Women + Sports Summit, ESPN president George Bodenheimer said, “when our company, and our people, many of whom are here today, get behind something, we tend to make it a success, and we take a lot of pride in that” (Bodenheimer, 2011). Executives at *espnW* take advantage of the “groundswell of participation and interest in sports” in the first generation to reap the benefits of Title IX in order to make profit for The Walt Disney Company and its affiliates, despite advancing rhetoric about a “global commons” that speaks to “Ws” as “athletes, fans, organizers, dreamers, doers, leaders, matriarchs” (Gentile, 2010, para. 13, 7). *espnW* is an exercise in brand management, not in advancing women’s sports.

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Notes

1. Revenues increased 7% (\$2.8 billion) from 2012 to 2013 (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b). Net income is income minus expenses. The Walt Disney Company’s net income increased 8% (\$454 million) from 2012 to 2013 (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b).

2. Revenue is composed of \$10.02 billion in affiliate fees, \$7.90 billion in advertising, and \$2.42 billion in “other” revenue (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b). Operating income is calculated by deducting operating expenses of selling, general, administrative, and other; depreciation and amortization; and adding equity in the income of investees (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b).

3. ESPN’s main cable network pulls in an estimated 99 million subscribers; and its cable affiliates ESPN2, ESPNNEWS, ESPN Classic, and ESPN U garner 99 million, 76 million, 31 million, and 76 million subscribers, respectively (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.b).

4. The NBA is contracted through 2020 (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.c); the WNBA, through 2015 (Dixon, July 15, 2007); the NASCAR, through 2014 (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.c); the MLB, through 2021 (Newman, August 28, 2012); the WTA, through 2015 (McGrogan, October 23, 2011). Broadcast rights for Pac-12 football and men’s and

women's basketball as well as ACC football and men's basketball are in contract through 2024; broadcast rights for 16 SEC sports are in contract through 2027; ESPN also supports an eight-year multiplatform agreement with the Big-12 conference and a 10-year agreement with the Big-10 conference (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.c). Other broadcasting rights include 24 NCAA championships through 2023–24; *Monday Night Football*, NFL studio programming, the NFL Pro Bowl, and NFL Draft (televised and online) through 2021; the Indianapolis 500 through 2018 (broadcast on ABC); Wimbledon through 2024; 64 FIFA World Cup matches (ESPN 3D); pay-television rights in eight South American countries; the British Open through 2020; USTA US Open; men's and women's World Cup events; and the NCAA women's basketball tournament (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.c).

5. The other multiplatform business within ESPN is ESPNHS, formerly ESPN RISE, which “is a multiplatform business which serves high school student-athletes and high school sports fans . . . provides high school student-athletes with recognition, resources, information and inspiration to improve their skills and achieve their goals . . . ESPNHS assets include *ESPNHS GUY and GIRL* magazines, ESPNHS.COM; mobile and social media products (facebook.com/ESPNHS and facebook.com/ESPNHSGirl; Twitter: @ESPNHS); and more than 160 high school events” (ESPN Media Zone, n.d.e).

6. The general climate of sports reporting may affect ESPN's perspective. In 2008 Lapchick (2008) analyzed leadership at more than 378 Associated Press websites and newspapers and found 94% of sports editors were male, 90% of assistant sports editors were male, 93% of columnists were male, 91% of reporters were male, and 84% of copy editors and designers were male. Women in league executive positions are also not on par with men, with women holding 18%, 43%, 49%, 27%, and 48% of professional staff positions in the MLB, the NBA, the WNBA, the NFL, and the MLS, respectively (Lapchick, 2009).

7. In 2013 Nike revenues were \$25.3 billion, and the company employed over 35,000 employees in more than 160 countries across six continents (Nike, 2013). They directly or indirectly employed almost one million people through Nike, Inc., as suppliers, shippers, retailers, and other service providers (Nike, 2013). Gatorade is a part of PepsiCo, whose 2012 revenues were \$65.5 billion, down 1% from 2011 (PepsiCo, n.d.).

8. A recent study in the *British Medical Journal* shows the “science” dedicated to hydration actually often comes from companies who have hired scientists to promote their products (Cohen, 2012). These scientists advise sports medicine organizations and entities like the European Food Safety Authority on the “dangers of dehydration” (Cohen, 2012, para. 2). PepsiCo owns Gatorade and has paired science with creative marketing, so “what started life as a mixture of simple kitchen food stuffs has become an ‘essential piece of sporting equipment’” (Cohen, 2012, para. 8).

9. I determined attendee count by going through attendee descriptions on

the retreat website and categorizing. Counts include 40 corporate executives or professionals, 36 media executives or professionals, 20 professional athletes, 10 league executives [WTA, WNBA (2), WPS, NBA, NCAA, AAU, USOC, CAA Hockey], 6 representatives from nonprofit organizations, 6 sports medicine professionals, 4 college coaches, and 2 representatives in sports management. Of these individuals, 31 are employed by ESPN. Individuals are categorized as media executives or professionals if their positions are solely media related. Examples include Lucy Danzinger, editor-in-chief of *SELF* magazine, and Jane Schonberger, managing partner for Pretty Tough Sports, “a media and lifestyle brand that empowers girls using sports while helping them remain true to their femininity” (Pretty Tough, n.d.). Many of the corporate executives or professionals have “marketing” or “public relations” in their titles and are affiliated with agencies that work for *espnW* or partner brands (Nike, Gatorade). Examples include Susanna Earnest, group director of strategy at OMD Chicago running the Gatorade business, and Andrea Fairchild, vice president of brand marketing for Gatorade. The professional athletes represented the following sports: triathlon, hockey, ultramarathon, boxing, snowboarding (2), golf, basketball, softball, soccer, and skiing. Some big names were Laila Ali, Gretchen Bleiler, Tamika Catchings, Skylar Diggins, Jennie Finch, Lolo Jones, Jessica Mendoza, Angela Ruggiero, and Annika Sorenstam.

10. I determined attendee count by going through attendee descriptions on the retreat website and categorizing. Counts include 57 corporate executives or professionals; 48 media executives or professionals; 21 media industry workers (e.g., writers, tv analysts); 13 nonprofit, government, or international organization employees (e.g., Awista Ayub, former education and health officer at the embassy of Afghanistan); 12 professional athletes (Olympic [2], snowboarding, soccer [4], track, softball, paralympic swimmer, basketball, skiing); 10 sports medicine professionals (trainers, sports psychologist); 4 students; 3 college athletic directors; 2 academics; and 2 coaches.

11. Other corporations represented were United Soccer Marketing, Gatorade, Nike, Proctor & Gamble, Oakley, and Fox Sports. Leagues represented were NBA (2), USA Hockey, WNBA (3), US Olympic Committee (2), NASCAR, NHL, NFL (2), NCAA (2), WPS.

12. Academic research shows that this truism is simplistic and ultimately untrue. Barnett and Rivers (2004) survey eight years of research covering over 1,500 studies from researchers in biology, primatology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, genetics, and managerial behavior that show individuals’ situations determine behavior far more than their genders do. Cultural norms supersede biology in determining behavior (Barnett & Rivers, 2004).

13. Gobé (2009) defines emotional aspects of a brand as, “how a brand encourages consumers on the level of the senses and emotions; how a brand comes to life for people and forges a deeper, lasting connection” (Gobé, 2009, p. xviii).

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