

**The Dehumanization of Professional Athletes: A Multi-context Examination**

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**50-minute poster presentation**

According to Haslam (2006), dehumanization is to deny humanness to human beings. This phenomenon has been studied across a number of settings including race, criminology, and gender; however, it has a direct application to sport marketing as well, since professional athletes represent the multimillion-dollar face of teams and leagues and are an important point of attachment for sports fans. Thus, understanding how individuals perceive professional athletes will provide sport marketers and managers with important information that can be used to reposition a player's image or even broker potential sponsorships and endorsements.

Dehumanization typically occurs in two forms—comparing humans to animals or machines (Haslam, 2006). Within the current context, the machine-like form of dehumanization was explored for the following reasons: (1) athletes are often viewed as chess pieces that are used strategically and sometimes sacrificially for a larger goal—team victory (Driskell, Goodwin, Salas, & O'Shea, 2006), and (2) the growth of fantasy sports has proliferated the notion of player ownership which, according to Li, Leidner, and Castano (2014), parallels mechanistic dehumanization.

However, survey respondents are not likely to describe professional athletes as machines overtly. Dehumanization, as a result, has typically been measured at the implicit level (Martinez, Rodriguez-Bailon, & Moya, 2014). That is, in contrast to traditional self-report measures, implicit methods tap into an individual's unconscious and allow researchers to overcome response bias, such as social desirability. The current study utilized the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which measures the strengths of associations between concepts and images based on response time in computer-administered tasks (Greenwald et al., 2009).

Larkin, Dwyer, and Goebert (2018) utilized the IAT to explore the dehumanization of professional football players from a machine-like perspective. The authors' hypothesized fantasy participants would dehumanize fantasy players more than non-fantasy players, but the results were the opposite. While this was theoretically and pragmatically explainable, it led to more questions about how fans interact with players. Do they view them as chess pieces within a game or is the connection deeper? Or, is it context specific? As a result, the current study looked to replicate Larkin et al.'s work and then extend it to baseball. The purpose of this paper was to explore potential differences in the dehumanization bias between fantasy football and baseball participants.

**Study One**

Guided by Haslam's (2006) conceptual framework for dehumanization, study one sought to explore the humanness to machine-likeness paradigm among fantasy football participants. The following hypothesis was created to be tested by the IAT:

H1: Fantasy football participants will implicitly associate humanness to non-fantasy team players and machine-likeness to fantasy team players.

**Methods & Results**

A total of 131 fantasy football participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to complete the online IAT. To eliminate favorite player bias, participants were asked to identify eight players from their team in descending order of importance, and the IAT utilized the last four players selected. The non-fantasy players utilized in the test included Richard Sherman, J.J. Watt, Clay Matthews, and Vonn Miller. At the time of the survey, each had their own national commercial. Therefore, the IAT comparison included the second-tier fantasy players against high-profile non-fantasy eligible players. These decisions were made based on previous dehumanization research with fantasy football participants (Larkin et al., 2018).

To answer H1, the effects of the IAT experiment were analyzed by calculating a *D*-score. A *D*-score was calculated by dividing the within-person difference by a pooled standard deviation. A positive *D*-score in the current context indicates bias in the form of fantasy team and machine-likeness / non-fantasy team and humanness. A negative *D*-Score indicates the opposite bias. A score of zero suggests there is no bias. A simple within-person *t*-test

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is then conducted to assess if participants are statistically faster or slower in one condition or the other. The study one results provided a negative and statistically significant *D*-score mean (-.35). As such, H1 was rejected. This result is consistent with previous research (Larkin et al., 2018).

### Study Two

In an attempt to explore differences across sports, study two aimed to examine the same dehumanization paradigm (humanness to machine-likeness) among fantasy baseball participants. The following hypothesis was developed:

H2: Fantasy baseball participants will implicitly associate humanness to non-fantasy team players and machine-likeness to fantasy team players.

### Methods

At the time of abstract submission, the 2019 Major League Baseball (MLB) season just began. The same method as study one will be conducted; however, fantasy baseball participants will be solicited from Amazon's MTurk. Ten fantasy players will be requested in descending order of importance because baseball rosters are larger, and the bottom four players will be utilized again as second-tier players. The following players will be used as the non-fantasy players: Mike Trout, Noah Syndergaard, Carlos Correa, and Aaron Judge. As every MLB player is eligible for fantasy baseball, these players were chosen to match study one's elite level players. Each of these players are all-stars and are in a national commercial in 2019. Any participant who selects any of these four players among the ten on their fantasy team will be eliminated from the sample. Similar to study one, the results of the IAT (*D*-score) will be interpreted to test H2. Data collection and analysis will be complete by mid-May 2019.

### General Discussion

Study one replicated the work of Larkin et al. (2018) and found a similar result, and study two will test to see if the phenomenon is unique to football or potentially generalizable to fantasy participation altogether. As marketers, these results are paramount. First, fantasy participants represent professional leagues most avid and engaged consumers (Dwyer & Drayer, 2010). Second, a better understanding of the connection between fantasy participant and fantasy player could lead to additional sponsorship and endorsement opportunities for professional athletes. Lastly, sports with robust fantasy offerings have been able to leverage the activity into larger media contracts (O'Reilly & Evans, 2017); thus, media providers also stand to benefit from a better understanding of the implicit attitudes of fantasy participants.

### References

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