(S)exist (T)echnologies (E)levating (M)asculinity in Neoliberal Higher Education

Michelle Fretwell
Methods

• qualitative data collected in 2017 as part of a larger, year-long study in the Intermountain Social Research Laboratory

• 47 student participants
  • recruited via university e-mail
  • interviewed for 60–90 minutes
  • paid $5
Neoliberal Economics and Higher Education

• education = product
• students = customers
• revenue generation = top priority
Neoliberal Economics and Football

• The football team; the main attraction

• Disproportionately promotion of non-academic football
  • Campus-wide impact

• Football and STEM employed as marketing tools

• Glorification of male-dominance at the university
“I feel like [engineering is] just one of those things that like attracts more guys. Just like computers, like I don’t understand why like zero women are interested in computers, but that’s just the way it works.”

- Devin
“From girls I know, they just hate math. Probably ‘cause- I don’t know, there is a lot less room for error ‘cause it is like numbers. There is an answer. Versus like other things. Like, a lot of other degrees like communication, there is no direct answer for a lot of things. It is more like talking through things.”

-Ryan
Why is it that Boise State students persistently believe males should naturally dominate the higher status STEM fields?

The university’s promotion of male-dominated football and STEM programs associates masculinity with success causing students to internalize a gender hierarchy.
Hypermasculine sport as a symbol of success

• “I think the university needs the football team. Financially, because [it’s] the biggest money maker on campus.” -Aaron

• “Everyone wants to watch football. So, I think it’s fair that football gets a lot of media coverage.” -James

• football transcends from a university value to a hegemonic cultural value
“[Boise State] had a pretty bad freshman graduation rate, a terrible orientation process, students felt isolated, and whenever anybody questioned anything, they always somehow turned it back into the football team and was like ‘well, have you seen our blue turf and our football team?’”

- Devin
“I wouldn’t like that, even though I don’t like how much money my tuition goes to athletics. I really enjoy it. If we didn’t have sports teams, I don’t think I would go here.”

-Ryan
“In terms of student wise, you would definitely see a demographics switch from like, people who are here to get a degree, but also have the college experience, like they are maybe willing to try out for sports, or do all of these activities, it would be a lot more like you go to school, you go home. Work, work, work. [It] would make it harder for a lot of buildings, you need different donors, and all sorts of things to keep the university running.”

-James
“I would just say, stand out in a good way, if that makes sense. Not stand out and use the fact that they are female to stand out, just show that they can think just as well. It sucks to say, but maybe prove themselves.”

-James
“Those women who are in the field feel that they must mask their femininity... They’re like “no, I’m just one of the guys,” so they have to take on sort of that identity.” -Alice

• Mentally masculine, but physically feminine contradiction
• Gender-blind sexism
• Tokenization of women in STEM
  • “Paradox of visibility”
“There are very few outspoken women in engineering. There are definitely more outspoken guys. Overall, I would say there is a trend that all the girls are kind of silent and for the most part keep to themselves. But all of them, even we are in groups, they will talk through things. But like, they won’t try to step on other people's toes while the guys are like ‘you did this wrong’ and they will like cross it off or tell you how you did it wrong; ‘cause you are wrong and I am right.’”

-Ryan
Long and short...

The promotion of football as a revenue generator masculinizes success.

Linking football to the ideal college experience masculinizes the ideal student.

The university establishes a masculine standard of success in academia.

The promotion of male-dominated STEM programs delegitimizes female success.

Neoliberal gender hierarchy that holds lower performing men above higher performing women.
Thank you