

## Fantasy Sports Consumer Behavior: An Investigation into the Differing Consumption Modes of Fantasy Football Participants

Brendan Dwyer, University of Northern Colorado

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Fuelled by extremely-loyal and highly-engaged participants, the activity of fantasy sports has blossomed into a cultural phenomenon. Nearly 30 million Americans and Canadians participate in some kind of fantasy sports league, and the activity is currently estimated to have an annual economic impact of \$4.48 billion (Fantasy Sports Trade Association [FSTA], 2008). Fantasy football is referred to as the "king" of fantasy sports with more than 20 million devoted participants (FSTA). Due to this habitual commitment, fantasy football has emerged as an easy, cost-effective means of reaching an engaged and loyal group of consumers (Leporini, 2006). The premise of fantasy football allows individual participants to act as general managers or owners of a self-selected group of National Football League (NFL) players. As a result, a certain level of attachment to individual players on a participant's team is garnered, as well as an awareness of the players on his/her opponent's team. The combination of these non-traditional interests can result in a competitive curiosity in nearly every NFL game played each weekend.

Given this phenomenon, the potential exists for fantasy football participation to widen the scope of NFL fandom from team-centric to league-wide. Previous research has confirmed that this interest in a group of heterogeneous professional football players in addition to their favorite team has resulted in an altered perception of the NFL and increased consumption of mass mediated NFL football (Comeau, 2007; Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse, & White, 2008; Dwyer, 2008; Shipman, 2001; Woodward, 2007). Due to these intriguing circumstances, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the behavior of fantasy football participants through identifying different modes of NFL media consumption. Specifically, this study examined the behavioral differences among fantasy participants and identified which groups of users consume greater amounts of professional football. The following two research questions were utilized to guide this study:

1. Among fantasy football participants, do differing high/low mixes of fantasy team and favorite NFL team consumption identify distinct modes of NFL media consumption behavior?
2. Based on these modes of consumption, are there any additional consumption behaviors (attendance-related and mediated) that differ significantly across the modes?

This study employed a cross-sectional design of current fantasy football participants. Data were collected online from individuals who visited two popular fantasy sports web sites (ESPN.com and CBSsports.com) between January 19, 2008 and February 29, 2008. Specifically, fantasy sports message boards were utilized to attract respondents. In total, 306 respondents completed the survey. In order to determine distinct patterns of media use, respondents were asked to indicate the number of hours per week spent following both their favorite NFL team and their fantasy team through several forms of media, including newspapers, magazines, the Internet, radio, event programming, and sport journalism programming.

Based on these results, a principal component exploratory factor analysis with promax rotation was performed, and two factors, fantasy team and favorite NFL team consumption, were extracted. Based on an orthogonal design to represent the connection between the two different dimensions of media use (Pritchard & Funk, 2006; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003), the median factor scores were plotted and produced high- and low-consumption mixes for the following four modes of media consumption: light ( $n = 79$ ), fantasy team-dominant ( $n = 93$ ), favorite team-dominant ( $n = 55$ ), and heavy ( $n = 79$ ).

After constructing the four different modes of consumption, two group contrasts (ANOVA, chi-squared tests) were employed to determine the distinctiveness of each mode. Specifically, a refined version of Mahony, Madrigal, and Howard's (2000) Psychological Commitment to Team (PCT) scale was measured as well as five statements evaluating individual player attachment and ten NFL gameday consumption items. The results indicated that a significant difference existed between the four modes with respect to both fantasy team ( $F = 68.8[305]$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and favorite team consumption ( $F = 130.1[305]$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, a majority of the theoretical and behavioral outcomes indicated significant differences between the light/favorite team-dominant groups and the heavy/fantasy team-dominant the groups. This includes the mean scores for player attachment ( $F = 9.8[305]$ ,  $p < .001$ ), PCT ( $F = 11.1[305]$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the various NFL gameday consumption habits (i.e., pre-game and post-game television viewership). Interestingly, the results indicated that there were no significant differences across the groups with regard to event attendance. Lastly, descriptive contrasts resulted in no significant difference across the groups in terms of participant age, level of education, and annual household income.

However, given the novelty of fantasy sports and the potential for future growth, an interesting discovery indicated that fantasy-dominant and heavy consumers have more years of experience playing fantasy football ( $F = 8.2[305]$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Should this trend

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continue, it should be of considerable importance to the NFL, individual teams, and partnering sponsors, for it appears a participant's interest in their fantasy team increases over time. From both practical and theoretical perspectives, the most compelling aspect of this study was the observed similarities and differences between the fantasy-dominant and favorite team-dominant participants. Specifically, the behavior of the fantasy team-dominant participant was most insightful, as it is not viewed as traditional NFL spectatorship. For instance, fantasy-dominant participants indicated a higher level of attachment to the individual players on his/her fantasy team than did the favorite team-dominant participants. Likewise, this group consumed a significantly greater amount of NFL and other ancillary services despite maintaining a lower level of psychological commitment to an individual NFL team. Finally, this group of participants is significantly more experienced with regard to fantasy football participation.

Implications of these results could affect sport organizations in several ways including brand management, marketing communication, player endorsements, and the deterioration of well-established psychological commitment to team. In addition, the findings signify to sport managers the ability to market beyond their traditional geographical base to reach consumers interested in teams and individual players regardless of location. In conclusion, this presentation will discuss and analyze the significance of the current study's findings as well as provide practical and theoretical implications for sport managers, marketers, and media companies looking to capitalize on a growing segment of fans with distinct characteristics, motives, and behaviors. Sport organizations are well aware that consumers evolve quickly, and in order to gain a competitive advantage, they must continually adjust their current strategies and techniques to meet the mercurial needs of the contemporary sports fan. The results of this study are informative as they provide insight into a growing medium of professional sport consumption.