

An examination of influences on the consumption of fantasy sports

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The multi-billion dollar market of fantasy sports leagues began almost 40 years ago and has since grown to the point that there are now more than 35 million consumers. While the market is large and increasing, there remains a relative paucity of original research exploring the psychological and sociological factors influencing membership in fantasy sports leagues. Research in the area of sports fan motives and involvement is well established, including several scales measuring these psychological constructs. However, there remains a dearth of research on the fantasy sports fan in regard to these constructs. The fundamental purpose of this study is to describe the experience and appeal of fantasy sports to consumers and the effects its consumption has on consumer motivation, involvement and behavior.

Fantasy sports, once an amateur hobby, has changed the landscape of the sport industry. Recent estimates suggest that more than 15.2 million people regularly participate in fantasy sport leagues (A.T. Kearney Inc., 2003; Ballard, 2004). Consumers of fantasy sports leagues assume the role of owners, general managers, arbitrators, and coaches in efforts to build their own virtual professional franchise. These roles allow consumers to experience virtually every phase of ownership including drafting players, trading players, researching player injuries, submitting lineups, and signing free agents. The strength and popularity of fantasy sports is undeniable and can be seen by the number of hours consumers spend researching player trends and managing their teams online. Muellner (2000) reported that SportsLine.com, the fantasy sports host site for CBS, received more than 35 million hits daily from fantasy sports enthusiasts. More recently, studies conducted by Fantasy Sports Ventures, Inc. (2007) reported that the average fantasy sports consumers now plays in 2.1 different fantasy leagues and spends 5.2 hours per week online managing his/her team. The influx in fantasy sports consumption warrants proper research as it assumes a possible shift in the behavioral patterns of the typical sports consumer. Despite this tremendous growth over the last couple decades, the systematic study of fantasy sports, its effects, meanings and contributions to the broader sociological and economical terrains, continues to be undervalued in academic disciplines. The growth of fantasy sports and the deficiency of literature pertaining to it leads us to ask the following fundamental research questions: (a) what are the primary attractions and experiences that drive sports fans to participate in and consume fantasy sports, (b) what experiences make fantasy sports so important to these consumers, and (c) how does fantasy sport consumption affect the involvement and identification of fantasy sports consumers?

Given the lack of research available on fantasy sports, the methodology utilized to explore the research questions was an exploratory case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data are currently being collected by use of semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations and document analysis. A purposive sample of 15 participants (n=15) was used in order to provide a bounded system for exploring the experiences of fantasy sports consumers. This sample was recruited through gatekeepers (i.e., fantasy league commissioners) who contacted league members and made volunteer requests. Fifteen total participants from 7 different fantasy leagues volunteered to participate in this study. Methodological triangulation will be ensured through the use of thick description and member checking to maintain internal validity and data accuracy within the study (Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1997). Altogether, the data collection conducted for this study will provide a rich interpretation of the behavioral processes used by fantasy sports participants and directly focus on the research questions.

The results of this study will provide support to sport marketers and media businesses in their attempt to leverage fantasy sports into a successful vehicle for reaching sport consumers. The phenomenon of fantasy sports has transformed the traditional passive and once elusive fan into a more interactive and involved sports spectator. In addition, the findings of this study will provide insight into sport leagues most significant fan base; the media-dominant consumer. This segment of sport consumers requires a significant amount of attention, as they represent a reflection of society's blending of traditional and digital culture. Regardless of this study's findings, it is recommended that more research be conducted in the area of understanding the behaviors of fantasy sports consumers and the appeals that drive them to the virtual world of fantasy sports.