The Fantasy Football Conundrum: An Analysis Of Novice Participants, Media Consumption, and Brand Saliency

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Fantasy sport participation is an ultra-popular and highly-interactive hobby for many sports fans. In fact, the Fantasy Sport Trade Association (FSTA, 2008) currently estimates that nearly 30 million North Americans, over the age of 12, participate in some sort of fantasy sport league. The online activity has created such a buzz among sports fans that sport marketing practitioners and researchers are now required to account for its effect on marketing strategy and communication in order to properly balance meeting the needs of a rapidly-evolving fan base while efficiently allocating a sport organization’s marketing resources.

Within this process of resource management, a sport organization must continually monitor the perception of its brand. A brand is a complex, interrelated system of management decisions and consumer reactions that identifies, builds awareness, and creates meaning for a product (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). According to Ehrenberg, Barnard, and Scriven (1997), a brand’s success depends on its saliency within the consumer’s mind. Brand saliency, within the study of perception and cognition, refers to brand clarity, conspicuousness, or pronouncedness (Reber, 1997). Due to the constant bombardment of commercial messages within our society, understanding a consumer’s clear perception of a brand is essential for grasping what motivates the consumer to select a particular product. With regard to sport spectatorship, fantasy sport participation has created a new, highly-engaged sport fan with newly-formed perceptions of the professional sport product (Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse, & White, 2009). These redefined perceptions center on the statistical output of individual players and have the potential to undermine a professional sport organization’s core brand concept, the pursuit of victory.

Given this intriguing circumstance, the current study investigated the relationship between fantasy football participation, media consumption, and the brand saliency of National Football League (NFL). Specifically, utilizing interpretivism as a theoretical guide, the current study qualitatively analyzed the experience of novice fantasy football participants with regard to their consumption of televised NFL programming. Novice participants were exclusively selected in order to investigate the unique psychological changes in sport fandom stemming from fantasy football participation. Novice participation was defined as less than three years of fantasy experience. Fantasy football was selected as the activity due to its place as the most popular fantasy sport endeavor (more than 15 million participants) and its status as the gateway activity for the industry (Fantasy Sport Association, 2007).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as this phenomenological study’s primary source of data collection. Correspondingly, fourteen participants from the age of 19 to 36 were interviewed. The participants in this study represented a purposive sample. Reflecting the growing population of novice female fantasy participants, ten males and four females participated. Some participants were avid football fans and others were casual enthusiasts, all with varying degrees of participation in fantasy football (from 1 to 3 teams). A semi-structured interview guide was formed through a review of sport consumption, media consumption, and brand saliency literature and implemented to loosely guide the interviews. After analysis of the fourteenth interview it was determined that saturation had been reached (e.g., based on repetition of a majority of the codes); therefore, no further interviews were needed.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection and was ongoing throughout the interview process. The appropriate process for analyzing data in a phenomenological study is through “the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). Therefore, following transcription, each interview was analyzed by two independent investigators specifically searching for emerging themes. The data were coded using open and axial coding procedures in order to begin the process of category construction (Merriam, 1998).

After interpreting and reviewing each interview, the two content evaluators retained three statements viewed as potential themes. At this point, the investigators analyzed each interview for a second time and two themes were ultimately agreed upon. From there, theory building took place through the linking and manipulating of abstract
Thematic analysis of the data revealed the following two universal themes for novice fantasy football participation: a distinct attitudinal change in how an NFL game was perceived, and a substantial increase in televised sport consumption. Under the first theme, the following cognitive and perceptual characteristics were prevalent among participants: an attraction to different elements of a televised NFL game, little focus on the outcome of the game, an increased attraction to a group of heterogeneous players, their statistics, and their situation within a game, an awareness of opponent's fantasy players, a transformation from single game focus to a league-wide scope, and an internal struggle between favorite team and fantasy team objectives. For the second theme, the following behavioral categories and sub-categories were discovered among participants: an increased consumption of live event programming including additional non-traditional games, increased consumption of sport journalism shows during the week and leading up to games, and consumption driven by informational aspirations as well as entertainment aspects.

Ultimately, in line with previous research by Drayer et al. (2009), the novice participants indicated that fantasy football participation activates additional and competing elements to traditional sport fandom as interest in an NFL team's outcome was most often not the dominating factor. As mentioned above, the core brand concept of the NFL is the pursuit of victory. To this end, team strategy, management objectives, and the media representation of the NFL product is primarily focused on the competitive outcome of each game. On the other hand, it appears that fantasy football participation acts as a brand extension of the NFL's core brand concept. As a result, participants, both in and outside the customary geographical area, now clamor for additional statistics, injury updates, depth charts, and team strategy information for fantasy football purposes and not to support the team’s objectives. With this new and evolving scope of fandom, it appears there are brand-product association issues among fans as two products (players and teams) are now associated with the league, and it has gotten to a point wherein the strength of the NFL’s pursuit of victory brand has the potential to become weakened by too many competing elements within a fantasy participant's mind.

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 and marketers looking to capitalize on this emerging phenomenon. Sport organizations are well aware that consumers evolve quickly, and in order to gain a competitive advantage, they must continually adjust their brand management strategies to cue the proper perceptions among targeted constituents. Thus, the results of this study are informative as they provide psychological insight into a growing segment of sport fans with distinct characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors.