The Internet is quickly becoming one of the most widely adapted tools for sport managers, academicians and fans alike. Based on the customizability and broad applicability the Internet provides, it was only a matter of time before its applications mirrored such growth. One such application is called fantasy sport. Fantasy sport is a platform where users accumulate points based on real-time statistics achieved by members on their “fantasy” roster. While evidence of rudimentary fantasy sports has been seen as early World War II, fantasy sport business as it is known today got its start in the early 1980’s (FSTA, 2006). While little contemporary research has been done on the realm of fantasy sports, its extreme popularity (to the tune of 29.9 million people in 2007) warrants that research be done in an attempt to understand the reasons why fantasy sports have attracted so many people and how it can be utilized as a potential marketing tool in the future.

Fantasy sport has created a new niche of fan, which identifies more with the individual players of the fantasy roster more so than his/her favorite team. This shift in identification has caused problems for academicians and marketers, alike. For academicians, this concept of player identification has caused scholars to reexamine traditional definitions of identification (points of attachment). For marketers, this shift in identification has led to different behavioral tendencies (i.e. purchasing licensed products of favorite fantasy players versus favorite teams and purchasing specific fantasy publications versus traditional sport periodicals like Sports Illustrated) varied spectatorship patterns (i.e. viewing games of fantasy players versus viewing games of favorite teams) and overall alternate sport consumption attitudes.

The purpose of this study revolves around fantasy sport consumers and an attempt to understand the antecedents to their identification with the athletes that make up their fantasy rosters. In this study, the authors address several key issues concerning points of attachment to fantasy sport: first, what are the antecedents of player identification; second, does regulatory fit between the player attributes and an overall team concept effectively predict player identification and third, what factors go into the creation of the ‘player attribute’ concept? To assist in answering these questions, we developed a research model by integrating key variables such as Player Identification, Regulatory Fit, Player Attributes and Overall Team Concept/Philosophy.

Issues unique to identification have been studied in the psychology and consumer behavior literature (Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James and Gladden 2002; Kwon, Trail & Anderson 2005), but have not been examined in any length in online settings and in more specific terms, with online sport consumers. Furthermore, while the points of attachment have been studied in the spectator sport context to a great extent (Robinson, Trail, & Kwon, 2004; Robinson, Trail, Dick, & Gillentine, 2005; Lee, Trail, & Anderson, 2009), the research on identification and the points of attachment in an online context, particularly fantasy sport, is quite new. Taking cues from the relevant literature, the researchers look to examine how these factors impact fantasy sport consumers and how marketers can use this information to maximize their effect in the consumption context.

The concept of regulatory fit is defined as the increased motivational intensity that results when there is a match between the manner in which an individual pursues a goal and his or her goal orientation (Aaker & Lee 2006). Avnet and Higgins (2006) simplify this point by saying that individuals experience fit when they engage in activities that sustain their regulatory orientation. In relation to our model, the researchers are interested in understanding how regulatory fit between Player Attributes and a fantasy owner's Ideal Team Concept lead to the creation of identification with a specific athlete.

The Ideal Team Concept refers to a general strategy adopted by the fantasy sport consumer that acts a guiding principle to the creation of his/her team (i.e. attempting to draft a few superstars while filling out the roster with average athletes, selecting athletes from a favorite college or state, only selecting athletes with high morals, etc.). Additionally, the authors postulate that the ‘Player Attributes’ factor is comprised of three items: Player Trustworthiness, Player Expertise and Performance Consistency. Ohanian (1990) defined Trustworthiness in the
communication context as a listener’s degree of confidence in, and level of acceptance of, the speaker and the message. As it pertains to our study, Player Trustworthiness is defined as a fantasy sport consumer’s degree of confidence in a player as it pertains to his on and off-field behavior. Arai and Ko (2009) define expertise as an athlete’s athletic capability in his/her sport, which is described by an athlete’s experience, knowledge, skills and proficiency. The authors adopted this definition in the current study. The authors operationalize Performance Consistency as a fantasy sport consumer’s perceived reliability in the athlete’s weekly performance, propensity for injury and talent level of the team around the given player.

While this hypothesized shift in identification seems to be detrimental to traditional sport marketing strategies, the authors believe that the shift occurring in the fantasy sport sector provides new business opportunities for sport marketers. Our proposed model has both scientific and practical contributions. From a practical viewpoint, sport businesses can capitalize on the popularity of productive fantasy athletes that may not have the traditional appeal that heavily endorsed athletes do by creating new sponsorship deals consistent with the popular trend of individual athlete branding. Furthermore, the results from this model will spur sport businesses to cater to this new niche of fans by creating new goods and services specialized to their needs. From an academic standpoint, our research has shed new light on the established field of identification in a manner not discussed in previous literature.

In our presentation, we will discuss the value of the proposed model as well as the scientific and practical implications created by it.