An Examination of Barriers Facing African American Membership in Fantasy Football Leagues
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The multi-billion dollar market of fantasy sports has grown immensely in recent years, and consequently academic research on fantasy sports has developed considerably in a number of various directions. In particular, increasing scholarly attention has focused on exploring the motives sport consumers have for participating in fantasy leagues. To date, however, the extant literature regarding fantasy sports has yet to examine the reasons why certain demographic consumer groups do not consume membership of fantasy leagues. Specifically, there is a relative paucity of literature regarding the lack of membership among African American sport consumers in fantasy leagues. Although African Americans represent 14% of the National Football League’s (NFL) avid fan base (Sports Business Daily, 2009), this demographic group currently makes up less than 4% of total number of fantasy sports participants in the United States (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2008). Thus better understanding of the reasons that prevent or reduce African American participation in fantasy sports might offer sport managers and marketers valuable insights into this important sport consumer segment. From a historical perspective, race has played an influential role in the access and participation of African Americans in various contexts (e.g., employment, housing, sport) (Cunningham, 2007). Accordingly, this has prompted scholarly discussion from educators and scholars (e.g, D’Souza, 1995; Feagin, 2006; West, 1993). Cunningham (2007) stated race impacts sport participation through two dynamics: socioeconomic status and cultural norms. It is plausible the same could hold true in the case of fantasy sports participation. For this reason, we sought to begin “taking the pulse” of conventional fantasy sports league members regarding this diversity issue. To this extent, the purpose of the current study was to provide the conventional fantasy football league members with a space to present their opinion on the barriers that prevent or reduce fantasy football league membership among African American sport consumers.

Participants of the study (N=15) were recruited from a convenience sample of fantasy football league members made available by intermediaries known to the authors. These intermediaries then contacted fantasy football league members and initiated volunteer requests. Of this convenience sample, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to ensure the richness of information for each case. The demographics of the participants were representative of the typical fantasy sports consumer: educated, upper-middle class, white males with an income of more than $75,000 annually (Fantasy Sports Trade Commission, 2008). The perspective of these participants is important to understanding the barriers limiting African American membership in fantasy leagues because the participants represent the central stakeholder group currently participating in fantasy football leagues.

The primary method of data collection was predicated upon semi-structured in-depth interviews with study participants. Interview transcriptions were then conducted for the purpose of authenticating the essence of the interview dialogue and to validate the themes that emerged from data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To meet the criteria of trustworthiness and to ensure internal validity and accuracy within the study, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling were applied to this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1997). Content analysis of the data was conducted to ensure that participant responses were thoroughly analyzed and simplified into units of meaning respective to their individual contexts. Data were then organized into larger unit groups dependent upon the frequency of response recurrence.

Upon the completion of content analysis, an accurate understanding and interpretation of the data was achieved. The major themes that emerged from the data regarding the barriers limiting African American participation in fantasy leagues include: economic, lack of interest, technological limitations, and lack of fellowship. According to participants, the foremost perception of why African Americans do not involve themselves in fantasy sports is due to economic limitations. The assumption that African Americans do not possess the economic stability to participate in fantasy sports is quite fanciful provided the average fantasy consumer spends only an average of $154 year on participating in fantasy sports (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2008). Further, Alleyne (2008) asserted African American spending power has steadily increased over the years and is expected to reach $1.1 trillion by 2011. Secondly, there was a shared perception among participants that African Americans simply aren’t interested in
fantasy sports. While African Americans represent a significant portion of the NFL's fan base, participants perceived the statistics-based nature of fantasy football to be disinteresting to these sports consumers. Another limiting factor perceived to exist was African Americans' limited access to the Internet and lack of technological savvy. Participants were quick to assume that African Americans as a demographic group do not possess the technological means to participate in online virtual games such as fantasy sports. Finally, participants perceived the small number of current African American fantasy consumers to be a drawback for future African American consumers. Previous research has shown that camaraderie is one of the primary motives for fans to participate and consume sports (Wann, 1995); thus it is not unlikely that African Americans might view fantasy leagues as unfamiliar and reserved for demographic groups other than their own.

There are practical implications provided by this study certainly worthy of discussion. Since African Americans represent such a substantial portion of participants in sports, namely basketball and football, they represent a viable pool of prospective members of fantasy leagues. In addition, as the aforementioned statistic regarding the economic spending power of African Americans demonstrated and coupled with the knowledge that a number of free fantasy leagues exist, the perceptions of study participants that economic barriers limit African American membership in fantasy leagues is not supported. Further, there is currently no evidence in the existing literature to support the perceptions study participants had for assuming limited online access or lack of interest among African Americans in fantasy sports. For these reasons, marketers and managers should take notice of this lack of participation and implement creative ways to increase the number of African Americans partakers.

Given its exploratory nature, the current study was certainly not without its limitations. Specifically, because the existing study lacked the presence of African Americans, future studies should make use of qualitative techniques to elicit the perceptions of this group. Scholars may want to consider utilizing an ethnographic approach which would require them to immerse themselves into the culture of a particular fantasy league. Furthermore, scholars could utilize a phenomenological approach identifying African American participants and non-participants in order to grasp the essence of each group’s perspective. These methods surely afford the opportunity of scholars in sport management and marketing disciplines to thoroughly examine this topic.