Connecting to Sport: A New Way

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Poster (Audubon)

Fans often become emotionally attached to sport objects, such as teams (e.g., Lakers), players (e.g., Kobe Bryant), and coaches (e.g., Phil Jackson) (Funk & James, 2001). However, present day sport consumers may also develop psychological connections to “fantasy” sport teams in addition to traditional teams. In fantasy sports, fans are able to build a virtual team with real athletes and compete against other fantasy teams based on real-life statistical data (Roy & Goss, 2009). Fantasy sports, which began in the 1980’s, rapidly increased in popularity due to the advent of the Internet and currently is considered a multibillion dollar industry in the U.S. (Fisher, 2006). In 2003, 15 million Americans considered themselves fantasy sport consumers (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2003). Fantasy sport fans demonstrate a comparatively strong commitment to sport. Lefton (2002) reported that the average fantasy football fan viewed approximately 30 percent more football per week than the average football fan. Despite the prevalence of this trade, however, very few studies have examined psychological connection in fantasy sports (Russo & Walker, 2006).

One of the major focuses of sport marketing research concerns the psychological connections that individuals develop toward sport teams. Anderson and Stone (1981) posed that sports allow for a similar interest “to be expressed through the utilization of symbols so that a common basis for identification and integration is established” (Anderson & Stone, p. 167). In general, fans demonstrate varying levels of identification and commitment to sport teams. Funk and James (2001) developed the psychological continuum model (PCM) to provide a framework for understanding the development of psychological commitment to sport objects. Comprised of four stages progressing from an initial level of awareness to more internalized levels, the PCM depicts the sequential development of team identification. Funk and James, among others, have provided empirical support for the notion that fans not only identify with sport teams, but may become committed to those teams as well (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Smith, Patterson, Williams, & Hogg, 1981). Although a plethora of research has examined the dynamics that characterize sport consumption (James & Ridinger, 2002; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995), these factors have been relatively overlooked within the fantasy sport domain. While fantasy sport teams lack the symbolism, representation, and history of traditional sport teams, fans nevertheless demonstrate both financial and time commitments to their fantasy teams (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2003). It is not known, however, if fans develop a psychological commitment similar to their commitment to traditional sport teams. Do they internalize the makeup and success of their fantasy teams, such that each becomes part of the fans’ self-image? One particular focus of this study is to determine whether the commitment fans demonstrate toward fantasy sports is analogous to that shown toward traditional sports.

The PCM (Funk & James, 2001) will be adapted to assess fantasy sport team identification. Modeling this framework, we will attempt to create categories that reflect different levels of psychological connection that individuals have with both traditional and fantasy sport teams. The current study will also investigate the motivational factors behind fantasy sport consumption. Previous research has suggested several motives for consuming sport (e.g., achievement, drama, escape; Trail & James, 2001), whereas these motives are unclear in fantasy sports. Fantasy sport products are very unique. Teams are derived from a series of decisions made by an owner based on his or her predictions of future team/athlete performance. Due to this predictive and strategic decision-making process, comparisons are drawn to the “escalation of commitment” literature (Staw, 1981). Staw’s theory states that commitment to an investment of any kind (e.g., money, time, or effort) is strengthened by either positive or negative consequences. Sunk costs have proven to be motivational forces (Staw, 1967). Staw interprets this finding in terms of self-justification. He argues that people conceptualize themselves in a particular way, and when a strategic decision yields negative results, they allocate additional resources in support of that decision to protect their original self-image. Therefore, investment-based strategic decisions are typically characterized by a particularly strong sense of commitment (Staw, 1967).

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Due to the differential nature between traditional and fantasy sports, in which the latter employs strategic and predictive components, it is possible that psychological connection to fantasy teams is the result of escalated commitment. To test this hypothesis, an experimental paradigm will be adapted from Staw (1976) to feature a fantasy sport theme in which participants will partake in a role-playing exercise. Participants will either be provided with a hypothetical sport team (traditional group), or they will make strategic decisions to generate their own sport team (fantasy group). During the exercise, participants will make a series of judgments regarding the allocation of resources to their team. An either positive or negative trend of consequences will ensue, followed by a decision to allocate additional resources. It is hypothesized that participants in the fantasy group will allocate more resources to sunk costs, due to enhanced psychological commitment. Support of this hypothesis would provide evidence that the strategic and decisional components of fantasy sport teams enhance psychological commitment.

Data will be collected among individuals who are currently involved in fantasy sports. With the purpose of identifying such individuals, a snowball sampling technique will be implemented (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The questionnaire will be composed of five items from the psychological commitment to team scale (PCT) (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000), 12 items from the study conducted by James, Kolbe, and Trail (2002), 11 items from the points of attachment index (PAI) (Robinson & Trail, 2005), and 12 items from the consumer involvement profile utilized by Kyle and Mowen (2005). A seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) will be implemented. The analyses will include confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to verify the factor structure of the scales employed and simultaneous equations will be tested using Mplus 5.2 with the purpose of examining levels of psychological connection.

This study is important to sport management literature because it applies the psychological connection research, and specifically the PCM framework, to a niche of consumers that has not yet been fully examined. Moreover, from a practical standpoint, it is important for practitioners to understand the connection that individuals develop with fantasy sport teams because this connection may impact their affiliation to traditional sport teams. The fantasy sport industry has experienced rapid growth and has achieved a size relevant to sport marketers (Fisher, 2006).

Intuitively, it is reasonable to expect an inverse relationship between a fan’s identification to traditional and fantasy sport teams, due to the differential focus of each. Fantasy teams are composed of individual players, and, for the most part, traditional teams are not a factor. Therefore, this fundamental shift in focus may impact the manner by which the sport industry is marketed as a whole. Fantasy sports offer an opportunity to generate new revenue streams across the sport industry. This study will help to reveal how fans identify with their fantasy teams, potential causes for this identification, and how it may impact traditional sport team affiliations.