A Metamorphosis of Fandom: Is Fantasy Football Creating Conflict Between Fantasy Teams and Actual NFL Teams Through Co-creation Opportunities?

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Fantasy sports are one of the more popular consumption activities of our time with the participation of more than 32 million people in the U.S. and Canada (Fantasy Sports Trade Association [FSTA] 2011) sharing this phenomenological experience where fantasy and reality converge. Although there are many fantasy sports ranging from basketball to auto racing, fantasy football has developed to be the most prominent (Bell 2008), based in the realm of the official NFL games, allowing sport consumers to create virtual football teams consisting of real NFL players.

During the last decade we have witnessed a change in the way sport is consumed, especially with the introduction of new media technologies, which have developed stronger connections with sport consumers (Santomier and Shuart 2008) and enhanced their passions to even greater degrees (Boyle and Haynes 2003) by extending and customizing the sport consumption experience. Furthermore, consumers, central to service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004), are co-creators of value, which “is considered to reside not in the object of consumption but in the experience of consumption” (Payne, Storbacka, and Frow 2008, p. 87). Thus, in this study, we offer an exploration of how co-creation opportunities within fantasy sports experience may impose a slow but evident metamorphosis of sports fandom between actual and fantasy teams.

Sport consumers are the co-creators of the value of this online means of entertainment such that they create virtual teams consisting of actual NFL players that they can cheer for during their sport spectator consumption. In this regard, what makes fantasy football unique is its relationship with the NFL fandom, which is, in spite of its widespread application in sport industry, an understudied area in sport consumer behavior literature. This finding is not surprising given the fact that, “as the study of sport consumer behavior has evolved, the examination of [the population of media-dominant fans] has been overlooked” (Dwyer and Kim 2011, p. 70). We intend to contribute to this area by adopting an experiential approach (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) - the phenomenon of fantasy football is more of a consumer experience than a product to be investigated by information processing. Recent studies on fantasy sports have mostly applied quantitative methods to investigate this consumption phenomenon (e.g., motivations [Dwyer and Kim 2011; Farquhar and Meeds 2007; Roy and Goss 2007], NFL/AFL associations [Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse and White 2010; Karg and McDonald 2011; Nesbit and King 2010]; consumption modes [Dwyer and Drayer 2010], winning expectancy [Kwak, Lim, Lee and Mahan 2010], and service quality [Suh and Pedersen 2010]). To date, to our knowledge, no study has investigated the conflict between actual and fantasy team fandom with an experiential aspect of consumption. The new insights that can be gleaned from an experiential approach may create further quantitative research questions. Thus, we adopt an inductive theorizing process to explain this phenomenological consumption experience.

We followed Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) suggestion that qualitative data collection should continue as long as new insights on important topical areas were still being generated. Thus, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with open-ended questions until we determined the data was not generating new insights. This was assessed through the codebook we created (i.e., no new codes emerged from the last six interviews). We used Atlas.ti for our qualitative data analysis along with the dynamic coding scheme based on previous literature and the interviews.

The main finding of our qualitative analysis pertains to how controls for picking actual NFL players for fantasy teams and constructing fantasy league rules generate co-creation opportunities for sport consumers:

“It's great to be a fan. I'm a fan of the Eagles. I love to see them win. But what did I have to do with that? I'm just a fan. I didn't influence the outcome in any possible way. At the end of the day, like this week against the Giants, I feel really
good. But what did I do? Nothing. I grew up in Philadelphia. That's all I did. But in fantasy, it's different, because if you win, you almost puff your chest out and you say, I won. These were my decisions. (...) My players. And that is huge. I gotta tell you, that's huge.” Neil (pseudo-name)

“Fantasy is very open they have lots of options so as the commissioner when you set up the league the first thing is you make a password and text all your friends then they sign on and everyone's in. (...) The commissioner sends a question like how many points for a touchdown and you vote on it. Whoever wins the vote that's what it is. You go through the whole list and move on to make your fantasy draft.” Charlie (pseudo-name)

These two conspicuous co-creation opportunities add value to this metamorphosizing fandom type (i.e., rooting for fantasy teams) as well as adding value to spectating actual NFL games. As a result, a deep connection between fantasy football and sport consumers has been formed:

“No I’m not going to stop playing fantasy football. Never. (...) Unless I die no [there could not be a specific reason that will make me stop]. Or get too sick or go blind! I’m pretty sure I’m going to be playing it forever.” Harry (pseudo-name).

This connection with fantasy football creates a conflict situation for sport consumers on which players to root for. Thus, sport consumers adopt different strategies to cope with this conflict situation. The following two excerpts from different interviews exemplify different coping strategies:

“[Y]ou find yourself rooting for odd things that you normally would just be rooting for a team to win, but now you're rooting for certain players to hit certain stats. It's especially odd when they're playing your home team and you're rooting against your home team for stats. The best combination is when you have your home town players on your team and they're doing well so you can still be a regular fan and a fantasy fan.” Jeremy (pseudo-name)

“Well fantasy football stops in week 15 and then it’s the playoffs start in week 17 so once fantasy football is over if your team is in the playoffs you can root for them. So you root for your team in the playoffs. On the ride getting to the playoffs, no, you just root for your fantasy football team.” Harry (pseudo-name)

In sum, this widespread participation in fantasy football, being central to many individuals' lives, is substantially changing sport consumption experience – it is not only affecting how sport consumers experience the NFL but also how we in sport consumer behavior and the social sciences in general must analyze this reality, in fact, this fantasy. We believe the co-creation opportunities and conflicts between fantasy teams and actual NFL teams discovered in this research may glean new insights for both future academic research and sport practitioners, who should take this new sport consumption form and its respective consumption needs into account.