Examining the Impact of Fantasy Sport Participation on Player Performance Assessments

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Fantasy sport has grown substantially in the last decade, and along with such growth has come questions regarding how involvement in fantasy sport impacts traditional fandom (e.g., Dwyer, 2011a, 2011b; Larkin & Fink, 2016). These questions have largely focused on the extent to which fantasy sport involvement impacts fans’ loyalty to their favorite team(s). However, as an array of columnists and media pundits have pointed out, another unintended consequence of fantasy sport may be its impact on how players are evaluated and perceived (Garda, 2013; Lincoln, 2015; Owusu, 2013). For example, Owusu (2013) suggested fantasy sport performance could impact fans’ perceptions of player quality. NFL writer Adam Rank stated the following:

I’m waiting for the first wave of Hall of Fame candidates who’ll be judged based on fantasy numbers. Like, wouldn’t it be crazy if Larry Johnson gets some Hall of Fame consideration because some NFL writer won his fantasy league one year (and Johnson)…helped him win his league? (Owusu, 2013, para 23)

Implicit in this quote is the notion that fantasy sport numbers may be replacing traditional performance measures in fans’ perceptions of professional athletes. However, this particular impact of fantasy sport participation on traditional fandom has not yet been explored. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of fantasy sport involvement on fans’ assessment of players. Specifically, through an application of Fiske and Taylor’s (1991) cognitive miser theory, we argue that fans who participate in fantasy sport will be more likely to assess players based on fantasy sport performance rather than more traditional measures, a trend that could come with significant ramifications for brand perceptions of professional athletes.

Fantasy sport researchers have demonstrated a number of ways fantasy sport participation has influenced sport consumer behavior, including an increase in sport media consumption (Drayer et al., 2010), media substitution intention (Larkin, 2015) and consumer empowerment (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Kwak et al., 2010). We posit that an additional consequence of fantasy sport participation may be its impact on how fantasy sport users perceive and evaluate players. While fantasy sport points are based on a player’s in-game performance and statistics, there is not always a perfectly linear relationship between a player’s on-field performance and their fantasy production. For example, a quarterback is docked points for throwing an interception, but can more than make up for that in passing yards and touchdowns if given enough attempts. Similarly, a running back who scores a lot of touchdowns can accrue a large number of fantasy points and thus, from a fantasy perspective, outrank other, more productive players, who do not find the end zone as often but gain more total yards and/or have a higher yards per carry average. Evidence of this phenomenon—wherein perceptions of players mirror their fantasy performance to a greater degree than more traditional metrics—can be seen in the mainstream media. For example, in 2014 Indianapolis Colts Quarterback Andrew Luck finished 2nd in fantasy points amongst quarterbacks. However, he finished 7th in passer rating—a more traditional metric for evaluating quarterbacks—and 13th in quarterback rating (QBR)—a metric ESPN has recently developed to assess quarterback performance. In contrast, Dallas Cowboys Quarterback Tony Romo finished 1st in both passer rating and QBR in 2014, but just 12th in fantasy points. The discrepancy in fantasy sport performance—and thus, as we argue, fans’ perceptions of the players—is rooted in the sheer volume of work Luck received in the Indianapolis offense. Despite playing in just one more game than Romo, Luck attempted 181 more passes in 2014 (616 compared to 435) and thus compiled in excess of 1,000 more yards. However, while Luck’s counting stats (e.g., touchdowns, yards) were all superior to Romo’s, his rate stats (e.g., completion percentage, TD:INT ratio, etc.) were all inferior. Nevertheless, more subjective assessments of the players, such as Sports Illustrated’s Monday Morning Quarterback, ranked Andrew Luck 3rd and Tony Romo 10th. This assessment mirrored the opinion of other media pundits (e.g., Massey, 2015), and we posit that this is largely attributable to Luck’s fantasy performance and NFL fans’ and media members’ fascination with fantasy sport.
We posit that the tendency for fantasy sport participants to assess players based on their fantasy sport performance rather than more traditional metrics is rooted in the central tenets of Fiske and Taylor’s (1991) cognitive miser theory and the fluency heuristic (e.g., Jacoby & Brooks, 1984). The basic premise of the cognitive miser theory is that rather than acting in a rational manner and weighing costs and benefits in decision making, humans tend to take mental shortcuts (or heuristics) and conserve mental resources when making decisions and assessments (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Drawing from this logic, we suggest that, rather than engaging in a detailed thought process about a player which includes such metrics as their passer rating and/or QBR, fantasy sport participants are more apt to rely on a player’s fantasy sport performance when making player assessments even when more traditional metrics suggest otherwise. This tendency, we argue, is rooted in the fluency heuristic, wherein individuals infer that objects processed faster, smoother, and more fluently than others have higher value (Jacoby & Brooks, 1984). In essence, because fantasy sport performance is conveyed in a more easily digestible and personally relevant fashion than such metrics as passer rating or yards per carry, this information is processed faster and more fluently, and thus is more accessible when making assessments.

To test this phenomenon, we will survey NFL fans and fantasy sport participants recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk panel service. Participants will be asked to indicate whether or not they participate in fantasy sport and also assess their level of fan identification [using Trail and James’s (2001) measure]. We will then provide a series of (2017 season) player comparisons where fantasy points and traditional metrics do not align (such as in the Andrew Luck vs. Tony Romo example discussed previously), and ask participants to choose which player they think is superior, controlling for player and team attachment. We expect that fantasy sport participants are more likely to choose the player with the superior fantasy performance, while those who do not participate in fantasy sport but are low on fan identification, may do the same due to the fact that fantasy sport is so heavily advertised on mainstream media outlets. However, we posit that those who do not participate in fantasy sport and are also high on fan identification will choose the player superior on more traditional metrics due to the fact that they meticulously follow the sport and are not as influenced by fantasy sport performance. A factorial logistic regression will be used to assess the impact of the independent variables on the categorical dependent variable. Data collection is currently in progress, and based on the expected results, we anticipate making a number of theoretical and practical contributions. First, the study would provide evidence of yet another area where fantasy sport has impacted traditional fandom. In doing so, we will extend literature on fantasy sport and fan identification. With respect to practice, results would indicate that for fantasy sport participants and casual fans, fantasy sport performance is becoming the default means by which players are assessed. Accordingly, player agents and marketers must take note, and pursue measures to either counter this phenomenon or take it into consideration in the marketing of their brand.