Man or Machine: Fantasy Football and Dehumanization of Professional Athletes

Ben Larkin, Merrimack College
Brendan Dwyer, Virginia Commonwealth University
Chad Goebert, Virginia Commonwealth University

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Fantasy sport is a tremendously popular activity, achieving steady growth in participation in the nearly 30 years since the Fantasy Sport Trade Association began tracking activity. In general, participants have indicated both a heightened interest in sport and more avid consumption behavior due to their involvement in the activity (Drayer et al., 2010; Dwyer, 2011). Academic researchers have linked fantasy sport participation (FSP) with higher levels of attachment, team identification, and consumer loyalty (Karg & McDonald, 2011), suggesting loyalty to both the National Football League (NFL) and users’ favorite teams is not in jeopardy (Dwyer et al., 2013; Larkin & Fink, 2016). Despite these consistent and noteworthy findings, scholars have yet to account for the potential implicit biases subconsciously held by fantasy sport users that could have a pronounced impact on the NFL and/or its team and player brands.

Recent work in economics has found that dehumanization may result from contexts promoting the assignment of economic value to people (Harris et al., 2014), a characteristic consistent with the activity of fantasy sport, wherein users assign value to players through actions such as drafting, waiver claims, trades, and analysis of weekly performance. The notion that fantasy sport participants (FSPs) may dehumanize the players on their fantasy team has been broached by current NFL players (Henderson, 2017). For example, Seattle Seahawks Cornerback Richard Sherman explained, “I think a lot of people, a lot of fans out there have looked at players even less like people because of fantasy football” (Henderson, 2017, para 2). While Sherman’s comments were largely meant to draw attention to the level of perceived disrespect directed at NFL players by virtue of this phenomenon, from a business perspective, it may also have ramifications for the implicit meaning attached to NFL league, team and player brands. Defined as the “ultimate emotional and psychological implications and significance of a brand,” implicit brand meaning has its roots in the subtle, visceral, unconscious feelings possessed by individuals (Batey, 2016, p. 112). To our knowledge, fantasy sport scholars have focused exclusively on conscious feelings toward players, teams, and leagues. However, to really get at the heart of this issue, researchers must leverage a methodology capable of overcoming response bias to measure the implicit (unconscious) associations made by consumers and investigate how this may impact brand meaning. As such, we propose a mixed method approach featuring the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and subsequent follow-up semi-structured interviews to investigate the relationship between FSP and dehumanization of NFL players, as well as implications of this phenomenon for the implicit brand meaning held by NFL consumers.

Dehumanization has been described as denying humanness to human beings (Haslam, 2006). While this has been studied in a myriad of contexts—from race to gender, medicine and technology—modern definitions have typically focused on two distinct forms. These include either likening people to animals or machines. Most relevant in the context of fantasy sport is the latter, wherein “other people are understood as akin to objects or artifacts, which have no emotion or rights because they have no mind” (Haslam, 2006, p. 261; Mithen, 1996). Li et al. (2014) explained how mechanistic dehumanization of this kind may be characteristic in situations featuring a sense of ownership. Such contexts promote views of targets as disposable commodities or interchangeable tools that can be bought or sold. Indeed, contexts such as these—wherein economic value is assigned to human beings—fosters inclinations toward dehumanization (Harris et al., 2014). In fantasy sport, it is common for players to regularly be bought and sold. Players are commonly spoken about as representing “good value” if taken in a particular round of fantasy sport drafts, and trades are largely judged from the standpoint of the value coming back to each party. This fertile ground laid for potential dehumanization could have significant ramifications for the NFL and its team and player brands. Batey (2016) argued that accessing these nonverbal and/or unconscious associations that underpin the more symbolic aspects of brand meaning necessitates a more holistic approach to research. Priluck and Till (2010) explained that while individuals may be unwilling to articulate or admit certain feelings on standard survey measures,
they can be detected through implicit measures. Indeed, Priluck and Till’s (2010) work with the IAT provided evidence indicating that “while brand associations, attitudes, and overall equity can be detected in part through standard conscious survey measures, the implicit test is capable of detecting another layer of associations that may affect the brand and its strategies” (p. 424-425). Such an approach, they argue, should serve to provide a more complete understanding of consumer responses to marketing programs, particularly in such instances where consumers may be unable to articulate hidden feelings.

The IAT has been shown time and again to represent a measure capable of capturing (implicit) dehumanization (see Martinez, Rodriguez-Bailon and Moya, 2012 for a review). Indeed, consistent with Batey’s (2016) discussion of implicit brand meaning, the implicit biases that characterize dehumanization often occur at an unconscious level (Haslam, 2006). In contrast to the more immediate, readily available associations that represent primary brand meaning, implicit brand meaning occurs at a more abstract level, is emotionally charged and loaded with symbolism and psychological meaning (Batey, 2016). Moreover, it is multidimensional, made up of associations ranging from the conscious to the unconscious. Implicit brand meaning is thus quite difficult to access, its key drivers existing in the deep hollows of the consumer psyche. While the more functional aspects of a brand may be easily communicated through verbal description, a significant proportion of consumer brand perceptions are attained through low involvement processing, and stored unconsciously in nonverbal mode.

Based on the preceding discussion, we have created an IAT to administer to consumers of the NFL, both FSPs and non-FSPs alike. In short, the IAT will force participants to pair players on their fantasy team, as well as NFL players not on their fantasy team (e.g., defensive players, offensive linemen, etc.), with words associated with both machines (e.g., device, tool, etc.) and humans (e.g., people, individual, etc.). Non-FSPs will be given a random assortment of NFL players not on their favorite team. The word list of machines and humans has been pilot tested on a group of graduate students (N = 35) in a manner consistent with that used by Martinez et al. (2012). The idea is that, for FSPs, the associations between players on their fantasy sport roster and “machine” words will be easier—and thus take less time—than the associations between those players and the “human” words. In contrast, the non-fantasy NFL players should be more easily associated with “human” words, and thus take less time than associations with “machine” words. This pattern of results would be indicative of implicit dehumanization on the part of FSPs, and we do not expect it to hold for non-FSPs. The IAT will initially be administered on a sample of NFL fans recruited from Amazon’s MTurk. Subsequently, a Qualtrics panel sample including both consumer types will be solicited to corroborate the findings. As part of the questionnaire, we will ask participants for an email address at which they can be reached for potential follow-up interviews. Our intent is to interview individuals scoring particularly high on dehumanization to uncover rich insight on the implications of dehumanization for NFL brand meaning at multiple levels (i.e., league, team, and player). Data collection is currently in progress and we anticipate full completion of the study well in advance of 2018 NASSM Conference.