Toward a Better Understanding of How Fantasy Football Impacts Dehumanization of Athletes

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With nearly 60M participants in North America, fantasy sport has become a $7B industry. In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate how involvement in this activity may, without conscious awareness, impact psychology and behavior related to the NFL and its players (Larkin, Dwyer, & Goebert, 2018). Drawing on work indicating that the assignment of economic value to humans leads to dehumanization (Harris et al., 2014), Larkin et al. (2018) investigated the extent to which fantasy football participants (unconsciously) dehumanize NFL players. Given that involvement in the activity entails assigning value to players through drafts, trades, etc., it was hypothesized that such a phenomenon existed. NFL players have even suggested that fans view players less like people and more like objects by virtue of their fantasy participation (Henderson, 2017). Nevertheless, leveraging the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to study this phenomenon (see Greenwald et al., 2009 for a review), Larkin et al. (2018) found participants to view athletes on their fantasy football roster(s) as more human than non-fantasy eligible players. Given the counterintuitive nature of these findings, the purpose of the current study was twofold: (1) to gain further insight into this phenomenon through qualitative interviews with fantasy football participants, and (2) to quantitatively test the qualitative findings through a modified IAT experiment.

Results from a series of 15 interviews indicated that participants consciously viewed players on their fantasy rosters as commodities to help them win (i.e., dehumanization). That being said, this propensity for dehumanization was more nuanced than the hypothesis put forth by Larkin et al. (2018). It was only certain players that were viewed this way, as participants indicated they develop a personal connection toward players on their roster whom they had come to know and like. Often, this connection manifests from paying more attention to the player, developing an image of the player with which to personally connect, and thus viewing them as more of a human than a commodity. Players on their roster for whom this does not occur are more apt to be viewed as interchangeable commodities (i.e., dehumanized).

We posited that this is most likely to occur with second-tier players on fantasy roster(s). The initial IAT conducted by Larkin et al. (2018) prompted participants to select their four most important fantasy players. Thus, lower-tier players were not included. Based on the qualitative findings, an adapted IAT procedure was created and applied to a sample of MTurk workers. Respondents were prompted to list eight players based on draft position and the bottom four were included in this version of the IAT. The results of the adapted IAT, however, paralleled the initial experiment. Fantasy football participants (N=107) viewed their second-tier players as more human than non-fantasy eligible players. The contribution of this work is clear. At the implicit level, participating in fantasy football appears to humanize not dehumanize professional athletes. This is contrary to popular opinion, and thus provides an opportunity for player representatives to leverage fantasy football as a platform in the marketing and branding of athletes.