The effects of fantasy football participation on NFL consumption: A qualitative analysis

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ABSTRACT

The growth of fantasy sports into a multi-billion dollar industry has made it an important component of the sports industry. Sport leagues must acknowledge the impact fantasy sports have on the way its participants consume their sport. This study examines the impact of fantasy football on the consumption of NFL-related products and services using an adapted version of the attitude/behavior model developed [Fazio, R. H., Powell, M. C., & Herr, P. M. (1983). Toward a process model of the attitude–behavior relation: Accessing one's attitude upon mere observation of the attitude object. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *44*(4), 723–735]. Using qualitative methods, the data indicate that fantasy football participants utilized various media sources, specifically the Internet, television, cellular telephones, and a variety of print media, at much higher levels as a result of their interest and participation in fantasy football. Further, contrary to previous literature on fan loyalty, team and player outcomes were found to alter perceptions towards a favorite team or a fantasy team.

1. Introduction

From humble beginnings as a pastime for statistical fanatics to a giant in the sport industry, fantasy sports have grown exponentially in the last 10 years (Leporini, 2006). Currently, more than 29 million Americans and Canadians participate in some kind of fantasy sports league (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2008). Much of this success is owed to the evolution of the Internet as it has provided a virtual community with streamlined statistical calculations, real-time information, and enhanced social interactive features. However, despite predominantly residing in an online environment, many fantasy sports participants rely on a range of offline sources, such as magazines, newspapers, and television programs to enhance the fantasy sport experience. As a result, a study conducted by an independent research firm on behalf of the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA) found that fantasy sports has an annual economic impact estimated at $4.48 billion across the sport industry[1] (FSTA).

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[1] While this study's results may be overstated given the motivations of the FSTA, it remains the only study that examines the economic impact of fantasy sports.

In addition to the direct economic impact of fantasy sports, the consumer profile of fantasy sports participants is particularly appealing to the NFL, its sponsors, advertisers, merchandisers, media partners, and teams. The average annual household income of fantasy participants is approximately $94,000. Further, they are, on average, much stronger consumers of the leading product categories than the general sports fan and the general population overall (Fisher, 2008). Therefore, potential exists to leverage fantasy sports into a significant marketing tool both online and off (Russo & Walker, 2006).

Academic inquiry into the effects of this highly evolving phenomenon has been scant. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to provide an investigation into the changing attitudes and consumption patterns of fantasy football league players. Fazio, Powell, and Herr's (1983) attitude/behavior relationship framework was used to understand the influence that attitudes shaped through fantasy football participation have on NFL-related consumption behavior. This information will help both academicians and practitioners better understand an area that has previously focused on traditional 'fandom' activities such as attending games and purchasing merchandise (Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Hill & Green, 2000; Kwon & Armstrong, 2006; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002).

To effectively update our current understanding of the contemporary sports fan with relation to the phenomenon of fantasy sports, we must first revisit the sport consumption paradigm (Madrigal, 1995; Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003) in which cognitive and affective processes (identification and loyalty) lead to direct and indirect consumer responses (consumption behavior). The following sections extend previous consumer behavior concepts to the domain of fantasy sports, highlight the theoretical framework used in this study, and provide guiding propositions for the subsequent analysis.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Identification and loyalty

Team identification has been explained as fans being thought of as a component of a sports organization (Heere & James, 2007). Fans have a unique relationship with teams and individual athletes where specific alliances are formed that influence future consumption decisions (Madrigal, 1995). Matsuoka et al. (2003) indicated that both team identity and team loyalty have a positive impact on consumer behavior. Strengthening the relationship between fans and their teams helps strengthen team identity and loyalty (Matsuoka et al.). In turn, this may enhance the consumption behavior of fans, making it important from a financial standpoint for sport franchises to encourage their fan base to have a strong attachment to the team.

An abundance of research suggests that people are eager to form strong attachments to sport franchises. These strong attachments are also known as fan loyalty. Heere and Dickson (2008) defined loyalty to a team as:

> The result of the interaction between negative external changes and the highly developed attitude of an individual, which is characterized by persistence, resistance to change, biasing in cognitive processing, and a guide to behavior based on the interaction between negative external changes and the individual's attitude (p. 233).

Previous research indicates a list of variables that affect fan loyalty: players and coaches of the team, an emotional hometown connection, being a part of a legion of fans, attending and experiencing the atmosphere of games, and fatherly influence since many people select a favorite team prior to the age of fifteen (Kolbe & James, 2000). James (2001) added media and peers to the list of factors affecting fan loyalty, citing the strong influence these factors have on children.

Identification and loyalty are two vital sources for bolstering team associations. With regard to the NFL, it is evident team associations are prevalent as NFL team brands are the strongest of all professional sports teams, including 10 of the top 18 strongest team brands according to a recent nationwide study conducted by Turnkey Sport and Entertainment (King, 2007). Traditionally, these positive attitudes toward a team result in varying levels of repeat consumption behavior such as event attendance and merchandise acquisition (Dick & Basu, 1994). For instance, the strong positive attitudes in the NFL resulted in attendance of over 98% of capacity leaguewide, the strongest figure of all the professional team sports in the United States ("Turnstile Tracker," 2008).

2.2. Consumption

Previous sport consumption research has categorized sport consumption into participation in competitive, nature-related, and fitness activities as well as spectatorship in the form of event attendance, television viewership, and reading of sport publications (Shohlan & Kahle, 1996; Sun, Youn, & Wells, 2004). The distinction between the various forms of spectatorship is important as some of the most highly involved sport fans rarely attend games. Given the enhanced accessibility via televisual and electronic media communications, these fans continue to practice the traditions associated with being an avid supporter, and thus, require the same amount of attention as sport spectators. According to Pritchard and Funk (2006), media-dominant patrons are in need of further in-depth investigation as they represent a professional league's most substantial fan base and often exhibit the same fan-related practices as heavy consuming sport spectators. For example, in 2005, the NFL reported 17 million fans attended games (The Associated Press, 2005); however, the NFLs television viewing audience was over 125 million fans (Jenkins, 2005).

Previous definitions also fail to include any form of interaction with sport. The explosion of Internet applications such as fantasy sports, message boards, and blogs have enabled sports fans to actively engage with sport products at a level unknown to them just a decade ago (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007; Seo & Green, 2008). Due to these technological advances, the

contemporary sports fan has a variety of consumption opportunities that did not previously exist. Therefore, with regard to this study, sport consumption is defined as the amount of time and/or money spent participating, spectating, following, or interacting with sport.

2.3. Attitudes and behavior conceptual framework

The attitude–behavior relationship framework has been examined extensively in the areas of psychology and consumer behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Fazio, 1986; Fazio et al., 1983; Wicker, 1969). Early research focused on the predictive relationship between attitudes and behavior (Fazio, 2007), and moderating variables that may influence this relationship (Fazio, 1986). However, the aim of the current study was not to predict behavior based on attitudes, but rather to understand how attitudes may guide specific behaviors. Fazio et al. (1983) developed a model to understand the impact that attitudes have on behavior. The model is process-oriented in that it focuses on how attitudes influence behavior. The model begins by assuming that an individual's social behavior is largely a function of his or her perceptions of a specific situation. For example, a sports fan's preference for a specific team has an effect on their decision to watch the game (Mahony & Howard, 1998; Mahony & Moorman, 1999; Mahony & Moorman, 2000). According to Fazio (1986), this assumption is of crucial importance because "the extent to which attitudes influence such perceptions determines the degree to which attitudes guide behavior" (p. 208).

Based on this assumption, a number of steps must occur in order for attitudes to influence behavior. First, the attitude must be activated. Fazio et al. (1983) proposed that attitude activation based on a direct behavioral experience has a stronger influence on perceptions and behavior than indirect activation. Second, attitudes developed through a direct behavioral experience will impact perceptions of a situation or event. Additionally, if there is a set of norms or existing knowledge, these guidelines will also have a powerful influence on perceptions of a situation or event. Finally, those perceptions, developed through a combination of an individual's attitudes and their subjective norms, will guide consistent behaviors relative to the specific event/situation in question.

The Fazio et al. (1983) model has been adapted within the context of sport viewership intentions (Mahony & Howard, 1998). The authors suggested that this relationship is more complex for sport-related attitudes and behaviors due to the fact that negative attitudes towards a team (i.e., a rival team) can still lead to a positive behavior in terms of viewership. Perhaps an adaptation of the Fazio et al. framework is most appropriate within the context of sport. Additionally, this model has not been used to understand the influence a direct, sport-related, behavioral experience has on sport consumption behavior. An adapted attitude–behavior model (Fig. 1) is proposed to understand the effect that attitudes shaped through fantasy football participation may have on sport-related consumption.

For the purposes of the current study, fantasy football participation acts as the direct behavioral experience which activates an individual's attitudes towards the NFL. It is proposed that fantasy football participation may have an effect on attitudes towards the NFL which will in turn influence an individual's NFL perceptions. In addition, norms, represented by existing knowledge and feelings towards a favorite team, will simultaneously guide an individual's NFL perceptions. These "altered" perceptions will impact NFL consumption behavior. Finally, the proposed model is in a constant state of change.
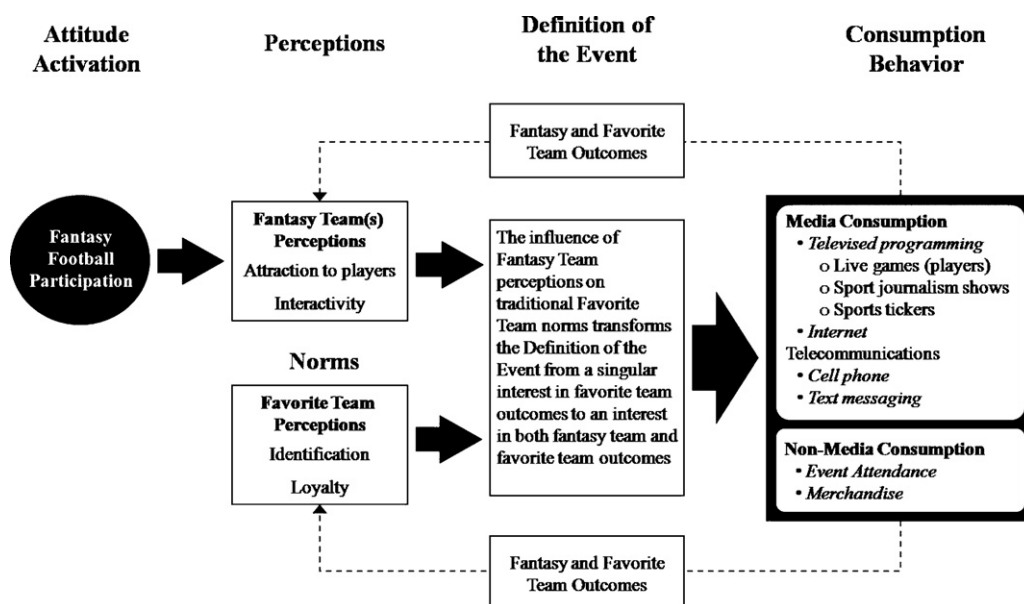

Fig. 1. Attitude/behavior relationship: fantasy football participation influence on NFL consumption.

Favorite team and fantasy team performance outcomes will influence attitudes, perceptions, and consumption throughout an individual's "NFL experience". Ultimately, the type and frequency of consumption will be continually affected by attitudes developed through a combination of fantasy football participation and existing normative attitudes.

The proposed framework in this study will act as an extension of the existing consumption literature with a focus on the media-dominant consumer. The following three propositions have been developed to guide this research and our examination of the proposed framework:

P1: The activation of attitudes facilitated by fantasy football participation will create new "Fantasy Team" perceptions of the NFL that are an extension of existing "Favorite Team" or norm perceptions.
P2: The combination of the newly developed "Fantasy Team" perception combined with existing norms will alter participants' definition of the event (e.g. the NFL), which ultimately influences NFL consumption behavior.
P3: The importance of outcomes in the redefined NFL makes this model in a constant state of change. Outcomes simultaneously influence perceptions of both fantasy and favorite teams. Based on the changing perceptions, individuals continually establish new definitions of the NFL with varying emphasis on either the fantasy side or the favorite team side. Based on these changing definitions as well as NFL outcomes, fantasy football participants adjust their consumption behavior, particularly related to media consumption.

New and immersive activities and technologies are continually altering the sport consumption landscape. This study, in particular, focused on how fantasy football participation is changing the existing perceptions and consumption behaviors of the NFL. Given the exploratory nature of this inquiry, a qualitative methodology was employed to understand the phenomenon of fantasy football from the unique perspective of the participants themselves. The following section underscores the methods utilized for data collection and analysis as well as provide a detailed look at this study's participants and research setting.

3. Methods

In qualitative research, the focus is on the essence or the structure of an experience (Merriam, 1998). This qualitative study focused on understanding the phenomenon of fantasy football participation and how it affects the consumption of NFL-related products and services. Creswell (1998) argued that qualitative research is most appropriate when the fundamental question guiding the research begins with "how." Further, a qualitative methodology was chosen because this study was exploratory in nature and, since no existing theory-related to the consumption behavior of fantasy football participants was available, a detailed examination of the topic was necessary.

This study was both inductive (data-based) and deductive (theory-based). Denis, Lamothe, and Langley (2001) proposed this mixed approach "because it allows one to gain creative insight from the data, without necessarily denying or reinventing concepts that have been useful previously" (p. 812). Indeed, consistent with the inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), this study "generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept" (Glaser and Strauss, p. 23). However, the analysis and discussion was also deductive and incorporates Fazio et al.'s (1983) attitudes–behavior framework. This theory served as a guide for the model and associated propositions.

3.1. Participants and setting

Participants were purposefully selected for this study which allowed us to discover, understand, and gain insight into this phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Each participant had been a fantasy football participant for at least 1 year prior to the start of this examination. This ensured that they were qualified to provide the necessary perspective (Creswell, 1998). A total of 13 participants from 21 to 38 years of age were interviewed in the fall of 2006. Eleven males and two females participated, which is similar to the demographic profile of fantasy sports participants reported by the FSTA (2008). We also selected participants with varying levels of interest in the NFL and fantasy football. Participants ranged from avid football fans to casual fans and all with varying degrees of participation in fantasy football (from 1 to 4 teams managed). Overall, the participants represented the profile of the "typical" fantasy sports participant, which is an educated, white male between the ages of 18 and 49 (FSTA). A brief profile of each participant is available in Table 1. Non-descript pseudonyms were used to identify the participants in Sections 4 and 5.

3.2. Method for data collection

Three of the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant based on the interview guide in Appendix A, with at least two of those authors present in each interview. The interview questions were created based on the aim of the study: to understand how fantasy football participation influences consumption of NFL-related products and services. Thus, there were specific questions related to game attendance, Internet usage, television viewership, interest in fantasy football, interest in the NFL, the purchasing of fantasy football-related products and services, and the purchasing of NFL-related products and services. Digital audiotaped interviews were administered with each participant for

Table 1
Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	"Richard"	"Tim"	"John"	"Roy"	"Todd"	"Allen"	"Julie"
Sex	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Age	28	27	23	30	32	38	29
Education	College Graduate	College Graduate	College Graduate	Two Master's Degrees	High school diploma	College Graduate	College Student
Location	St. Paul, MN	Chicago, IL	Bloomington, IL	Lawrence, KS	Las Vegas, NV	Tucson, AZ	Denver, CO
Years played	8 Years	7 Years	6 Years	11 Years	8 Years	9 Years	2 Years
Involvement in fantasy sports	High, in multiple sports	High, in multiple sports	Moderate, in multiple sports	Moderate, in multiple sports	Moderate, in multiple sports	High, in multiple sports	Low, football only

Pseudonym	"Elizabeth"	"Stan"	"Harold"	"Corey"	"Andrew"	"Joseph"
Sex	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	29	29	36	21	27	28
Education	College Graduate	College Graduate	College Graduate	High school diploma	College Graduate	College Graduate
Location	Monterey, CA	Ft. Lauderdale, FL	Windsor, CO	Rapid City, SD	Greeley, CO	Rock Valley, IA
Years played	4 Years	9 Years	6 Years	5 Years	6 Years	10 Years
Involvement in fantasy sports	Moderate, football only	High, football only	High, football only	Moderate, in multiple sports	High, in multiple sports	Moderate, in multiple sports

approximately 30 min in a quiet location that was compatible with their schedule or via a phone call. The semi-structured interview protocol was used in this study because it allowed the participants to talk about their experiences and feelings, and the questions were structured to make them easy to understand and answer for the population being addressed (Kvale, 1996).

3.3. Analysis

Coding and analysis followed the procedure outlined by Amis (2005). After interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were initially analyzed by each one of the five authors, who identified their interpretation of the themes that emerged from the data. These groups of data were mostly descriptive, using quotes from participants to describe each theme. Five authors were used in this study due to the exploratory nature of the investigation. Each author provided individual expertise in the areas of consumption theory, qualitative research, and fantasy sport in order to bring a variety of perspectives to the study. Amis stated that using multiple reviewers "will provide additional insight into conceptual linkages and interconnectedness of the codes that may have been missed by the interviewer, and also provides an additional check against preconceived biases that may have unduly influenced the analyses" (p. 128). Once the initial review of the transcripts was completed and the authors agreed on the emergent themes, the authors went through a second, more interpretative, round of analysis. Amis stated: "As the researcher gets to know the data better, coding can become more interpretive to identify what each chunk of data represents" (p. 128). With five authors examining the data at least two times each, we felt as though we had identified each of the emergent themes and the categories had become saturated.

Although only a small number of interviews were conducted, the data supported, to varying degrees, the same categories throughout the thirteen interviews. After approximately nine interviews, statements and themes became redundant and categories became saturated. Four more interviews were conducted to ensure that no new categories would emerge, which they did not, and interviews were subsequently stopped. Further, as is common with most qualitative studies, generalization was not the goal of this study (Merriam, 1998). It is certainly possible that this sample is not representative of the population of fantasy participants. However, Stake (1995) argued that generalizations could be made in qualitative research provided that the researcher offers thick description as well as the interpretations of the people who are most knowledgeable about the topic. By purposefully selecting a sample that was representative of the population of fantasy players as reported by the FSTA (2008) and providing thick description in Section 4, we hope this research can provide readers "with good raw material for their own generalizing" (Stake, p. 102).

4. Findings

4.1. Proposition #1

The authors' first proposition suggests that the activation of attitudes facilitated by fantasy football participation will create new perceptions of the NFL. These perceptions are not replacing normative attitudes toward a participant's favorite NFL team; rather they are simply an extension of those previously existing perceptions. All of the fantasy sports participants interviewed in this study had an existing affinity towards their favorite NFL team prior to their participation in fantasy football. It appeared that merely participating in fantasy football did not impact the existing perceptions of a participant's favorite NFL team, specifically the strength of their loyalty and identification with that team. (The impact of outcomes on this loyalty and identification will be discussed in Proposition #3). However, while they maintained this connection with their favorite team, fantasy sports added a new dimension to their perceptions of the NFL. For example, Richard, a lifelong fan of the Minnesota Vikings and highly competitive fantasy football player, admitted to spending "way too much time" following his fantasy football team in addition to the Vikings. He stated: "I spend an hour a day looking over the waiver wires and checking websites on line ESPN, CBS, and niche sites." He also said that on Sundays:

> I only used to watch the Vikings, now I watch a lot more...I have my computer set up. I'm going to sound like a psycho. I have live scores and watch games on TV and I track stats all game. I tend to follow a game in multiple ways... It's a day long experience. I watch all the highlights. Single team to a whole NFL experience for me now. (Richard)

Again, it is important to note that the affinity for a favorite NFL team is not being replaced by fantasy football. It is simply providing another outlet for NFL fans to enjoy following the league as a whole. As Allen stated, "I think people join a fantasy league because they have an interest to start with so a fantasy team is kind of a natural extension of that interest...It's taken me to another level of interest. I've gone from interest in the teams and who wins to the players and how they've performed."

An important aspect of fantasy sports is that a fantasy "team" is made up of a group of players scattered throughout the actual NFL. So, when the participants in this study indicated that they were following their fantasy football team, this actually involved following a group of players on different NFL teams. Participants grew increasingly more attached to these players. Corey, another Vikings' fan, stated: "Instead of just watching a football game, I can watch a particular player, and root for them, especially players on teams that aren't the Vikings." Later, when asked if he considered himself a fan of his best fantasy player, LaDanian Tomlinson, he said: "I think so, yeah. I mean, he's definitely a good player, and you follow more of his press releases and actually watch him to see what he says and get to know him as a player a little more. I even see myself following him years down the road, when he's not on my team." Interestingly, Corey was one of only three participants that

indicated the possibility of a continued interest in a player beyond the current NFL season. The majority of participants stated that the attraction to the players on their fantasy team ended at the end of each season. This was not surprising considering that, unless they participate in a "keeper" league where fantasy teams are maintained from one season to the next, they have an entirely new group of players at the beginning of each season.

For two of the participants, including Corey, this attraction to players actually carried into an attraction to that player's actual NFL team. Corey stated:

> During playoff time, I found myself rooting for a team that had one of my fantasy players on it. If the Vikings aren't in the playoffs, then I'll follow a team I have fantasy interest in, but not because of the fantasy, but because I've been following that player all season.

Tim, an experienced fantasy football player and avid fan of the Chicago Bears, provided another example of this phenomenon: "I have Reggie Bush, he is my keeper player so I have a greater interest in Saints games for the next how many years, if I keep him as my keeper. I definitely have a connection with that team good or bad and I'm going to want them to be good." Tim was the only participant in our study to belong to a "keeper" fantasy football league, so his continued interest in Reggie Bush may have influenced this tendency to follow the Saints more closely despite his allegiance to the Bears.

The NFL attitudes developed through fantasy football participation have a major impact on an individual's perception of the league as a whole. These new perceptions were based on a more holistic view of the league where an individual's interest is broadened to include more players and more teams. It is important to understand how these new perceptions interact with existing normative perceptions to create an "altered" characterization of the NFL.

4.2. Proposition #2

Our theoretical model suggests that as these two distinct sets of perceptions come together, fantasy football participants create a new definition of the NFL. The second proposition suggested that this redefined NFL is broadening the consumption behavior of fantasy football participants. Fantasy football participants now consume the NFL through fantasy league participation in addition to traditional team-based consumption methods. The most significant increases in consumption were specific to media consumption.

With the vast majority of fantasy sports leagues existing on a web-based platform, an increase in Internet usage was expected. Indeed, participants spent extra time, in some cases several hours, preparing their fantasy football teams. This typically involved visiting a variety of websites including, local and national newspaper websites, team websites, and fantasy football-specific websites. Harold stated:

> I'll go in there Sunday morning, online, I'll spend maybe half an hour tweaking my roster, checking the injury reports, evaluating the matchups, stuff like that. I'll check ESPN.com... a lot of my leagues are through Yahoo! So I'll use Yahoo!'s sports tools.

He also made visits to local newspaper websites because "that's where you get the best player news, and the most updated player news." Four of the participants indicated paying for fantasy-related content online, usually in preparation for the initial draft, where players are selected for each fantasy team.

The Internet was also used frequently for updates during the games and statistical information after games. When asked if he uses the Internet more on Sunday's since he started playing fantasy football, Tim stated sarcastically: "Besides checking my computer every five minutes if I'm home? Or every 10 min to see how my team's doing, or after every quarter or half?" Andrew also indicated checking the Internet for updates every 30–60 min on Sundays. All participants utilized a web-based fantasy platform and ultimately referred back to their specific fantasy league website in order to check on team performance during and after games. With such a wide variety of information available online and the ease of the web-based platform for fantasy sports, it was not surprising to find that the Internet was the primary source of information for the majority of our participants.

In addition to Internet usage, there was also an increase in television consumption. Like the Internet, television was used for information gathering. ESPNews was identified repeatedly as a great source for up to the minute updates on fantasy sports, particularly in the hours leading up to the games on Sunday when fantasy participants decide which players to include in their lineup for that week. ESPN was also identified as a great source during the games for continuous highlights and updates. Adding to the appeal of the station is the constant statistical information available on ESPN's "Bottomline." Elizabeth, a highly involved fantasy sports player from San Francisco, followed her players via the Internet on Sundays and even paid for real-time statistics through her fantasy league provider. However, even though she had all of the information available on her computer, she made sure to "check ESPNews on the half hour." When asked if he watched more television, Steve stated: "Yeah, definitely, ESPNews I watch a lot of on Monday mornings." Roy also had similar viewing patterns with the primary ESPN network: "I'm watching Monday SportsCenter a little more religiously than in the past. Also, I guess I pay much more attention to the Bottomline scrolls on ESPN."

While Mahony and Howard (1998) found that viewership only increased when a respondent's favorite team was directly or indirectly involved, our participants showed a tendency to watch games strictly for the purposes of following relevant fantasy players regardless of the involvement of their favorite team. In other words, beyond looking for updates and information on players through the Internet and sports news and recap shows, the majority of our participants indicated that

they had increased the amount of time they spent watching NFL games as a result of their participation in fantasy football. The following are responses from various participants which were indicative of their increased consumption of NFL games on television:

- "I watch more NFL games due to fantasy football. I watch teams I've never watched before." (Andrew)
- "Since I've started playing fantasy football, I will watch more games. Before, I would just watch the Vikings…But I'd say now, I'll watch more games because I have a lot more players to care about." (Corey)
- "I like watching games that I typically won't…I watch the AFC now because of my players. I only used to watch the Vikings, now I watch a lot more." (Richard)
- "I watch more football, definitely, at least three times more…We'll have multiple TVs set up and watch a number of games…We follow fantasy players from other teams. It definitely plays a major part in what games we watch." (Steve)

Additionally, Joseph and Julie indicated they were more interested in other teams because of their fantasy players and therefore more likely to watch multiple games on Sundays. Todd also claimed to spend more time watching television on Sundays; however, his additional time was spent looking specifically for statistical information on sports news programs rather than the games themselves. The more passionate fantasy football players such as Richard and Andrew indicated that they occasionally liked going to bars (for up to 6 h, according to Richard) to see a variety of games and players on multiple televisions. They both admitted that this increased their beer and food consumption as well. Several of the other participants admitted that the additional time spent watching football and seeking information on players had a negative impact on other important activities in their lives. However, they were all willing to make the sacrifice. In the end, the majority of the participants were not only spending more time looking up information related to their fantasy players, but they were also spending more time watching the actual games.

Another increase in media consumption that was unanticipated but nonetheless significant was the increase in mobile phone usage as a result of fantasy football. John stated that he used the Internet via his mobile phone for updates on his favorite team and his fantasy players. He automatically received these updates on his phone. However, the increase in mobile phone usage was not generally for informational purposes since most of our participants were never far from a computer or a television. The increase in mobile phone usage was for the purpose of communicating with friends and/or competitors. Todd, Harold, Richard, and John all stated that they were regularly on their mobile phones on Sundays sending text messages or making phone calls to friends regarding fantasy football. This was partially for information purposes; however, these communications were mostly done to "talk a little trash" (Todd) with their friends and/or opponents.

Despite these significant increases in mediated consumption of the NFL, for the vast majority of participants, the involvement in fantasy football did not affect consumption of NFL-related products. The only exception was Elizabeth, who became a fan of Tiki Barber of the New York Giants when he was a member of her fantasy football team. She stated: "I liked Tiki and always would watch him on TV even when he was on Regis and Kelly. I really became a *real* fan of his. I'd buy his jersey or something else." For the rest of the participants, having a fantasy football team and following those players during the season did not translate into an increase in merchandise sales.

Finally, fantasy sports had a negative impact on NFL game attendance for some participants. Richard admitted that fantasy sports "affects me attending games." He later stated: "For someone who loves football so much, I only attend one or two a year. It's easier to watch multiple games on TV, versus the hassle and cost of attending a game." Andrew, a frequent attendee at Denver Broncos' home games, stated "I would like to see the Broncos have stats above the urinals during games." The rest of the participants in this study were not regular attendees of NFL games before or after they began participating in fantasy football.

Based on the information provided by the respondents, there was a wealth of evidence supporting both a new definition of the NFL (which includes normative perceptions and fantasy participation perceptions) and a change in the type and frequency of NFL consumption. Fantasy football participation helped to generate new outlets for consumption, which were heavily mediated and more universal in nature.

4.3. Proposition #3

The third and final proposition of this study suggests that outcomes can influence both a participant's favorite team norms and fantasy-specific perceptions. In this case, outcomes referred to both team performance for a favorite NFL team as well as the statistical outcomes of relevant fantasy players. Therefore, outcomes can influence both a participant's level of loyalty to their favorite team as well as a participant's level of attraction to their fantasy players. Given the two distinct objects to follow, fantasy football participants have choices in how to spend their time and money. Furthermore, given that outcomes change frequently throughout an NFL game, weekend, and season, it is logical to assume that the perceptions and behaviors of fantasy football participants are similarly mercurial. This suggests the proposed model is in a constant state of change. The following section describes the effect of constantly changing NFL outcomes on fantasy team perceptions and favorite team norms as well as the altered media consumption behavior resulting from a fantasy participant's ever-changing attitudes toward the NFL.

4.4. Outcomes influencing perceptions

NFL fans are known to be among the most loyal in all of sports (Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008). However, for some of these participants, their participation in fantasy football influenced their allegiances. Specifically, the information gathered during the initial consumption behavior identified in the analysis of Proposition #2 and the subsequent outcomes of NFL games influenced their perceptions of their favorite team and/or the players on their fantasy team.

Harold is a loyal Broncos' fan and when asked if he roots for his fantasy team or the Broncos more, he stated: "I've lost so much at fantasy football that I'd probably say that I'd rather root for the Broncos. If they (Broncos) have players that are playing that would hurt my fantasy football team, I think I'd still be a bigger Bronco fan, unless it was a playoff situation in fantasy. Then I might be rooting against the Broncos." Tim, a "passionate" Bears' fan, explained: "If my team is not doing very well, then I definitely want to see my fantasy team do well…In general, I'd rather have a Super Bowl than a fantasy championship." These responses were indicative of many other participants whereby decisions on who to cheer for were based on outcomes.

For some participants, an increase in allegiance to one side suggested a decrease in allegiance for the other side. When asked if the success of his fantasy players was more or less important than the success of the Vikings, Richard stated: "I would say my fantasy players. I lost interest in the Vikings for their lack of wins. I'm a Vikings fan first, until they are losing." For other participants, the allegiance to their favorite NFL team would not fluctuate. Instead, a successful fantasy team resulted in an increased identification with their fantasy team and those players without negatively impacting loyalty to the favorite team. For example, Todd's allegiance lies with the New York Jets. He stated: "I definitely, on Sunday, live and die with my team (Jets). If they win, I'm in a good mood and if they lose I'm in a bad mood." On the fantasy side, his perceptions are entirely performance-based. He stated in regards to his level of interest in fantasy sports: "There are lots of things in life that are more important, but if your team starts off good and stays good, it tends to become more important. But if you start off on the losing end and stay there, which is what I've done the last couple of seasons, it's really not of much importance to me."

On the other hand, Elizabeth and Corey identified much more strongly with their fantasy teams. Her loyalty to her favorite team remained constant; however, as opposed to Todd and his passion for the Jets, her loyalty to her favorite team was at a very low level. Still, her level of identification with her fantasy team did fluctuate and this was based almost exclusively on performance. She stated: "I'm moderately passionate (about the NFL) depending on how my (fantasy) teams are doing…If I'm not winning, then I start to not pay attention and I don't care." She would later state that she had trouble increasing her interest in her favorite team because when they lose "I can distance myself from the sport because I have nothing to do with it." However, since she is selecting the players on her fantasy team, she is more responsible for the outcomes. Elizabeth stated: "I control it. It's my fault if I pick the wrong quarterback." For Elizabeth, she became a fan of her fantasy players (although not a fan of those players' actual NFL team) during the current season and even in future seasons. This attraction was also purely outcome-based. When asked if she became a fan of the players on her fantasy team, she stated: "Yeah, except if they suck."

Section 4.2 indicated that fantasy football participants increased their consumption of the NFL, mostly by seeking out information pertaining to the players on their fantasy team. A few of the participants in this study indicated that, in addition to the traditional statistical measures associated with fantasy sports, other forms of information also impacted their perceptions. Two of the participants, Harold and John, said that their perceptions of LaDanian Tomlinson changed after he was a member of their fantasy team. However, despite having one of the great seasons in NFL history in 2006, Tomlinson's on-the-field performance was not the first reason Harold and John mentioned as to why they were now fans of his. Harold explained:

> I think that I learned a little bit more about LT (LaDanian Tomlinson) than I might have known before. I'll go to other newspaper websites…and when I drafted him I read up on him and realized that this isn't just a really good football player, but a really good person. He's very active in the San Diego community. I didn't know that before and I might not have known that if I hadn't had the good fortune of drafting him.

He later added: "Drew Brees is also a good example. He was on one of my teams—just a pick-up. He's another good character guy. There are a couple of players, that even though they may not be on my team this year, I'll still root for them."

In the end, the way that the NFL is defined by fantasy football participants is largely the result of their initial consumption behavior and the subsequent outcomes of NFL games. As participants consumed televised games, sports news shows, sports tickers, or NFL-related websites, they gathered information about their teams and made assessments about their favorite team and fantasy team(s). This information, combined with the actual performance outcomes of NFL games, continually altered fantasy football participants' perceptions of the NFL.

4.5. Outcomes influencing consumption decisions

Section 4.2 showed how participation in fantasy football influenced consumption decisions. The participants in this study altered their consumption patterns as a result of participating in fantasy football. However, these consumption patterns continued to change based on the outcomes of NFL games, including favorite team performance as well as individual player outcomes. Fantasy football players change their perceptions based on the outcomes of NFL games (based on the findings in the previous section). Based on these changing perceptions, players continually established new definitions of the NFL with

varying emphasis on either the fantasy side or the favorite team side. Fantasy football participants adjusted their consumption behavior, particularly related to media consumption, based on these altered definitions.

The previous section suggested that fantasy football participants developed more of an attachment to their fantasy team if they were doing well and less of an attachment to their fantasy team if they were doing poorly. Favorite team perceptions were prone to this effect for some participants. This section suggests that not only did outcomes affect perceptions, but they also impacted consumption decisions.

Consumption behavior was impacted by the success or failure of a favorite team for some participants, but not all. For example, Corey stated about his favorite team: "I definitely try to stay on top of what they are doing and watch their games. I'm sure I'd probably stop watching halfway through the year because that's usually when they end up being out of it anyway. If they're not in it, I probably won't watch them." Richard, also a Vikings' fan, said: "If the Vikes are down big and there is no fantasy value, I'll change it over." Of course, all of the participants, including Elizabeth and Corey, would strongly support their favorite team if they were successful. Elizabeth and Corey were the only participants that preferred the success of their fantasy team over the success of their favorite team.

On the other hand, consumption of a fantasy team and its players was significantly impacted by the success or failure of that team and those players for every participant. The participants in this study started out each season consuming their fantasy team (watching their players, seeking information on the Internet or in newspapers, etc.). This level of interest continued as long as the fantasy team and its players were performing at or above expectations. Richard said: "I'll watch a Monday night game closely if I have a chance to win that week." However, he would later add: "If I'm watching the Monday night game and I'm in the running and my quarterback throws two interceptions to start the game, I won't watch anymore." This final statement, where interest decreased when the fantasy team and its players performed poorly, was more indicative of the impact of outcomes on the consumption behavior of fantasy football participants.

This phenomenon occurred within the context of a single game but also occurred throughout the entire season. Most participants indicated that they would disassociate with an unsuccessful fantasy team. Harold stated: "If my teams aren't doing well, it lessens my interest. I'll want to keep up to date on league news and player news if my team is competitive. If the team's not competitive, I probably won't even update my players."

Overall, these findings provide an understanding of the influence of outcomes (both favorite and fantasy-based) on the proposed attitude behavior framework. Not only did outcomes affect perceptions during the process, but the outcomes identified through NFL consumption influenced future attitudes and perceptions. In essence, there was a continual loop throughout the framework where outcomes had an influence during all stages of the process.

5. Discussion

The findings supported all three of the researcher propositions and provided both theoretical and practical implications regarding the influence fantasy football participation has on NFL consumption and the impact of outcomes on the proposed framework. These implications are discussed in the following sections.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Consistent with the model presented by Fazio et al. (1983), the findings suggested that fantasy football participation acted as a direct behavioral experience which activated attitudes towards the NFL. These newly formed attitudes helped to develop a fantasy sport-based perception of the NFL. As stated in the proposed model, fantasy team perceptions were generated and focused on a combination of individual players from multiple teams and the interaction with other fantasy league participants. These newly formed fantasy perceptions did not replace normative perceptions represented by loyalty to a favorite team. These perceptions simply added to the existing norms which ultimately influenced an individual's definition of the NFL. The existing set of perceptions was related to their favorite team and the new perceptions were related to their fantasy football team.

As the model suggests, the combination of fantasy team perceptions and favorite team perceptions created a new definition of the NFL. An individual's "NFL experience" changed from an individual team focus to a league-wide focus. Our findings suggested that fantasy football participation helped to generate a broad interest in the NFL rather than a narrow interest in a specific team. Consumption behavior was ultimately guided by this new definition of the NFL. These findings were consistent with the attitude/behavior framework developed by Fazio et al. (1983). Fantasy football participation created new avenues of consumption for NFL fans, particularly mediated consumption.

The adapted model in the current study extends the Fazio et al. (1983) framework through the addition of a feedback loop which implies the constant change in perceptions and consumption behavior. In the case of fantasy football participants, game and statistical outcomes had the most significant influence on perceptions, including loyalty to a favorite team and attraction to players on a fantasy team. Heere and Dickson (2008) indicated that loyalty is "the result of interaction between negative external changes and the highly developed attitude of an individual" (p. 233). Most of the participants in this study had highly developed attitudes towards both their favorite team and their fantasy team(s). However, these perceptions were negatively affected by external changes (outcomes). This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of casting off reflected failure (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992) whereby fans disassociate themselves with an unsuccessful team. In this case, that team was either an actual NFL team or a fantasy team. According to Heere and Dickson,

the interaction between the negative external changes and an individual's attitude will serve as "a guide to behavior" (p. 233). For the NFL and its sponsors, the great benefit of fantasy football is that negative attitudes about favorite or fantasy team do not stop consumption behavior; they simply divert it. Team loyalty is not the only form of attachment that fans have; they also possess a degree of involvement with or attachment to the sport itself (Hill & Green, 2000). This diversion appears to be logical as fans find other outlets to consume professional football.

This study also seemed to indicate another level in Mullin's Escalator Theory which separated consumers into several categories: nonconsumers, indirect consumers, and consumers (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). In this model, consumers are separated in three subcategories: light users, medium users, and heavy users. However, indirect consumers are grouped into one category called media consumers. This study suggested that perhaps media consumers could be classified as light, medium, and heavy users as well. Fantasy sports moved our participants from light media consumer's too much heavier media consumers. With as many different media platforms as there are, this distinction is an important one. The NFL and its member teams have a choice on whether to continue to capitalize on the increased media usage or to try to move these consumers from media consumers to game attendees. The second option may prove to be a difficult proposition as some of our participants indicated that they were less likely to attend games because of their involvement with fantasy football and their desire for instant statistical information. As comical as Andrew's suggestion of posting statistics above the urinals at NFL games may be, it may be this kind of innovative thinking that moves fans up the escalator from heavy media user to actual game attendee.

As a result of fantasy sports, fans who were generally not highly engaged in the NFL became avid media consumers. This new and expanded fan base could diversify the existing NFL fan base and could make NFL-related media a more attractive advertising option for companies seeking to reach that demographic. Clearly, a detailed demographic and psychographic profile of this particular consumer group is necessary; however, it is possible that these new consumers share common traits that are not reflective of the traditional NFL audience.

5.2. Practical implications

Overall, the impact of fantasy sports on consumption of NFL-related media was generally positive. However, there was no noticeable impact on the purchase of tangible NFL-related products. Participants were attracted to their favorite fantasy players but not to the point where it compelled them to do anything more than find as much information on them as possible. However, this increase in media consumption does have indirect benefits for the NFL and its players. Yost (2006) argued that fantasy football has been one of the best brand-building tools for the NFL over the past 5 years as fans around the world are watching the NFL more intently than ever, translating into real advertising dollars for the league. The findings in the current study supported this increase in media consumption and suggest that this stronger NFL brand may have resulted from an increased attraction to individual players due to their relevance in fantasy football. Ultimately, finding new ways to capitalize directly on the increased attraction to players will be a challenge for marketers in the coming years as fantasy football continues to grow.

From an endorsement perspective, this study raised the question: "Is a player marketable based strictly on his importance in the realm of fantasy football?" For example, players like Earnest Graham, Bryant Westbrook, and Greg Jennings are hardly household names outside of their local market; however, they were all highly impactful fantasy players in the 2007–2008 NFL season. Could these players, based solely on their fantasy impact, be valuable product endorsers? In contemplating this question, the initial thought was that these players could endorse fantasy football-related products and services to a very small population of highly involved fantasy players. However, the profile of a fantasy football player is expanding every year and the number of fantasy football players is growing every year. The participants in this study indicated that they were just as loyal to their best fantasy players as they were to their favorite NFL teams. Is it too far-fetched to assume that their purchase behavior would reflect this loyalty towards individual players? The only potential limitation to this is the indication that loyalty to players only lasts during a single football season as opposed to a lifelong commitment to an NFL team.

There are sponsorship categories that can align themselves more closely with fantasy football. For example, some restaurants have already started to market themselves as potential fantasy football draft sites; however, several of our respondents indicated that they would go to restaurants and bars because, with several televisions, it was easier to follow all of the fantasy football players. Restaurants can position themselves as the fantasy football headquarters throughout the season and provide additional information to fantasy football players desperate for the latest insider statistics and analysis.

Cellular phone providers also have an opportunity to align themselves more closely with the NFL and fantasy football. The majority of our participants used their phones on the weekends and on Monday nights to look up information via their phone's web browser as well as to engage in competitive banter with friends via phone calls and text messages. For example, Sprint, the NFL's current official telecommunications sponsor could provide an incentive, such as free text messages on Sundays, which may be enough to entice fantasy football players to switch carriers in order to communicate with friends and competitors.

5.3. Future research

In order to enhance the generalizability of this study, this research team is using the existing literature along with the themes discovered in this research to guide a quantitative study. This study will help us to gain a broader picture of fantasy

sports participants and further understand the consumption patterns of this population. It is important to quantify the benefits associated with fantasy football participation and to determine how much the NFL and its constituencies benefit from these new consumption patterns.

In addition, television viewership and psychological commitment within fantasy sports requires future investigation. Is the NFL leveraging the commitment of fantasy football players by making their players more visible? Perhaps this higher player-level commitment is weakening NFL team brands. As an example, several participants in this study indicated an effect on their attendance of NFL games. Future research should examine the impact of fantasy football participation on game attendance in more detail.

Determining the motivational factors specific to fantasy sport participation will help sport marketers, league administrators, and media companies better understand this growing and lucrative demographic. Finally, the study of sport consumption and other fantasy sports (baseball, hockey, basketball, NASCAR, golf, etc.) will help researchers separate sport-specific popularity from fantasy popularity (i.e., are the observed consumer behaviors due to the attractiveness of NFL football or the uniqueness of fantasy football?).

Appendix A

A.1. Semi-structured interview guide

1. What is your age?
2. How long have you been playing fantasy football?
3. Describe how passionately you follow professional football.
4. Do you have a favorite NFL team?
   a. Describe how passionately you follow this team.
      i. Do you attend any games? Why or why not?
5. How many fantasy football teams do you have?
   a. What's more important to you: the success of your favorite team or the success of your fantasy team(s)? Why?
   b. Describe your feelings if your best fantasy player was playing against your favorite team?
6. Explain why you like fantasy football.
   a. Drafting, trading players, setting lineups?
      i. Sense of control?
   b. Competition with friends?
   c. Makes watching football more fun?
7. How important is it for you to do well in fantasy football?
   a. How much time do you spend looking for information related to fantasy football?
      i. What kind of information do you look for?
      ii. Where do you look for it?
      iii. When/how often do you look for it?
8. Describe your average Sunday experience during football season.
9. Describe how your average Sunday has changed since you started playing fantasy football.
   a. Are you more or less likely to watch multiple games? Why?
   b. Are you more or less likely to stop watching games because of fantasy football? Why?
   c. Are you more or less likely to watch channels that post news/stats? Why?
   d. Do you check the Internet for updates of your fantasy players/teams?
      i. What other kinds of activities do you do online?
   e. Did you subscribe to NFL Sunday Ticket?
   f. Do you attend to more/less games? Why or why not?
10. How has participation in fantasy football affected your understanding of the game?
11. Explain how fantasy football has affected your interest in the NFL.
    a. How does participating in fantasy football influence your decision to purchase NFL-related products/services?
12. Describe how your fantasy football team's success affects your interest in the NFL?
13. Who was your best fantasy player last season?
    a. Do you consider yourself a fan of that player?
       i. How big of a fan are you?
       ii. Will you continue to follow him next year? Why or why not?
    b. Are you a fan of his team now? Why or why not?
       i. Will you continue to follow his team next year? Why or why not?
14. Do you become a fan of the players on your fantasy football team? Why or why not?
    a. Do you become a fan of that player's team? Why or why not?
    b. Will you continue to follow that player/team next year? Why or why not?
15. Final Comments about fantasy football or the NFL?

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