

Fantasy Football: Is It All Touchdowns and Victories?

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Introduction

Fantasy sports is an interactive, team-management activity played by millions all over the world. One of the most well-known fantasy sports there is to play is fantasy football. Currently played by millions of people each year by all age groups, fantasy football provides an opportunity for friends, families, and coworkers to make their football Sundays more interesting. The scoring system is based on statistics accumulated by athletes of real-life professional sport organizations. The end of August marks the start of the fantasy football season. After league members get together to draft their respective teams, participants set their rosters for the week and watch the week's NFL games as their fantasy team accrues points. Fantasy football is a bonding activity for friends. Thus, fantasy football has psychological and social implications that are worth exploring. The social implications have the ability to affect the people who play together in their respective leagues, which at times is cut-throat and highly competitive.

The studies conducted on fantasy football have led to interesting findings. For the people who create their fantasy teams, it is a fun game to play with friends and it makes football Sunday a little more exciting, but research has concluded there are many unforeseen consequences when joining a league. An example of an unintended consequence would be a breakdown of relationships between fantasy league members (Schlimm 2015). Another consequence is the impact fantasy sports can have on team fandom (Ruihley & Hardin 2011). Although on its face, having a fantasy football team is an exciting hobby, being involved in a league can lead to many unforeseen consequences for participants.

We engaged fantasy players by sitting with them on Sunday afternoons to observe their reactions to football games and watched how they interacted with each other. Along with observing participants as they watched football, we also asked participants

questions during the viewing session. Our paper starts with an overview of previous literature written about the topic. We will then discuss our methodology of observing fantasy league members and non-fantasy league members as they watch professional football games. Our findings section shows interesting results from our observations that may make people reconsider joining a fantasy league. We discuss our findings in relation to previous studies pertaining to fantasy sports and draw connections between what the researchers studied and what our results found. Finally, we conclude with making recommendations and general observations about this activity and its implications for friendships.

Literature Review

Commitment to Socialization

Combining social media and gaming, fantasy football is one of the biggest sports gaming markets. Ruihley and Hardin (2011) explained how socialization is one of the major reasons for people to join leagues. Ruihley and Hardin (2011) collected data from 322 fantasy sports users (FSUs) in a questionnaire format using quantitative-scale items and qualitative open-ended questions. They used message boards as a way to observe the purpose of joining a league. Their findings demonstrated that socialization plays a huge role in participating in a fantasy league. It also showed the commitment to socialization by how often players in a league responded to message board posts. They found that 11.8% of FSUs in the study used a message board daily, and 20.2% used it at least once a week.

Unintended Consequences

Both Ruihley & Hardin (2011) and Lee et al. (2013) used message boards as a way of looking at commitment to socialization in fantasy leagues. Whereas they looked at the reasons and benefits for joining leagues, Schlimm (2015) researched the unanticipated consequences of joining a league, and wrestled with the question of whether or not playing in a league is worth a person's time. Schlimm (2015) discussed how fantasy football is a great escape from the pressures of the real world and how it is a way to meet new people with similar interests. However, fantasy football is not always touchdowns and victories. Schlimm (2015) warned about how fantasy football can be addictive and become too involved in someone's life. Fantasy players need to keep in mind the baggage that can pile up when the game becomes

larger than the friendships that it creates.

Effects on Team Fandom

Another unintended consequence of joining a fantasy league is the impact on team loyalty. Lee, Ruihley, Brown, and Billings (2013) found that, participants in a fantasy league showed higher team loyalty and higher fandom in general, ... where fandom in the NFL is higher than team identification (np.). They also found that "... 41% of fantasy football participants preferred a win by their fantasy team instead of their favorite team" (Lee et al., 2013, np). Not only do people who participate in fantasy leagues increase their interest in their favorite team, but there is also a much higher increase in the viewing and enjoyment of the NFL as a whole.

While all of these studies demonstrated the social aspects of a fantasy league, they are all done online by observing message boards and social forums. This encouraged our group to observe fantasy league members in real time in order to get raw reactions to games, filling the gap left by prior research. Researching people in real time allowed us to record genuine responses to events going on while our study groups watched football.

Methodology

Our research question is, "Does participating in a fantasy football league have a negative impact on the friendships of the participants?" Throughout the month of October 2017, our group got together on Sundays, Mondays, and Thursdays (days that the National Football League has games) to host game days at our house. In order to get people to come to our sessions we incentivized them to come and get free pizza while watching the games. We observed two groups: one 12-member Fantasy Football League, and a group of 10 individuals who are not participating in a fantasy league currently. Both groups were made up of college-aged males (ages 18-22) who love the sport of football. We had two separate sessions of football screenings whereby we observed only the fantasy league members in one session and the non-fantasy league members in the other. We used phones and computers to take notes in the back of the room and we analyzed people's patterns of behavior and conversations.

Findings

The location that held our football game screenings was in the Club Room of our fraternity house (Phi Gamma Delta). The room is a rectangle layout, that when cleared can hold around 100 people. We set up the sofas in the room in a U-shaped, stadium style seating (see Figure 1). The red leather couches provided adequate comfort for those who decided to attend our sessions. Throughout the games, the poignant aroma of Papa John's plain and pepperoni pizzas were predominant everywhere the room. People entered the room talking about the day's games and what their projections were. Each participant wore mostly causal clothing that ranged from a t-shirt and shorts, to sweatpants and a sweatshirt. A handful of participants wore football jerseys of their favorite team or a jersey of a player they liked. Once people decided to take their seats, new smells illuminated the room: stale beer and cheap cologne. The room's light was turned off once the games began, so that the only light in the room was coming from the projector and peoples cell phones. The 100-inch projector screen took up most of the wall, which allowed participants to have a clear view of the multiple games that were being displayed at once using "NFL Redzone" (see Figure 2). "NFL Redzone" is a television service that provides its watchers with coverage of live football games where a team playing is within 20 yards of a touchdown. This allowed watchers to see all the teams that were about to score at one moment. This added excitement into the atmosphere of our sessions because at all times, participants were watching players score touchdowns or highlights of big plays, which had major implications on the outcome of their fantasy matchup.



Figure 1: This is the screening room in our fraternity's club room.



Figure 2: The size of the projector is 100 inches.

Cell Phone Usage

When comparing the two groups together, there were a considerable amount of differences and patterns that were noticeable. One of the more interesting findings was that participants in the fantasy league were more likely to use their phones during the games compared to those who were not in a fantasy league, despite the large display accompanied by sound from a top-of-the-line speaker system. However, the league members seemed to be more distracted by the screens of their cell phones. We were curious as to why this was, so it prompted us to ask a couple of questions to the fantasy league members about their phone usage. Their responses centered around them being able to see updates from other games and to check on their own fantasy team's scores.

Patterns in Behavior

Patterns in behaviors also differed between groups. Some incidents occurred where fantasy league members were so upset with either a play in a game or another league member that they left their comfortable seating to sit farther away. They were so mad that they decided to sit somewhere less comfortable (i.e. on the floor, standing to the side of the room, etc.) in order to avoid interactions with each other. At times, members in fantasy leagues were so enthralled by what was going on during the games that they forgot they had pizza right in front of them. It wasn't until the commercials that people realized they still had food left to eat. Members of leagues were also more inclined to ridicule each other for saying something inaccurate or something that went against the general consensus. There was a mentality of "I know more than you because my team is winning." Members who were not in a fantasy league showed

more signs of inclusion compared to the other group. After players in the NFL made electrifying plays, people not in a league gave each other high fives and chest-bumped each other. During commercials when people would get up to use the restroom or refill their drink, non-fantasy league members asked others if they needed anything, such as food or something to drink. Not once during our sessions with fantasy league members did anyone ask each other if they needed anything.

Patterns in Conversation

There were also noticeable patterns in conversations between league members and non-league members. Jack Brusco, a member of the fantasy league, was arguing with his fellow league member about the outcome of their fantasy game. He said, "Bro, I'm projected to beat you by 40 points. There's no way you're winning!" Right from the start of the session, there was already a feeling of tension rising between participants. Not only was there a tense atmosphere, but fantasy league members were looking at players in the NFL not as athletes but as point-collectors. "Another point right there, boys," said league member Michael Ertel. Him and other participants clearly showed no respect for the sport and only cared about his fantasy team accruing points.

Non-fantasy participants had very different patterns in their conversations. Most conversations tended to be light-hearted and didn't focus on anything controversial. Conversations were about what people did over the weekend or what they planned to do the upcoming week. Furthermore, non-fantasy members were more invested in which team won a single game and didn't worry about individual players' performances. This shows that people not in a fantasy league had more of an appreciation for the players and the sport overall.

Discussion

Through our research, we found that most people joined the league in order to fulfill their need to socialize with friends. Participants joined the league because their friends joined or because they placed some amount of monetary bet. Members communicated almost daily with each other either through phone calls, group message chats, or by word of mouth. Although our research specifically focuses on the unintended consequences of joining a league,

our findings correlate to Ruiley & Hardin's (2011) research which found that people join fantasy sport leagues in order to commit to socialization. They researched fantasy sport participants' commitment to socialization through how often participants responded to a message board post. Their results showed the amount of times a fantasy sports user responded to message board post in order to socialize with their fellow league members.

During our research, we found that the atmosphere surrounding the participants in a fantasy league was intense. We focused on looking for specific unexpected consequences of joining a league that Schlimm (2015) may have overlooked. Specific unintended consequences we found were people's patterns in behavior and their patterns in conversations. Schlimm (2015) found that in certain situations, the game becomes larger than the friendships. Schlimm (2015) carried out this research by tracking online fantasy emails and message boards. Our group took a different approach by studying these unintended consequences in person. For example, patterns of conversations were more hostile between members of a fantasy league compared to those who are not in one. Where Schlimm (2015) focuses on the overall unanticipated consequences, we take it a step further by focusing on specific consequences that Schlimm unobserved.

Throughout our research, we encountered different attitudes from our participants about how they felt about football players on their fantasy football teams compared to their favorite teams. Players pick their fantasy team based on statistics that the real football player accumulated over previous years. They don't pick their fantasy team based on personal preference for their favorite team. They choose players that have the best overall statistics and players who are most likely to get them the most points. Participants in fantasy leagues frequently would choose to not watch "their team", but rather the various other games going on that day in order to check up on the players on their fantasy teams. Whereas, people who were not in a fantasy league only had one concern, if their favorite team was winning. Lee, Ruibley, Brown, and Billings (2013) found that fantasy league participants showed a high increase in the fandom of football. They found these same people often wanted their fantasy team to win more frequently than their favorite NFL team,

concluding that the increase in fandom was more towards the NFL and lowered loyalty to one's favorite team. Moreover, fantasy players in our research seemed to be more knowledgeable about what was going on in the NFL, as opposed to non-fantasy players who mostly had knowledge about their favorite team. Although Lee et. al (2013) goes more into depth about the impact of fandom while participating in a fantasy league, we were also able to see some of the changes. Knowing that people joined a league as part of fulfilling their need for socialization allowed us to gear questions to participants more effectively during the game. Furthermore, we found that Schlimm's (2015) research on the unintended consequences allowed us to look for specific consequences that resulted from league members joining our league. Additionally, our findings indicate that participating in a fantasy league has its drawbacks and can negatively impact the relationship of friends in the league.

This study demonstrates the importance of considering the potential consequences and benefits of joining a fantasy football league before deciding to participate. Everyone likes to believe that friends are there to comfort and support each other. However, based on observations and relevant literature, there are unintended consequences of joining a league. These consequences might reveal underlying personalities about individuals which others failed to recognize. These findings are noteworthy because the knowledge of the adverse consequences a league may impose on a friendship may serve as a deterrent from participation. Therefore, these consequences may impact participation in fantasy football leagues, as well as the perception of what these leagues entail.

Conclusion

Fantasy Football has accumulated millions in revenue for websites that host fantasy sports. This time-consuming activity has shaped the way participants think and act toward each other. Through ethnographic observations our group was able to sit in with fantasy football participants from an all-male league. We compared their patterns of behavior and patterns in conversation to a group of males who all were not part of a fantasy football league. Overall, we found that there was a high degree of animosity and competitiveness among members of the fantasy league compared to those who were not part of a league. The tense atmosphere was felt by many who

were in a league, compared to the uncommitted and open-minded atmosphere of those who were not part of a league. Members, who were part of the league, on average interacted with their mobile devices more during games in order to keep track of other games' scores and to see highlights of the players that were playing in their fantasy matchups. Observing our study groups, produced interesting findings. However, our research was not without any drawbacks or limitations. Observing an all-male league skewed our data and observations. Unfortunately, we were not able to find an all-women's league or a mix-gender league that was willing to allow our group to study them. Our findings could have been different if we also observed women and their patterns in behaviors and conversations. Furthermore, we were not able to host a significant amount of game days for our participants because of the time allotted for visiting our research site and because of the limited amount of NFL games being played in the month of October. Future researchers can take our research a step further by hosting more game days for their study's participants. For example, observing a fantasy league from the start of the professional football season to the end of the season would probably give researchers more data overall. This would allow researchers to have more observations, thus allowing them to discover more astute and detailed findings about their participants. Close friends, family, and coworkers all over the world participate in this online experience. It is important to realize the unexpected consequences that may result from joining a fantasy league. For some, our findings may be the determining factor of whether or not someone joins a league; it can ruin friendships, cause bitter fighting to erupt, and overall ruin an experience as a fantasy football player and football sport lover.

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