Participation in Internet Fantasy Sports Leagues and Mass Media Use

Quint Randle
Rob Nyland

ABSTRACT. Two hundred and forty sports fans sampled through internet message boards were surveyed to examine the relationship between participation in web-based fantasy sports leagues and mass media use. The study also looked at the influence participation in fantasy league sports has on the use of different media outlets to follow team results. Participation in interactive fantasy sports leagues was significantly related to an increase in traditional television, newspaper, and radio use. It is suggested that mass media managers should consider implementing interactive fantasy sports leagues via their websites in order to build customer loyalty and increase use of their traditional media properties.

KEYWORDS. Customer loyalty, fantasy league, internet, media, message boards, sports

Rob Nyland is a graduate student, Department of Communications, Brigham Young University, 360 BRMB, Provo, UT 84602 (E-mail: robynland@gmail.com).

Address correspondence to Quint Randle, (PhD, Michigan State University), Assistant Professor, Department of Communications, Brigham Young University, 360 BRMB, Provo, UT (E-mail: quint_randle@byu.edu).

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The number of media outlets that cater to sports fans have increased dramatically in recent years. Gone are the days when one had to wait for the sports segment on the 11 o’clock news or for the sports page in the morning paper. In today’s world—where information is exchanged almost instantaneously—sports fans only need to type in a web address, turn on a cable sports channel, or tune in to a sports talk show on the radio to satisfy their sports habit (Grover, 1998). Now, with the advent of mobile phone technology, fans are able to receive sports information wherever they go (GoTV Networks, 2006).

With the recent explosion of affordable technology and growth of the internet, more sports fans have found yet another avenue to express their love and obsession with sports: fantasy sports. In an age when scores and statistics can be exchanged and analyzed in a matter of seconds, sports fans can play out their fantasies by creating leagues and teams on paper or in cyberspace, pitting their skills against other fans who could reside anywhere from next door to the other side of the world (Umstead, 1999).

With this influx of information, fantasy sports leagues have popped up all over the sports world. This emergence has not been confined to one major league sport; rather it has engulfed all sports where fans are willing and ready to role-play being big time athletes (Aragon, 2006).

Attractive to an audience of 18- to 34-year-old men (Murphy, 2000), fantasy sports is a market in which an estimated 15 to 18 million Americans participate (La Monica, 2006). Bringing in an estimated $1.5 billion in advertising and subscription fees, fantasy sports has gone from hobby to big business (McFeatters, 2006).

With the emergence of fantasy sports leagues, mass media outlets have a new market that desires and demands fast and accurate delivery of sporting news and statistics. This development provides several opportunities for media outlets to meet consumer needs and gain market share. If media outlets can develop good relationships with fantasy sports fans, by sponsoring leagues and providing up to date information, they have the potential to gain a devoted segment of the media viewing market. Such reasoning may be the impetus behind new television programs like ESPN2’s *The Fantasy Show*, that cater to the needs of fantasy sport participants (La Monica, 2006).
**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to determine if participation in interactive fantasy sports leagues was related to an increase in sports media and sports news consumption. While TV viewing was the main medium that was studied, other mediums were examined to see if news consumption by sports fans is confined to one medium or if all segments of the mass media have the potential to tap into this expanding specialty market.

The findings of this study are beneficial to mass media management because if participation in web-based fantasy sports is associated with an increase consumption of information, media outlets can increase viewership (as well as readership and listenership) by sponsoring fantasy leagues on their websites and providing the needed information to these leagues (Dholakia, Zhao, Dholakia, and Fortin, 2000). Additionally, if the leagues are based on a particular media outlet’s news delivery style, participants in these leagues may become devoted consumers of that form of news delivery. Taken more broadly, building stronger customer loyalty through the implementation of a various types of interactive multimedia is a promotional strategy that can be applied to all forms of news and information media.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Sports Viewing**

Sports participation and sports viewing varies considerably between males and females. Wann (1999) suggest that there are eight common motives for sports participation and sports viewing. These motives are identified as eustress, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, and family. Males were more strongly motivated by eustress, i.e., males enjoy the excitement and anxiety that they receive from sports. Males were also strongly motivated towards self-esteem reasons. An example of this motivation is when someone’s team is successful, he or she has a feeling of accomplishment and achievement. Males also scored higher on than entertainment motivation than females (Wann).
Sports Fan Demographics

Not surprisingly, males make up the largest demographic of sports viewing and participation. A study conducted by The Taylor Group found that 85% of boys ages 14 to 18 said they either “loved sports” or “liked them a lot.” However, the same study noted that 74% of girls ages 14 to 18 said they too love or like sports. Additionally, 77% of girls age 9 to 13 spend an hour a week playing sports-related video games, just 5% less than boys of the same age (Gardyn, 2001). The numbers provided in this survey run almost parallel to that of another study that sought to understand if and when males and females differ in their sports fan behavior and reasons for being sports fans. In that study, 73% of females and 83% of males considered themselves to be sports fans (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, and Jacquemotte, 2000).

While the percentage of persons who consider themselves to be sports fans may not vary dramatically with gender, there remains large differences in how males and females demonstrate their interest. Men spend more time watching sports on television, have a greater knowledge of sports, have different motivations for watching sports on television, and have a significantly greater interest in sports than women (Gantz and Wenner, 1991).

Dietz-Uhler et al. (2000) also suggest that each gender is just as likely to consider themselves sports fans, but for females the motivations are different. Being a sports fan means, for females, attending, watching, and cheering at sporting events. For males, being a sports fan means playing sports and acquiring sports information. Unfortunately, standards for being categorized as sports fans have differed between males and females, making such a comparison based on gender difficult.

Background of Fantasy Sports Leagues

Sports fans vary in several variables including age, gender, economics, and intensity. Fantasy sports leagues provide a way for a variety of fans to participate, from armchair quarterbacks to homemakers, in daily and weekly sporting events. Through fantasy sports, these participants can play the role of an owner of a sports franchise. Groups of friends or coworkers will get together and form a league, drafting players whose performance is based on how the real-life players are performing (Berentson, 2000). Players can be traded,
benched, injured, or dropped. The point of fantasy sports leagues is to out-manage the other teams in the league.

In early fantasy sports, only “the most fanatical sports fans” participated, as it required a great deal of “number crunching” and pouring over sports pages loaded with statistics (Berentson, 2000). With the advent of the internet; however, the technology is able to do the required calculations automatically. As a result, the barrier of entry into fantasy sports leagues has been lowered (Holahan, 2006)—a factor which undoubtedly accounts for its rise in popularity.

Football is by far the most popular of the fantasy sports with 85% of fantasy sport users participating in football leagues (La Monica, 2006). The potential payoffs for such uses are great for both the users and the owners of the media outlets. The users who may either subscribe to a free service like ESPN or Fox Sports, or pay extra for premiums such as news or draft strategies from such outlets as Yahoo and CBS Sportsline (La Monica), can win prizes for their fantasy management efforts, from virtual trophies to up to $25,000 in cash (Holahan, 2006). On the owners’ side, the lure of fantasy sports means big money for media outlets and advertisers, with some fantasy league hosts commanding up to seven-figures for advertising space on their websites (Klaasen, 2006).

Fantasy sports may also generate advertising and subscription revenues in other, non-web-based media. Direct TV, which sponsors ESPN’s fantasy league, has a built in feature to their NFL Sunday ticket service: Whenever a team is within 10 yards of making a touchdown, the channel automatically switches to that game (Klaasen, 2006). Such services are all provided with the hope of singling in on the needs and gaining the devotion of the exploding fantasy sports market.

**Role-Playing Theory**

Role-playing theory is a useful framework in examining the relationship between fantasy sports league participation and consumption of sports news and information.

The metaphor of linking the world with a stage and role-playing has captured the imaginations of philosophers, poets, and social scientists for centuries (Landy, 1993). The study of role-playing has been analyzed in regards to everything from education to mental health. Moyles (1989, p. x) suggests that the pretend and dramatic play “is recreation...because it continually recreates the society in
which it is carried on.” When role-playing we “operate with things as things have meaning” (p. xi).

The term role-play takes on different meanings to different people. It encompasses a varied collection of activities that range from highly controlled conversation at one end of the scale, to impoverished drama activities at the other (Ladousse, 1987). Regardless of the activity; however, role-play seeks to provide a wide variety of experiences and learning to the participant. Milroy (1982, p. xii) described the need for role-play: “There is the gap between knowing what to do and doing it. This gap is very familiar to all young people as they assume their chosen work role for the first time. ... Thus role play attempts to narrow that gap.”

As pertaining to the other forms of media, Kinder suggested that playing video games can accelerate cognitive development...within which children can be challenged to perform at higher levels (Heintz, 1992). Therefore, role-playing can challenge the participant in a way that would be impossible in real life.

Several studies have looked at role-playing and identification as an essential part of creating an online experience. Coney and Steehouder (2000) argue that “designers embed their notion of readers or users into a document by giving their audience a role to play. And the degree to which the actual audience is able and willing to assume and maintain that role while using the document will largely determine how successful the site is” (p. 327).

Thus, the online experience should take the user out of their everyday role, involving them as if they were producing the media text. This is more readily achieved in the online environment because of the nonlinear environment and the use of multiple hyperlinks (Coney and Steehouder, 2000). This finding is echoed by Edwards and La Ferle (2003). They found that greater role-taking by the users of online environments was related to greater involvement and more positive experiences with those environments.

**HYPOTHESES**

*H1:* The more hours a day a person spends participating in fantasy sports leagues, the more hours that person will spend watching sports or sports highlights.

*H2:* As the number of times people check their fantasy sports scores increases, the more time they spend watching sports highlights.
**H3:** The more hours a day a person spends participating in fantasy sports leagues, the more days a week a person spends following sports in communication mediums other than the internet.

**H4:** The more a person participates in team sports, the more he or she will participate in fantasy sports leagues.

**H5:** The more hours a person spends on the internet, the more hours a person spends participating in fantasy sports leagues.

**METHODS**

The two principle variables used in our study were the participation in fantasy sports leagues (independent variable), and the amount of time spent viewing sports on television (dependent variable). Other variables were employed for control and other purposes, including gender, marital status, participation in team sports, and use of other media.

Employing a convenience sample, an internet-based survey \( n = 240 \) was conducted. A link to the survey was posted on sports-oriented message boards for 4 weeks in March and April. Most of the responses were received when the researchers posted an invitation to the survey on more than 50 different sports message boards during a 2-hour period. Other responses were received in the weeks following the initial posting.

In order to establish a background on the respondent, questions were used to inquire as to the respondent’s internet usage and whether or not they participate in fantasy sports leagues. Nominal “yes” and “no” questions were used to confirm participation. These were followed up by ordinal questions, used to rate the number of hours spent in those activities, and frequency in which they used the internet to check their scores. Respondents were also asked how many days per week they utilized specific media, including television, newspaper, radio, and actual attendance of the sporting event.

Questions addressing perceptions of the respondents’ position as a sports fan and their perceived knowledge of sports utilized a 9-point Likert scale. All questions having to do with the amount of time spent viewing television or using the internet were recorded in whole hour increments.

Eligible respondents were anyone present in a sports-oriented message board. The researchers did not solicit responses based on
age, gender, or any other characteristic. However, the majority of the respondents were males \((n = 222)\). Over 80% of all respondents were single, while the remaining 18% were married. Because of the focus on sports message boards, most respondents were dedicated sports fans.

**FINDINGS**

Hypothesis 1 was supported. There was a moderate positive correlation between fantasy sports participation and watching sports or sports highlights \((r = .409, p = .000, n = 240)\).

Hypothesis 2 was also supported. As the frequency of checking fantasy sports scores increased, the more time subjects spent watching sports highlights \((r = .29, p = .000, n = 188)\).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the more hours a day a person spends participating in fantasy sports leagues, the more days a week a person spends following sports in communication mediums other than the internet (and in person). This hypothesis was supported for each medium on the questionnaire. The strongest correlation was for viewing sporting events in person \((r = .49, p = .000)\), followed by radio \((r = .39, p = .000)\), and events on television \((r = .28, p = .000)\). Rounding out the list were newspaper sports \((r = .24, p = .000)\) and sports television news \((r = .20, p = .003)\).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the more a person participates in team sports, the more he or she will participate in fantasy sports leagues. But through cross tabs tests, this was not supported \((\text{chi-square} = 9.689, p = .28)\).

Finally, Hypothesis 5, which predicted a positive correlation between general internet use and hours engaged in fantasy sports league participation, was supported \((r = .50, p = .00)\).

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the study indicate that fantasy sports league participation is related to media use across the board: watching sports news, listening to sports news on the radio, reading sports articles in the newspaper, watching sporting events on television or in person. Participants in fantasy sports leagues believe it is important to be a sports
fan. In sum, fantasy sports leagues are also monster sports media users. In another question on the survey, data show that fantasy sports league participants frequently visit the websites that host their particular league. Combined with their media hungry behavior, playing host to fantasy sports leagues would be beneficial to an organization’s website because it would increase traffic and loyalty to the brand. Hosting a fantasy sports league would be a means by which a media company would be able to engage in significant self-promotion.

A key point of interest in the study showed that there was no significance in actual participation in team sports and participation in fantasy sports. This leads one to speculate that persons who are unable to take part in actual sports because of lack of talent, physical capabilities, and/or time and place constraints may vicariously participate in “sporting events” through fantasy sports leagues. These participants may enjoy the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat, and the managerial decisions that accompany real life sports. These findings also coincide with the theory of role-playing in that participants in fantasy sports leagues can be challenged “professionally” in a way that would be impossible in a real-life, professional-sporting experience.

Although limited, this project tends to reveal an example of the principle of involvement: Participation in fantasy sports leagues acts as a catalyst to increase interest in and likelihood of attending real life games, reading sports material, memorizing sports trivia and statistics, and being caught up (to the exclusion of other activities) in the world of sports. While the subject matter for this study was only sports, one could argue that findings may be generalizable to other subject areas. And this is where our findings are very applicable to website management and promotion: Any media- or content-based website can attract and building ongoing relationships with heavy media users by creating and hosting fantasy leagues, or other interactive activities that create similar levels of involvement or role-playing. This promotional strategy can lead to increased traffic, potential advertising, etc.

REFERENCES


