

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF INFLUENCES ON FANTASY SPORTS CONSUMPTION

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The explosion of fantasy sports and the dearth of research about it create a need for investigation in this relatively new form of sport spectatorship (Davis and Duncan 2006). This paper proposes a conceptual framework for marketers to utilize in their examinations of influences on the consumption of fantasy sports by postmodern sports fans. The framework is based on literature from psychology, sociology, sport management/marketing, general management/marketing, and consumer behavior and leads to the proposition that fantasy sports consumption is impacted by the interplay of psychological characteristics internal to consumers, social interactions, and external influences controlled by fantasy sports marketers.

INTRODUCTION

While estimations concerning the exact size and scope of the fantasy sports industry vary, its status as a growing industry connected to large portions of leisure time and activity, escalating numbers of participants, and increasing marketplace fertility remains unchallenged (Janoff 2005). Janoff (2005) and Fisher (2007) estimated fantasy sports to be a \$2 billion industry in 2005, including website fees, game add-on features, videogames, etc. Less well known are the underlying dynamics of the unique market of fantasy players and the major transformations occurring within the fantasy sports business (Russo and Walker 2006). The explosion of popularity in fantasy sports participation and the dearth of research about it create a need for investigation in this relatively new form of sport spectatorship (Davis and Duncan 2006), not to mention new challenges for marketers, media companies, and others within the sport industry who wish to capitalize on the fantasy sports audience (Russo and Walker 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework for marketers to utilize in their examinations of influences on the

consumption of fantasy sports by postmodern sports fans. The framework is based on literature from psychology, sociology, sport management/marketing, general management/marketing, and consumer behavior.

FANTASY SPORTS BACKGROUND

History

Fantasy sports leagues, first known as rotisserie leagues, were started using the sport of baseball in the United States during the early 1980s by American journalists Glen Waggoner and Daniel Okrent (Hu 2003). Like modern fantasy sports, rotisserie owners drafted teams from active players, tracked season-long statistics, and declared winners based on statistical performances. High-speed computers and the Internet revolutionized statistical calculations for rotisserie leagues, which now operate on elements such as fixed spending allowances or round-robin drafts, trades, waivers, and lineup changes (Fantasy Baseball n.d.).

Fantasy sports competition now exists for nearly every major sport, including football, baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer, stock car racing, and golf, as well as variations of competition for several sports (Birch 2004). Most of these games are offered by seven major providers (see Table 1), which averaged 8.307 million unique visitors who spent an average of 28 minutes, 38 seconds on their websites for the

TABLE 1
Major Fantasy Sports (FS) Providers, April 2006

Fantasy Football Provider	Number of Unique Website Visitors (millions)	Time Spent on Website (Minutes:Seconds)	Major Attraction, Addition or Renovation
AOL Sports	5.44	16:46	FS: critical component that scores well among hardcore fans
ESPN.com	14.5	42:03	King of sports Internet landscape relies heavily on FS
The Sporting News	.669	20:57	promotes paid FS leagues to engaged, high-income base of sports fans through heavy community aspect
Fox Sports	10.47	22:25	Technical malfunctions marred its 2005 fantasy football season
Sports Illustrated	6.49	17:03	Enhanced all FS offerings; made "Fantasy Plus" section a larger, permanent component of magazine; added fantasy football column by Peter King
Yahoo! Sports	11.35	45:30	Early establishment as FS powerhouse placed it far ahead of late-arriving competition
CBS SportsLine	9.23	33:56	Deep base in FS

Source: Fisher 2006c

month of April 2006, and the websites of professional sports leagues (Fisher 2006c).

Demographics

Market Sizes. From 2003 to 2006, an estimated 15-18 million people per year engaged in fantasy sports participation (Birch 2004; Janoff 2005; Fisher 2006d; Fisher 2007). In football, widely regarded as the most popular fantasy sport, estimates include nine million unique fantasy users in October 2005, as well as an estimated ten million fantasy players for all of 2005, including offline players (Russo and Walker 2006); this market was estimated to grow to more than 11 million for 2006 (Fisher 2006b).

Spending. An August 2006 estimate indicated that approximately 12 million people spent more than \$1.5 billion on fantasy sports per year, with some players spending \$265 a year as the industry grows 7-10 percent annually.

Participant Profile. Combined data reveals that the typical profile for a fantasy sports participant is that of a young, married, well educated, White, relatively affluent man with a high household income who spends profusely,

including fantasy sports expenditures (Weekley 2004; Levy 2005; Klaassen 2006). In 2006, the average age of players was 36 years; these players, who spent 3.8 hours per week managing teams, possessed undergraduate degrees and received an annual income of \$89,566 (Klaassen 2006).

Growth. Numerous sources predict sizeable future growth for the fantasy sports industry. The total number of fantasy players is expected to reach 30 million by the end of the decade (Fisher 2006d), with a prediction of more than 6 million fantasy baseball players alone for 2006, up from 5 million in 2005 (Fisher 2006e). More than 30 percent of 2005 fantasy football players were first-timers; NFL.com indicated that nearly 50 percent of its 2005 fantasy audience consisted of first-timers (Russo and Walker 2006). Fantasy sports participation has become such a phenomenon that numerous websites exist as independent fantasy sports arbitrators that examine disputes for a fee (Thompson 2007).

Gender. Though described by Thompson (2007) as "an outlet for misdirected testosterone, fueled by ego and trash talk" (p. A1), growth segments in fantasy sports may not

be limited to males. Though numerous studies indicate that several different media (including fantasy sports) offer opportunities to emphasize masculine ideals in sport by providing viewing pleasure for males (Duncan and Brummett 1989); emphasizing empowerment through sports knowledge (Duncan and Brummett 1989; Gantz and Wenner 1995; Kennedy 2000); and reinforcement of masculinity through hypermasculine sport fanship choice (Messner, Dunbar and Hunt 2000; Sargent, Zillman and Weaver 1998; Sullivan 1991), one source indicated that 25 percent of fantasy football players in 2004 were women (Weekley 2004).

Another source indicated a major upswing in female fantasy sports participation related to a sports property long known to boast a female fan base of approximately 40 percent: the National Association of Stock Car Automobile Racing (NASCAR). According to an April 2007 study released by the Fantasy Sports Association, 33 percent of the more than 1.2 million people who play NASCAR fantasy games are females, far higher than the female participation rates of other fantasy sports games and much larger than had been assumed (Fisher 2007). According to industry experts, these findings showed considerable demographic expansion for the fantasy sports industry, since female participation in other fantasy sports hovers in single-digit or low double-digit percentages (Fisher 2007). Of additional importance were data indicating that NASCAR fantasy participants, who spent an average of 4.49 hours per week playing and researching the sport online, were almost as engaged time-wise as fantasy football players (5.05 hours per week) and fantasy baseball players (4.97 hours per week) (Fisher 2007).

Marketing

With the increased growth in fantasy sports participation, marketing dynamics surrounding the industry have heightened organizational restructuring and reformulation of marketing initiatives related to it. Advertisers may currently fear a close association with user-generated content because of the lessened

guarantees of quality controls and variable standards of practice (Fisher 2006e). Another way in which the fantasy sports boom has permanently impacted marketing tied to event consumption patterns in sport lies within the subsequent diminished fan focus on the success of teams and the increased notoriety of individual performances (Birch 2004). This heightened focus on individual performances has spurred interest in even the most mundane games, thereby increasing the value of sponsorships because of the decreased likelihood of waning fan interest.

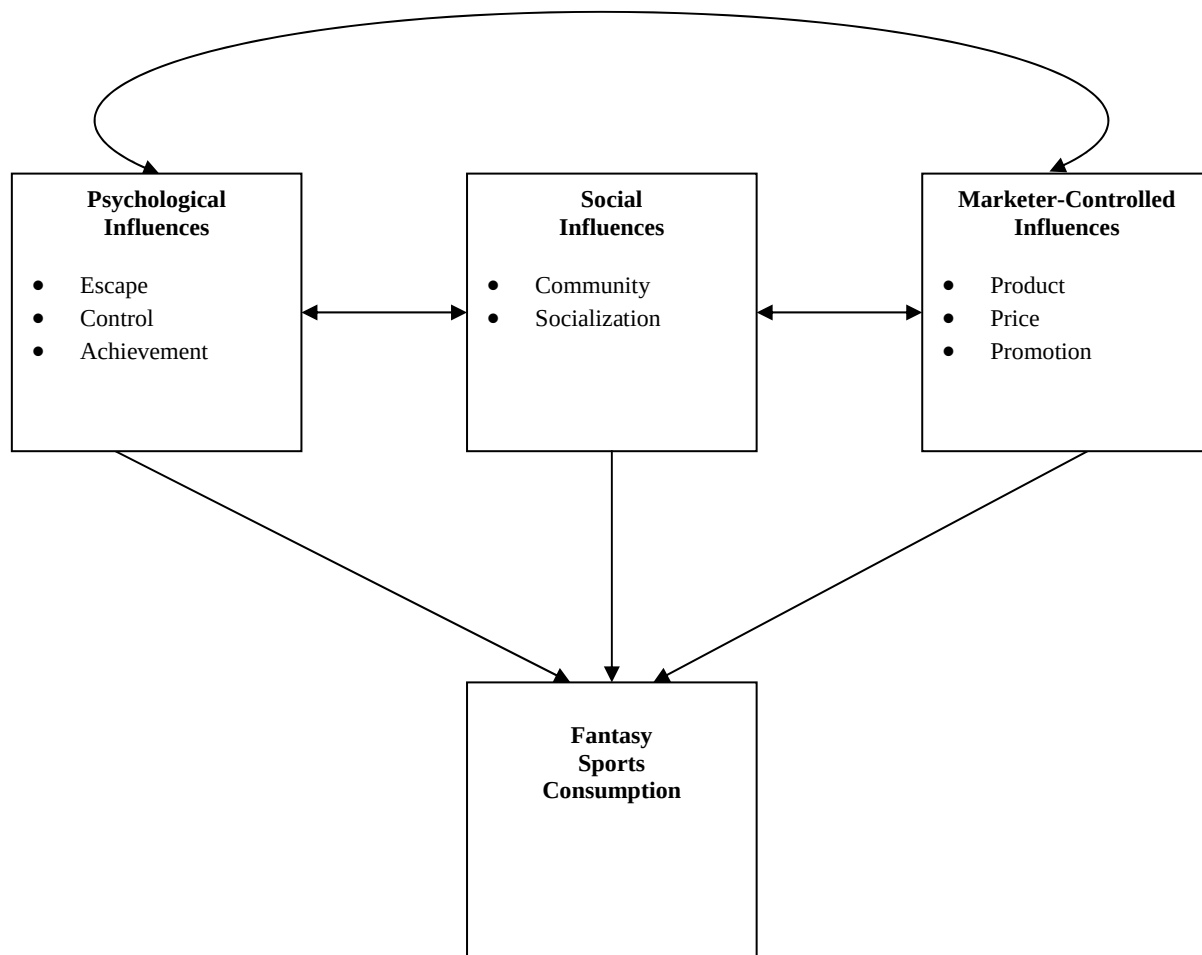
However, perhaps the largest seismic shift in the fantasy sports marketing landscape has occurred offline with the advent of numerous fantasy season preview magazines, advertising across all forms of media, and numerous promotional offers to join leagues (Fisher 2006b). Such increased emphasis on fantasy team draft parties, introduction of new, simpler games, and sharp rises in TV programming devoted to fantasy football (Fisher 2006a; Fisher 2006b; Welch 2007) has led to expanded marketing initiatives due to increased competition among fantasy sports game providers.

Despite the apparent soundness of these opinions, a more complete view of fantasy sports consumption is warranted given explosive growth in participation with little inquiry about forces that influence individuals to become fantasy sports players.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF FANTASY SPORTS CONSUMPTION

A person's decision to play fantasy sports games is influenced by several variables. As is the case with any purchase decision, consumption of fantasy sports can be driven by a combination of internal and external influences. A review of relevant literature leads to the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts that fantasy sports consumption is impacted by the interplay of *psychological characteristics* internal to consumers as well as *social interactions* and

FIGURE 1.
Influences on Fantasy Sports Consumption



marketer-controlled influences that are external to consumers but can affect consumption decisions. These three factors are discussed in the following sections.

Psychological Influences

One set of influences on fantasy sports consumption resides within individual consumers. These variables, labeled psychological influences, are individual characteristics of consumers that could affect one's decision to participate in fantasy sports. Psychological influences identified as having a potential impact on the fantasy sports consumption decision are: the ability to exert *control*; the desire to *escape* from reality; and the feelings of *achievement* experienced after success in competitive play.

Control. A strong psychological influence on fantasy sports consumption is the feeling of control created through participation in fantasy sports games. Owning a team in a fantasy sports league allows a person to participate vicariously in professional sports (Bernhard and Eade 2005). Such decisions as drafting players for a team, acquiring players from other fantasy teams via trades, and claiming players from free agent pools provide fantasy team owners opportunities to experience a measure of the careers of certain sport management professionals (Birch 2004; Davis and Duncan 2000). Development and application of sports knowledge is highly correlated with the control experienced by fantasy team owners. The more knowledge one has about players' statistics, injuries, or other variables that can impact individual players' performances that are on

his/her fantasy team roster, the stronger the feelings of control and confidence in decision-making become for fantasy team owners. For example, fantasy football players with more in-depth knowledge about National Football League (NFL) players and events that could affect players' performances may experience a stronger sense of exerting control and have greater confidence in selecting players in their league's draft and selecting their weekly line-ups than fantasy players with less knowledge.

Fantasy game marketers recognize consumers' desires to experience feelings of control as team owners. Advertising campaigns for fantasy sports games have utilized messages of individuals exerting control as appeals to participate (Shipman 2001). Similarly, marketers of support products for fantasy game players often appeal to the desire for control in their marketing efforts. For example, the website of one fantasy baseball information provider promotes its 2007 draft products with such copy as "Start preparing to dominate your fantasy baseball league" and "Get a huge leg-up on the rest of your league and sign up today with Big Dawg Baseball" (Big Dawg Baseball 2007).

Escape. Sports offer people an opportunity to forget their worries and briefly escape into another world (Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease 2001). Escape is central to the notion of consumption as a form of play (Holt 1995). The escape motive cuts across all demographic groups and is not limited to particular age groups, income levels, or occupation categories. Regarding fantasy sports, consumers who feel the need to get away from daily routines or relieve stress regardless of their demographic characteristics can find refuge in the simulated world of professional sports executives. The get-away-from-it-all ability provides fantasy sports players with an outlet to release tensions and engage in play with others while immersing themselves in a particular sport. Escape attained via fantasy sports participation is congruent with the motives of hedonic consumption, which is driven by consumers'

need to engage in experiences filled with fun and pleasure (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

Based on their premises of allowing one to use fantastic imagery to assume the role of a sports team owner, fantasy sports games are ideal vehicles for enabling consumers to fulfill their desire to escape. Fantasy team owners become involved in professional sports in the only way most of them could ever possibly experience: assuming a role as a sports team executive in a simulated league in which performance is based on statistics of actual professional players.

Research into feelings experienced in fantasy game play, and online gaming points to the importance of escape among consumers of these games. Escape from the everyday world is an important part of consumption experiences for many fantasy game players, as are preparation rituals conducted before engaging in game play such as devising game strategies (Martin 2004). Another way fantasy sports provide escape is by offering consumers a means to expend energy and recharge energy (Kim, Park, Kim, Moon and Chun 2002). In addition to providing a getaway outlet, players benefit from fantasy sports games by strengthening analytical skills and problem-solving abilities (Bernhard and Eade 2005). Thus, the escapes that consumers experience when engaged in fantasy sports may be more than mere diversions from reality; they may become means of sharpening intellectual skills that can benefit them upon return to reality.

Achievement. Another internal motive that influences fantasy sports consumption is achievement. Achievement motivation is "the striving to increase, or keep as high as possible, one's own capability in all activities in which a standard of excellence is thought to apply and where the execution of such activities can, therefore, either succeed or fail" (Heckhausen 1967, p. 4). The need for achievement can be met through the competitive nature of fantasy sports in which the goal is to outperform other fantasy teams in certain statistical categories. While casual consumers of fantasy sports are unlikely to be drawn to fantasy games because

of competition, most highly involved fantasy game players are thought to engage in fantasy sports because of their desires to engage in competitive activity. This need to achieve success and outperform other league players motivates players to invest time and money in acquiring and analyzing information that could improve their fantasy teams' performances.

Fantasy sports meet consumers' need for competition through frequent competitive experiences such as weekly match-ups against other team owners in a fantasy football league (Davis and Duncan 2006). Fantasy game marketers recognize that some consumers can be motivated to play fantasy sports due to opportunities to compete and achieve success through victories over other fantasy teams and even winning league championships. Advertising strategies for some fantasy sports games have been based on the suggestion that successful players (i.e., fantasy league champions) can enjoy public recognition of their sports knowledge (Shipman 2001). Another factor widely supposed to drive the growth of fantasy sports participation is the possibility of extrinsic rewards, which may involve provider- or sponsor-offered cash or other prizes for winners, not to mention wagering among participants (Birch 2004; Thompson 2007).

Social Influences

Fantasy sports can be viewed as a form of consumption that is based on playful interaction with other people. Holt (1995) described "consumption as play" as a type of consumption practice in which a desire exists to interact with fellow consumers. Two forms of playing identified by Holt are *communing* and *socializing*, which are apparent influences on consumers' decisions to participate in fantasy sports as discussed below.

Community. Fantasy sports games provide a forum for people with shared interests to interact with one another. Fantasy game players who play in public leagues are joining a group of people with whom they have had no

prior interactions. In a public league, the group of team owners brought together to compete have only one known shared interest when the league is formed: a supposed interest in the sport upon which the fantasy game is based. Fantasy game tools such as live online drafts, message boards, and e-mails between team owners facilitate community building among fantasy consumers. Davis and Duncan (2006) posit that fantasy sports provide a venue for male bonding, a particular form of community building, and point to the male majority of fantasy sports consumers, creating "men's clubs" that are platforms for reaffirming masculinity.

Participation in fantasy sports not only provides a means of communing with other players in one's league, but it enables communing through shaping one's identity. Just as people may define themselves in part through identification with a sports team or athlete (Wann et al. 2001), fantasy sports participation fosters identity development through identification with fantasy sports play in general (e.g., the ability to identify one's self as a fantasy football player). Also, sport identification can be enhanced through fantasy sports consumption. For example, fantasy baseball consumers may develop a stronger identification with Major League Baseball (MLB) as a result of closely monitoring game scores, league standings, players' statistics, and other information used to make decisions in fantasy game play. Identification with fantasy sports in general or a particular sport through fantasy games can become an element in one's identity and aid in gaining acceptance among communities with similar interests.

Socialization. A strong influence on the decision to consume fantasy sports is the opportunity to socialize with family, friends, co-workers, or other people within previously established social networks. Fantasy sports participants can create private leagues, which allow those players to control the league's other participants. Whereas public league players are brought together through shared interest in the sport, private leagues are formed by dual

influences of prior social interaction and sport interest, and social connections can even outweigh sport interest in some private leagues. For example, participation in a private fantasy football league created for a group of former college classmates may be motivated more by social affiliation (i.e., connecting with old friends) than members' interest in football.

Researchers investigating consumer behavior of sport and gaming have identified socialization as a prime motive for consumption. Desire for group affiliation and spending time with family are key reasons why people consume sport (Wann et al. 2001). The rapid evolution of fantasy sports as a mass-market product has enabled more consumers to meet these needs through sport. A negative stereotype of fantasy sports players that emerged in its early years was one of a group of dedicated players who were viewed as "an enthusiastic but socially disconnected cult" (Bernhard and Eade 2005, p. 32). This stigma has been removed largely through easy access to games via the Internet, making fantasy games a more common, attractive vehicle for social interaction.

Marketer-Controlled Influences

In addition to psychological and social factors that influence consumers' choices to consume fantasy sports, marketers of fantasy games can impact consumer behavior through their selection of marketing mix elements. Potential for influencing consumers via the marketing mix is greatest through *product*, *price*, and *promotion* decisions.

Product. The product element of fantasy sports games includes game *branding*, game *formats*, and design of the *user experience*. Branding of fantasy games can impact perceived value of a particular game. The branding strategy used by a game marketer can affect consumers' perceptions about the quality and credibility of a game. For example, the primary fantasy game offered by the NFL on its website during the 2006 season was "NFL Fantasy 2006" with a shadow endorsement "Powered by CBS SportsLine.com." This strategy allows the NFL

to leverage the equity its brand possesses. Football fans who have never played fantasy football previously may consider fantasy consumption through their knowledge of the NFL brand. Conversely, the NFL is able to promote its association with CBS SportsLine, which is recognized by regular fantasy players as a well established, leading fantasy games provider. Similarly, Major League Baseball's fantasy games are co-branded with *The Sporting News*, a media outlet historically recognized for its coverage of baseball. These co-branded game offerings can enhance the perceived value of the games among baseball-savvy consumers.

Offering multiple types of fantasy game formats for a given sport can enhance the product offering of fantasy games. Consumers can choose from a variety of fantasy game formats to find games that match their preferences. In the case of fantasy baseball games offered by Major League Baseball/*The Sporting News*, players can choose to play games using the classic roto-scoring system in which fantasy teams earn points based on their league rank in statistical categories or a head-to-head scoring system in which pairs of teams compete in terms of their players' statistical performances. Another game format offered by MLB is a salary cap game in which team owners select a team with players who have variable salary values; owners must draft rosters whose total salaries do not exceed the salary cap. This format is noteworthy because MLB does not have a salary cap in reality. Many baseball fans believe a salary cap is needed to promote payroll equity among teams, and engaging in a fantasy baseball game with a salary cap format allows them to experience that concept. Other variations of fantasy baseball games are available, too, generating many options for finding appealing game formats.

A third element of the fantasy game product that can influence consumption of fantasy sports is the design of the user experience, which was essentially a non-issue in the early days of fantasy sports, since game play

occurred via face-to-face interactions among players. The advent of online fantasy sports games predicated the importance of the user experience design, which becomes the epicenter of fantasy sports play. Just as sportscares (physical environment in which sport is contested) influence consumers' patronage of spectator sports (Wakefield and Blodgett 1994, 1995; Wakefield, Blodgett and Sloan 1996), the environment in which fantasy sports players interact with competitors and make game decisions can influence consumption decisions and re-patronage intentions.

Since the development of a fantasy game's physical environment can be influential in creating a positive user experience, game marketers therefore employ a variety of tools to enhance user experiences. Many fantasy game offerings enable team owners to select a team logo and/or color scheme that is represented graphically on a football helmet or baseball jersey, creating tangibility for an owner's fantasy team. Another element that enhances the product offering is the group message board that allows team owners within an individual league to interact with one another by posting messages about player trades, strategy or rules questions, and even engaging in various forms of banter with opponents. In addition to a message board for players within a single fantasy league, many fantasy game providers offer a general message board that players from all leagues can use to ask other players for advice and opinions on player drafts, trade proposals, or other strategy decisions. Message boards not only serve as a means of information exchange, but they provide a channel for facilitation of meeting players' communing and socializing needs, too.

Another way that the user experience design can influence fantasy sports consumption is the availability of statistics. Fantasy team owners with high involvement are particularly interested in accessing player statistics to make better decisions about roster changes and to monitor performance of their team and others in their league. Fantasy game marketers recognize that differing needs exist among

fantasy game players regarding player statistics. For example, Yahoo!'s fantasy football game offering has basic NFL player statistics and is available for free, but it also offers other features for high involvement fantasy team owners such as in-depth NFL player and team reports and analysis that can be purchased for a one-time fee of \$19.99.

Price. Opportunities for consumers to engage in fantasy sports consumption has been impacted greatly by pricing tactics employed by fantasy game marketers. Widespread adoption of fantasy sports play has occurred largely through free fantasy games offered by mainstream media companies such as ESPN and Yahoo! as well as free games offered on professional sports leagues' websites. MLB, NFL, National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), and NASCAR all offer free fantasy games on their league websites. These free games allow consumers to engage in fantasy sports consumption without incurring financial risk. Free game offerings are important for attracting new fantasy sports consumers, enabling them to try the product at no cost.

In addition to free games that appeal to casual and price-conscious fantasy sports consumers, fantasy game marketers typically also offer fantasy games for which consumers must pay to participate. Consumers who participate in these pay fantasy leagues often have higher involvement and are more experienced fantasy sports players. Many pay fantasy leagues offer cash or other prizes for league winners, with team owners subsidizing the rewards through their payments to play in the league. Pricing of pay fantasy sports products is often structured to encourage more involvement and consumption. For example, ESPN's pricing for its pay fantasy football product in 2006 was \$29.95 for one team, \$49.95 for three teams, and \$69.95 for five teams (ESPN.com 2006). The pricing structure of fantasy sports games enables marketers to appeal to various market segments in terms of product usage rate, with free games for light-to-moderate users and pay games for heavy users.

Promotion. Consumption of fantasy sports can be influenced through promotion programs, particularly the use of incentives to encourage or reward game play. In addition to pricing incentives that were described in the previous section, fantasy game marketers use sales promotion methods intended to persuade consumers to play fantasy sports games. For example, in 2006, CBS SportsLine.com offered a \$20 discount and a premium item (a free cap) for consumers to purchase Fantasy Basketball Commissioner, a fee-based fantasy basketball league product.

Other promotional tactics involve special events driven by marketing objectives that attempt to add to the realism of the fantasy sports team-owner experience, including organized draft parties, opening day promotions, and special celebrity athlete appearances. The marketing objectives driving these events include product placements, cross-promotions, and traffic-drivers established either by fantasy providers in conjunction with their marketing partners or with brands seeking to independently buzz market through fantasy sports (Fisher 2006b; Fisher 2006e).

Rewarding performance is another incentive used to influence fantasy sports consumption. The types and value of incentives vary depending largely on whether the league is a free league or pay league. Some free leagues do not offer any rewards for their champions. Other free leagues and some pay leagues offer prizes of nominal value such as a t-shirt or banner denoting the recipient as a fantasy league champion. While low in financial value, these rewards can be a source of pride for recipients. Cash rewards are typically restricted to pay fantasy games. The amount of cash awarded and the number of teams per league receiving cash prizes varies and often is correlated with the cost required to play in the pay league. For example, CBS SportsLine.com offers four different levels of pay fantasy football leagues, ranging in cost from \$14.95 to \$499.99. Prizes awarded to the league champions for the games range from \$200 to \$3,500 (CBS SportsLine 2006). Offering

different levels of risk and reward through different price and prize amounts allow fantasy game marketers to segment the fantasy player market and appeal to a broad group of consumers.

Another element of fantasy game marketers' promotional mix is the use of interactive marketing tactics, particularly e-mail marketing. As consumers sign up to play free or pay fantasy games, their contact information typically is fed into a game provider's database. This information can be used to influence customer loyalty to a fantasy game provider by cross-selling other fantasy sports games. For example, consumers who sign up to play a free fantasy baseball game on *The Sporting News* web site might receive e-mails containing information for fantasy games in other sports (e.g., NFL, NASCAR, or Professional Golfers Association [PGA]). Such cross-selling tactics could increase visits to game providers' websites beyond time periods of initial fantasy games, thus increasing the value of sites to advertisers that support free fantasy games.

DISCUSSION

Empowerment of the Sports Fan

Ultimately for marketers, the major implication of the growth of the fantasy sports industry is that its evolution is another unambiguous signal of the emergence of an increasingly empowered consumer, in this case, the empowered sports fan. This empowerment of postmodern sports fan stems greatly from two growing elements of the sports universe: fantasy sports and sports talk radio (Fisher 2006c). However, unlike sports talk radio, the fantasy sports industry affords its participants unparalleled opportunities for bonding (Davis and Duncan 2006). Such opportunities have further spurred empowerment as fantasy sports providers through their expanded game offerings and marketing/promotional initiatives have begun to accommodate the burgeoning fantasy sports market as its movement tracks from online elements to offline elements that create movement from an individualized *linear*

experience to participation in an *engaged community*.

Transition From Linear Experience to Engaged Community

The expansion of the fantasy sports universe is likely due to a demonstrated existence of fantasy sports participation as a pleasurable social experience (Davis and Duncan 2006). As users increasingly desire connections to true online communities with social networking for quality levels of engagement, fantasy sports providers must ensure that associative opportunities become critical components of the entire user experience (Fisher 2006c). Those providers who are able to offer users such community-based connectivity through enhanced participative experiences will generate greater percentages of Internet page views, wireless data consumption, etc., providing more viable, safe platforms for marketers and their initiatives. (Oliver 2005; Fisher 2006b)

Dynamics of Transition

Russo and Walker (2006) identify two chief dynamics that will benchmark successful transition of the fantasy sports industry from the linear experience model to the engaged community model.

First, movement will occur away from subscription models to ad-supported models that position fantasy sports games as multidimensional marketing vehicles. Strong engagement metrics (page views, visits, and time spent on the site) and large numbers of new players in 2005 suggest strong future growth for ad-supported models and more limited niches for subscription-based products/services (Russo and Walker 2006). Approximately 63% of fantasy football users recalled seeing an ad from one of five major fantasy advertisers, and those who recalled fantasy advertising had a better impression (15-20 percent) than users with no recall/association (Russo and Walker 2006).

Second, further development and evolution of a wide range of offline fantasy sports products and services to complement online games must be generated. The increased marketing potential inherent in such offline activity surrounding fantasy sports must be embraced with greater creativity by marketers. According to Russo and Walker (2006), sponsors are presently included in online game headers and banners, but site providers rarely create custom interactive features that incorporated the sponsors, nor do most sponsors effectively leverage fantasy football in offline marketing. Klasseen (2006) postulates that game providers have historically had so little trouble selling fantasy sports advertising packages until little incentive existed to move past basic banner ads and sponsor buttons. However, Klasseen (2006) notes movement toward the design of more creative marketing packages in 2006 to drive sponsor initiatives.

Keys to Unlocking Potential of Engaged Fantasy Sports Communities

Given the estimated number of players and monetary volume of the industry, the stability and viability of fantasy sports as a marketing platform is no longer questionable. Tremendous potential to leverage fantasy football as a marketing property apparently exists, but marketers and fantasy game providers must work together to develop more creative, high-impact programs, promotions, and executions in both online and offline elements. This development must be tempered by the realization that such engaged fantasy sports communities exist at the intersection of television viewing and fantasy play (Russo and Walker 2006). The pending transformation must involve brand marketers embracing fantasy sports, as well as fantasy providers developing new products and services that extend fantasy sports beyond merely online games (Russo and Walker 2006). According to Clay Walker, chairman of the Fantasy Sports Association and senior vice president of Players Inc. (the commercial arm of the NFL Players Association), advertisers have not yet determined how to maximize their investments

in fantasy sports, and such maximization will not occur until leagues and/or providers have “significantly better, richer data to bring to market” (Fisher 2006d, p. 6). As with all social-network advertising, marketers take care not to disrupt consumers’ experiences (Klaassen 2006).

Fueled by the discovery of fantasy NASCAR racing’s considerable female base, the apparently increasing numbers of women make fantasy sports a fertile ground for marketing investment. Marketers should explore initiatives that encourage women who do not currently participate to sample fantasy sports participation and to drive those who already participate to more involved levels of the engaged community by designing marketing campaigns that offer incentives, encouragement, and acceptance.

Creation and dissemination of meaningful statistical information will be important to attract fantasy participants who crave and attempt to utilize even the smallest fragment of statistical data to their advantages, much as general managers and coaches do in actual sport franchises. According to Dick Glover, NASCAR’s vice president of broadcasting and new media, growth of NASCAR’s overall and female fantasy participation rates can be directly attributed to NASCAR’s specific conjunctive efforts with Stats Inc. to create/disseminate more statistical data and concrete performance data (Fisher 2007).

Another important implication, particularly for fantasy sports providers, is the emergence and growth of games/contests that apply fantasy sports game principles to Hollywood awards, reality television shows, cover appearances on national lifestyle magazines, and other entertainment elements (Fisher 2007). Internet portals may find these to be particularly salient streams of new revenue if developed well.

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