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The Hyperactive Fan: Characteristics of Online Fantasy Football Players

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The Hyperactive Fan: Characteristics of Online Fantasy Football Players

By

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This study examines fantasy football players and their leagues because sports are a large and influential aspect of society, with fantasy football as an emerging form of sport spectatorship that has recently gained widespread popularity. From leagues we can learn more about the social identity of sports fans and the meaning behind identifying oneself as a fantasy football player. I also examine the presence of masculinities within fantasy sports along with their influence with respect to the significant population of women affiliated with sports. Further, I explore emotional elements that are embedded within sports and how those factors apply to sports spectators with respect to masculinity, collective group identities, and behaviors. This study analyzes fantasy football leagues as its own unique subculture in comparison to "traditional" populations of sports fans. In doing this, I will illustrate some of the greater cultural elements of sports fan populations along with how fantasy football players align with and distinguish themselves from traditional fans. I accomplished this by interviewing fantasy football players and comparing their experiences with literature related to traditional sports fans. The core argument is that fantasy football players possess many of the representative qualities of traditional sports fans but they represent a different type of fan with different cultural elements, a hyperactive fan. I use in-depth interviewing and participant observation of men that participate in online fantasy football leagues. I found that fantasy football players do indeed possess many of the representative qualities of traditional sports fans but the experiences of those who participate and identify themselves as fantasy football players are different than traditional sports fans by way of organized group membership, vicarious competition, elevated media consumption, and a league-wide focus. There are many characteristics that these two subcultures share but there is enough

information pointing to the fact that fantasy football players represent a unique subculture within

the subculture of National Football League Fans.

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PREFACE

My interest in researching sports fans began with an affinity for sports and identifying myself as an avid sports fan from an early age. My grandfather was both an NFL player and coach from the 1950s-1980s. Family members and others around me throughout my formative years instilled the belief within me that athletic accomplishments at an elite level are something of value. Celebrating significant NFL related events was common, along with celebrity idolization of the players and coaches, particularly those who were the most successful. To say that sports is a point of interest for me is an understatement, and when I entered an academic program which allowed me to choose an area of study, it seemed like a natural fit. The reach and influence of professional sports, especially the NFL, is apparent to me and many of those I interact with. In this day and age, another pervasive influence that works in conjunction with sport is the media, and in particular the internet as computer mediated technologies have become a central part of our social world. By researching the realm of fantasy sports, specifically fantasy football, I feel that I am able to uncover greater insight into two pervasively influential forces, sport and media, that are present in our everyday lives.

INTRODUCTION

Sport has become a pervasive aspect of the lives of those who are involved in it either actively as sport participants or vicariously as sport spectators (Armstrong 2007:112)

The experience of sports fans in the United States has changed a great deal over time, as mediated technologies are reshaping sport culture (Hutchins et al. 2009). The ways that fans can express their support and interact in realms affiliated with their desired sport is part of what is changing. "It is now time to think less in terms of the longstanding relationship between sport and media, and more about sport as media given the increasing interpenetration of digital media content, sport, and networked information and communications technologies" (Hutchins et. al. 2009:89). The sport industry has become increasingly meaningful in our society, with sports fans defined as those who have an interest in and follow a sport, player, or team (Park et. al. 2010). Online fantasy sports are a popular way that sports fans actively participate in their favorite sports, with nearly thirty million Americans and Canadians currently participating in some kind of fantasy sport league (Fantasy Sports Trade Association 2011). Avid sports fans are considered a persuasive part of our culture due to more people becoming sports fans (Laverie and Arnett 2000) and sports fans often go to great lengths to display their associations with sports teams publicly (End 2001).

In this study, I examine the subculture of fantasy football players and their leagues with respect to the social identity of sports fans, masculinities, emotional elements that are embedded within sports, and how those factors are applicable to participants. The NFL is the most popular fantasy sport, accounting for eighty five percent of fantasy sport players (Randle and Nyland

2008) and drawing the largest media audiences for team sports in the United States (Oates 2009).

These leagues are played almost exclusively online with players subscribing to free and/or paid

services in order to participate. According to Dwyer and Kin (2011), fantasy sports has created a

new role for the consumer, and for most people it is the closest they can get to competing in a

professional sport without putting on a uniform and hitting the field.

      Dwyer and Kin (2011) found that fantasy sport participation is a unique activity that

combines elements of interactivity with traditional sport spectatorship, enhancing a sports

consumers overall experience. Fantasy football leagues were created to reflect a mirror image of

what happens in the offices of NFL franchise owners and managers. Randle and Nyland (2008)

suggest that through fantasy sports, participants can assume the role of a sports franchise owner.

"Fantasy sport is a new form of sport spectatorship, where participants have a great sense of

control in co-producing results of their "sporting competitions" (Kwak and McDaniel 2011:

244). Statistics and analysis are often provided by websites, providing exclusive access to NFL

happenings like the league owners fantasy participants emulate. The technological mediums

available to players are able to carry out the required calculations automatically for users,

providing ease of use when it comes to getting started and participating (Randle and Nyland

2008). Participating in fantasy football allows users to assume an active role within their NFL

fan identities by emulating the role of an NFL executive. Randle and Nyland (2008) argue that

participating in fantasy leagues increases the likelihood of sports related participation. This

includes attending games, reading more sports materials, and becoming further involved with

sports trivia and statistics. Randle and Nyland (2008) also point out common motives for sports

participation that include excitement, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, economic, and group

affiliation.

The online environment has the ability to bring the NFL fan experience to levels beyond conventional sport spectatorship, helping streamline information about NFL teams and players (Oates 2009). "New media have begun to compensate for live word-of-mouth and fans now have unprecedented opportunities to communicate with the sport and each other technologically" (Rein et. al. 2006:71). The highly interactive features provide fantasy players with an experience that engages the fan in a mental and emotional experience with their selected players (Dwyer and Kin 2011). These online experiences take place in addition to offline experiences, where experiences regarding individuals fantasy leagues are often expressed, creating an interconnected relationship between the two.

Symbolic interaction is a useful perspective for this study, possessing the ability to employ highly analytical methods and principles when looking at the fantasy sport participant. Armstrong (2007) explains that symbolic interactionism helps illuminate the way people define their experiences, and give meaning to social interactions, identities, behaviors, and realities. This is helpful when examining the socially constructed experiences of fantasy gamers through uncovering what they deem as meaningful within those experiences. Since this study examines social interaction and communicative technologies, a qualitative approach is an appropriate means of gathering further insight into the unique perspective of the fantasy gamer. "A self emerges in the process of interaction. Important to this process are both symbolic meanings and the structure of interaction. That is, meaning and the form of interaction are symbiotically wed in the process of communication" (Waskul and Douglass 1997: 382). Sports fans are conscious of their own sense of self when engaged in a sport setting, internalizing their experiences in a way that influences their self-concepts and guides their behaviors (Armstrong 2007). Through

employing an interactionist approach it helps illustrate the micro-social happenings and symbolic meanings that affect fantasy football players.

Randle and Nyland (2008) describe role-playing as a useful framework when analyzing participation in fantasy sports leagues and consumption of sports information. Erving Goffman's (1959) work on dramaturgy relates social action to an act performed on a stage, where actors manage presentations through impression management. We evaluate our performances and adjust our presentations so people will accept the identities we proclaim. This is applicable to online fantasy football participants because the player assumes the role of a franchise owner, engaging in a series of league interactions that mimic reality. In an online fantasy football realm, users interact with other league participants creating front-stage environments where impression management is employed to preserve whatever image they intend to portray. The fantasy football website provides a pre-existing template for users to assume their role as a franchise owner, creating a universal informing element that influences the social interaction of league participants. The interaction between fantasy football players in an offline context is significant also given that the majority of interaction takes place within that context. I am interested in how gamers inhabit and reflect on the role-playing process in fantasy football settings.

My research aims to provide further insight into fantasy football as an industry and culture through connecting with participants and gathering information regarding their experiences. This requires taking a look at significant influences surrounding their participation. Information gathered from players will contribute to existing research within sport sociology, masculinity, social identities, emotions, gaming and commercialization. A common theme in researching sports fans online is what benefits online communicative technologies can provide the user. In this study, I explore the nature of online sports fans through identifying the

significance of their online existences. This examination looks at opportunities to create meaningful identities and engage in unique forms of interaction. Fans are becoming more actively engaged in developing new activities related to sports (Park et. al. 2010) and this study reports an intimate portrayal of how sports fans interact through fantasy football, their unique positioning within the culture of NFL fans, and the environmental attributes that contribute to the experience.

Exploring the kinds of connections made by fantasy football players and examining the extent of those relationships helps portray the social significance of fantasy football players. Through the use of principles set forth by research in social identity theory, I examine the significance of those relationships and how they fit into the conceptual framework of understanding within those parameters. Because my study places a great deal of focus on a new type of fan with connections in the online realm, this creates the potential for a contribution in the area of sports fan research that may be less extensively researched versus work looking solely at offline contexts that relates to traditional spectatorship and/or participation.

Emotional experiences prompted by significant happenings that are relevant to participation in fantasy football are also central to my research. This study incorporates literature on emotion and connects them to emotional experiences that participants report as a result of their participation. I examine emotional displays in both online and offline contexts, illustrating the significance of emotion and its significance to the league participant. Additionally, I asked fantasy football players about any suppressed emotional experiences that were not shared in the collective online or group contexts. This provides further detail into the emotional experiences that are tied to online fantasy players, exposing the underlying processes in the development of these significant experiences.

By tapping into the experiences of those who play, I bring further insight into the lives of fantasy football leaguers and help identify what is significant to them about those experiences. I am most interested in exploring specific aspects of how users are engaged in fantasy football leagues. First, I review relevant literature related to the context of this study. Second, I provide a layout of the research methods I employed and describe the process of data collection. Third, I describe what I found in the study and the connection my data has to my research. Lastly, I provide an all incorporative discussion that covers the concluding points of the study and pertinent information for future analysis.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Because the NFL is influential and fantasy football offers participants an in-depth experience with the NFL, I am studying fantasy football players because of the presence sports has in American society. The fantasy football experience is a progressive and less-extensively analyzed phenomenon and this study explores fantasy football leagues in depth as their own unique subculture in comparison to "traditional" populations of sports fans. The traditional sense refers to sports fans as simply spectators that consume sport images and media by engaging in sport related events. I use literature related to traditional sports fans as a way of crafting an analysis in comparison to fantasy football players. These behaviors are observed through things like game attendance and watching football on television. In doing this, we are able to illustrate some of the greater cultural elements of sports fan populations along with how fantasy football players align with and distinguish themselves from those groups.

I analyze how we can learn more about the social identity of sports fans through fantasy football leagues and the meaning behind identifying oneself as a fantasy football player. Furthermore, I focus on the presence of masculinities within fantasy sports, whether popular sport-informed masculinities present contend or support negative perspectives directed toward women and homosexuals. Emotions are also a significant aspect embedded within sports, where I seek to determine how those factors apply to sports spectators with respect to masculinity, collective group identities and behaviors. The overreaching argument is that fantasy football players possess many of the representative qualities of traditional sports fans but they represent a different subculture of fan with different cultural elements, a hyperactive fan.

This study embraces the traditional qualitative focus in sport sociology (Nixon 1993) and adopts an interactionist perspective when attempting to illustrate aspects of fantasy football populations. Through the use of past perspectives within sport sociology and analysis of sports fans in the traditional sense, we can use data collected from fantasy sports participants to draw relevant connections to what we already know about the influence of sports and sports fans. Furthermore, we can also build knowledge that connects fantasy football leagues with general influences within sports like media, masculinity, gender, and social identity; all of which welcoming the potential for additional insight and new analytic directions. Through analyzing the subculture of fantasy football players, the information gathered provides a foothold for insight into the experiences of sports fans, more specifically a highly identified and actively involved subculture of sports fans that has received little recognition within analyses of sports fans. I first review literatures concerning sport sociology, then review more specifically focused literature involving sports fans, masculinity, emotions, social identity, and gaming theory.

Sociology of Sport

Sport sociology is an area of study that is broadly applicable and able to illustrate many varying aspects of social life. It is considered a relatively recent and less recognized field within sociology (Coakley 1987) with a connection to other prominent areas of study like psychology and sport and leisure studies (Eckstein et al. 2010). The field itself is considered an international phenomenon, incorporating the works of scholars from all over the world (Coakley 1987). Sport sociology in the United States is usually referred to as North American sport sociology given the significant contributions and influence from Canadian sociologists (Coakley 1987). This section highlights the development of North American sport sociology in the United States and the rationale behind its legitimacy as a separate field of study. Additionally, changes within the field

have taken place largely in response to socio-cultural and socio-political influences. Identifying these influences shows why sports sociology has taken particular approaches and helps to justify why it is a potent method of analysis for understanding society.

Nixon (2010) explains that sport sociology surfaced in the United States in the 1960s, with early well known scholars within the field like Kenyon and Loy (1965) lobbying for sport sociology as its own area of study. Even up to the 1980s, sport sociology had yet to receive recognition as a serious subfield of study (Loy 1980; seen in Coakley 1987).This is at least partly attributed to the shifting focuses of scholars within the field and their tendency to travel between perspectives and theoretical foundations rather than in a straightforward cumulative fashion (Nixon 1991). While some may see this as a weakness, I perceive this as a strength considering its broad focus and ability to incorporate diverse areas of application. It is very important that sport sociology remains interdisciplinary and collectively incorporative because in doing so we are able to convey an image of society in compliment to other perspectives, even if it does invite further criticism.

> I am, however, asserting not only that discursive rivalries are normal in fields such as sport sociology but also that these rivalries can be productive for the growth of knowledge and fruitful application as long as we are willing to seek points of intersection and coherence across our diverse forms of discourse and despite our predisposition to do otherwise (Nixon 1991: 291)

Sport sociology is then considered a dynamic area that contributes to the telling power of different perspectives when it comes to explaining social reality. This includes a variety of discourses and perspectives much like the general field of study it represents, sociology (Nixon 1991).

Regardless of what perspectives sport sociology adopts, sports have a significant influence on a large portion of our social experiences in the United States. Nixon (1991) agrees

that sport is a serious area of study, and Eckstein and Blanchard (2007; seen in Eckstein et al. 2010) point out that despite the large chunk of our social experience that sports inhabits, there is research out there that indicates its effects may be made to seem more significant than they actually are. This may be connected to the lack of theoretical focus and interdisciplinary nature of sport sociology. Sport sociology is an easily discounted field due to how sports are generally perceived. Sports are considered games which have a connotation that promotes a perspective of leisure and fun. Other areas of research looking at topics that reside outside of areas we deem leisurely or fun might receive more serious recognition given the nature of their work.

Our society contains sports as a part of our social lives, homes, family, time away from work, and even into the socialization and development for our children. The connection with sports people have in the United States is undeniable and arguably much further reaching than most would generally recognize. Even people who don't like sports are connected to it in some way. I argue that the interdisciplinary nature of sport sociology is most powerful when employed in an applied sense rather than in a theoretical matter. This is due to the explanatory value it contains when it comes to areas of social life where sports are able to contribute to what is already known. In the following paragraphs, I explain the connection that sport sociology has to happenings within society and relevant shifts that have occurred within the perspective.

Bryant (1993) posits that sport sociology is an essential component when attempting to derive an understanding of present socio-cultural forces, making it a natural fit when analyzing paramount social issues. "Sociology of sport emerged in the U.S. during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when there was widespread awareness of social and political issues and calls for reform in all major institutional spheres of American society" (Coakley 1987: 76). During the development of sport sociology in the 1960s, popular research topics came from areas like social order and

reform, attributed to the rapid expansion of sports and its connection to social and political issues that were present during that era (Coakley 1987). An early version of North American sport sociology was drafted by Loy, McPhereson, and Kenyon (1979), with Loy (1968) specifically endorsing the institutional perspective within sport analysis and labeling sports as competition laden games involving principles surrounding social acts and communications (Nixon 2010).

Because sport sociology was still a developing field in its infancy, it makes sense that the social issues many Americans were concerned with would naturally take priority. Developments within the field came during a time where there was a great deal of social unrest given events surrounding the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war, prompting scholars to analyze problems of sport through related subjects like violence and African American athletes (Coakley 1987). Other popular topics of study throughout the 1960s and 1970s followed a similar trajectory, analyzing at areas like stratification, groups, socialization, and subcultures (Ingham and Donnelly 1997). Coakley (1987) explains that sociological studies included information that contested commonly held beliefs about American sports, with their importance illustrated through the over two dozen different text books produced between 1969 and 1978. If sport sociology were to follow any kind of historical pattern, research within the field would start to change as social sentiments evolved and different important social issues developed. Coakley (1987) explains that sports ultimately became a target for reform, and the passing of the landmark legislation title IX in 1972[1] sparked large amounts of research and publications dedicated to women and sports.

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[1] Title IX was passed as a source of change and opportunity for women in all fields of American society, helping increase enrollment for advanced degree programs and athletic participation (Kennedy 2010)

Today, it comes as no surprise that sport sociology covers a vast array of subjects and provides in depth analysis using diverse lenses such as cultural, critical, feminist, and interactionist (Nixon 1993). Sport sociology has been consistent in allowing researchers to bring new insight into areas of study that concern social issues, aiding in our understanding of how sports contributes to those ideologies (Eckstein et. al. 2010). "Undergraduate texts in sport sociology today reflect the influence of cultural, feminist, and critical racial and disability studies of sport, with increased interest in body culture, physical fitness, postmodernism, queer studies, new media, and multiculturalism" (Nixon 2010: 77). As society changes, the perspectives used within sport sociological analysis do also. Prominent social issues from recent history have prompted these types of analyses contribute to the legitimacy of sport sociology by addressing modern social sentiments. Because sports have experienced significant growth throughout modern history, specifically men's professional sports, it invites even further analysis from prevalent research areas within the sociology of sport. I hope to contribute to literature on sport sociology by creating new insight into our understanding of fantasy football players and their significance within the sporting world.

Sports Fans

The growth that men's professional sports have experienced translates into a greater influence on social life along with economic and media prowess. A great deal of funding and commercialized attention dedicated to professional and amateur sport organizations (Eckstein et al. 2010) has created a significant market for sports and embraced its connection to mediated technologies. The sports fans that devote economic resources and consume sports media are arguably as much a part of the game as the player. The role of the sport spectator is one of the

most compelling aspects of sociological understanding within professional sports, attributed to the ability of sport to create and harbor mass interest (Jonassohn et. al. 1981).

Huge revenues are drawn by NFL franchise owners and media outlets because sports fans are consumers, helping sustain the argument that the NFL is one of the most influential media-driven interests in the United States. This is largely due to the technology employed by media outlets and the NFL as a way of creating an intimate portrayal of NFL events that are broadcasted to the masses. There have been significant media related advancements related to technologies used by professional sports leagues like the specific NFL media packages that fans can purchase for exclusive coverage and online resources that provide exclusive access to insider information. Fans have become a driving influence that impacts the development of NFL and technologies used, creating a demand for a more intimate experience with professional football. Fantasy sports are a way that sports fans can accomplish this, by stepping out of their consumptive behaviors as traditional sports fans and engage in a more involved form of spectatorship. The Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA) reports an estimate of the total market impact of fantasy sports to be at $4.48 billion, annually, with $800 million spent on products or services directly related to playing fantasy sports (Dwyer and Kin 2011).

More emphasis on sporting audiences are becoming important because of the amount of spectators, the size of sporting venues, and the development of mediated technologies (Jonassohn et al. 1981). Fantasy sports are a product of the innovations seen within sports media, driven by the market demand that sports fans create. Kwak and McDaniel (2011) explain the business of fantasy sports has also extended beyond the internet into other media realms, like magazines, books, television and radio. Fantasy football players represent a form of sport spectator that is immersed in and reliant upon mediated technologies. Oates (2009) explains that market research

conducted by the NFL in 2002 found that the average fantasy sports player watched nearly two hours of football more than the average fan. Furthermore, industry data suggests that the average fantasy sport player is likely to spend $460 annually and use the internet an average of five hours per week in managing their virtual franchises (Kwak and McDaniel 2011). These are some of the attributes fantasy football players possess that distinguishes themselves from sports fans in the general sense because of their elevated level of involvement. This information acts in support of the argument that fantasy football participants should be considered their own unique subculture within the culture of sports fans because of the identifiable differences that come in the form of cultural norms and collective behaviors. They represent a progressive form of fan that are actively participating in their interest, creating unique cultural elements distinguishable from traditional sports fans and brining participants even closer to the NFL through the employment of advanced mediated technologies.

Sports fans are commonly referred to as a subculture by sociologists (Crossett and Beal 1997) and Armstrong (2007) suggests that they make up their own clear subculture. Within the subculture of sport fans are additional distinct subcultures of fan groups. This is commonly found in traditional NFL fan subcultures, where fans identify with specific NFL franchise groups that possess their own unique cultural norms and values, distinguishing themselves from fans that support other teams. Fantasy football players possess differentiating characteristics in comparison to traditional sport spectators, representing a subculture that is all their own.

Traditional fans generally support one or a few teams and identify with a local NFL franchise or team that they have some connection to. They are considered a subculture because fans identify with specific symbols and cultural values that distinguish themselves from others that share an interest in the NFL. The prefix "sub" is indicative of the level of analysis, pointing

to its positioning below the macro level and is useful when portraying a focus on intermediate levels of society which is helpful when attempting to make meaning from everyday happenings in society (Crosset and Beal 1997). Donnelly and Young (1988) explain that the analysis of sport subcultures is grounded in interactionist approaches, and argue that it is common in interactionist research to view the process of socialization into sub-cultures as part of the process of identity formation. Furthermore, they argue that the most significant act of identity construction is through intentionally adopting mannerisms, attitudes, appearances, language, and behaviors that are characteristic of the established members within a sub-culture.

Fantasy football participants adhere to their own cultural norms much like traditional sports fans, where it is common to use league related jargon, create in depth opinions about players, converse about fantasy league happenings with others, discuss deadlines, and become well versed in the technology that drives fantasy sports. The differences reside within the uniqueness of fantasy football players in comparison to traditional fans, where there are distinct cultural attributes and league related behaviors that are simply not found within traditional fan populations. Fantasy football players have obligations that traditional fans do not, where they are encouraged to actively create and manage their franchises in ways that bring more depth to the NFL along with experience a form of vicarious competition. These attributes are some of what differentiate fantasy sports players and traditional sports fans, creating a subculture where groups demonstrate the ways that they are different from the larger social world of sports fans by creating unique language, perspectives, behaviors, and so on (Crosset and Beal 1997).

A useful way of illustrating differences between groups of fans and fantasy football players is by looking at relevant concepts that surround the social identities of sports fans. Reyesen and Branscombe (2010) delineate a difference between fans that are personally

connection to a sports team and fans that are associated with other groups of fans, explained as "fanship" and "fandom." The difference between fanship and fandom is centered on whether fans identify themselves based on personal attributes or in regards to their membership to a social group (Reyesen and Branscombe 2010). Reysen and Brandscombe (2010) explain that fanship illustrates the connection someone has to a sports team and identifies themselves with that team. They define fandom as symbolic of the connection they have with other fans of the same team, essentially identifying with others who share such a connection.   A good example of this would be a fan who explains that they are a Viking fan (fanship) versus a fan who claims they are members of "Thee Viking World Order" (fandom). Those that play fantasy football exhibit the characteristics of a sport fan populations through representing both fanship and fandom driven attributes. While they are compelled to participate in fantasy football because they are fans of the NFL, respective franchises, and/or players within the NFL, they also represent an organized group that operates under the title of fantasy football player or fantasy football franchise owner.

Masculinity in Sport

Men's professional sports can be considered the dominant or idealized level of competition within the sports world. Male athletic masculinities are most easily identified in professional and national sports (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005), making their widespread popularity and influence significant when seeking a greater understanding of the connection gendered ideas have with sports in the United States. Sport is an institution that is centered on physical prowess and framed within a gender-oriented basis, and the creation of modern sports was crafted by and designed for men (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005). This is an important piece of information considering the role of sports in society, how we idolize athletes that

experience success at elite levels and even use sports and sports figures as a socializing elements

directed toward our nation's youth. There are issues within the present ideology surrounding

sports in our society considering the idealization and glorification of male physical bodies in

terms of cultural power (Oates and Durham 2004) along with team sports endorsing forms of

masculinity that promote masculine characteristics that belittle women (Anderson 2008). By

studying sports, we are able to derive greater insight into why an ideology that is driven by the

glorification of male attributes is so widely popular despite the demeaning and segregating

qualities that it possesses.

> Men's professional sports is often used for a collective celebration of discourses
> that encourage the giving and taking of pain, that assumes the physical superiority
> of heterosexual men over women and gays, and support the display of physical
> affection and male bonding (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005: 126).

Concepts surrounding masculinity are contested among scholars that define them differently

(Pringle and Hickey 2010). Essentially, there are different ways to interpret or define masculinity

with the application of those principles also varying depending on the context. Because

masculinities are embedded in our culture and informed by larger institutional and cultural

influences, the definitions and present state of masculinities are subject to change over time

(Connell 2008). The general public generates an understanding of masculinity through their

social interactions and the institutional demands in which they are subject to (Connell, 2000;

quoted in Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005).

Drummond (2008) points out that sports are a domain that men have generally relied on

when it comes to constructing their identity. Because sports are an influence that informs the

identity construction of men, it carries the ability to create standards surrounding what it is to be

masculine in today's society. "Foucault (1978) observed, humans cannot simply create any

understandings of the self as they please, as identities are constructed in relation to the working

of power, life experiences and the availability of discursive resources" (Pringle and Hickey

2010:116). Discourses regarding athletics and masculinity tend to include shared male interests

and common values, like a "good ol' boys network" (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005) with

football considered as an exclusive "men's club" where the interests of men are protected

through the exclusion of women (Boxill 2006).

There are many forms of masculinity that can be identified throughout various

international locations and cultures around the globe (Connell 2008). Connell (2008) argues that

masculinities include patterns of body-reflexive behaviors, characteristic postures, muscular

tensions, specific skills, and masculine interpersonal interactions that are salient for masculine

definitions. Male sports celebrities have become some of the main representative figures of

what's called hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987), with sports acting as a realm for sustaining

such ideology (Gruneau and Wilson 1993; seen in Gee 2009). Hegemonic masculinity is the

dominant male pattern and promotes behaviors geared towards authority and power, which agree

with the idea that men should be collectively privileged for the long term (Connell 2008). This is

justified through male privilege that is seen throughout society, how many realms of power and

influence are largely controlled by men. This perspective also sees sports as a positive social

influence within our culture, despite concealing a number of social problems that this ideology

creates (Anderson 2008).

Another version of masculinity is orthodox masculinity, which speaks to the way men

identify with the acquisition of certain attributes that align with dominant male ideology

(Anderson 2008). In the NFL, athletes represent hyper-masculine appearances. Hyper-

masculinity is an extreme form of masculinity that very few people embody (Pringle and Hickey

2010) and is seemingly impossible or extremely difficult to achieve. Regardless of categorical label or assigned title, forms of masculinity related to sports promote a privileged status of men that discounts those whose appearances or behaviors do not represent dominant male ideology and those that fall outside of this ideology like women and homosexuals. Due to the significant socializing influence of sports, it is important to consider how men that are socialized into sports are encouraged to emulate characteristics that surround violence, a desire to place others in suffering based on the stratification of masculine attributes, and downplaying ideas surrounding very serious acts that involve violence against women (Anderson 2008). Not surprisingly, there is a long history of exclusion and negativity that has been directed toward women that are involved in sports. This could relate to the sense of control that men desire aligning with ideologies surrounding masculinity. Men are supposed to be in control, and losing control indicates that someone is unmanly or connected to anything involved with being a woman (Boxill 2008).

Coaches of athletic teams will designate unmanly traits to athletes as motivation to perform, typically by assigning demeaning feminine characteristics to their players (Boxill 2006). Athletes then work to shed what are interpreted as feminine attributes because of the negative connection between their status as an athlete and being negatively associated as a woman. Generally, male athletes and team sport athletes have been known to objectify women, seeing them as sexual objects to be dominated (Anderson 2008). These kinds of messages promote the exclusion of women and feminine characteristics in sports, deeming them unfit or out of place. A problem that women face despite the significant progress they have made is that male ideology is still dominant and endorses behaviors and values that are aimed at the exclusion of women. Women are then forced to resist being controlled by men when entering traditionally

male-dominated areas like sports (Boxill 2006) and their involvement in doing so is helping challenge and reshape ideologies surrounding feminine presence and success within sports.

Not all men agree or adhere to such ideology or place any kind of value on male dominance, but regardless of their personal beliefs they still benefit from masculine privileges that are found throughout American society (Whitehead and Barrett 2001; quoted in Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005). The unearned social privileges afforded to men that meet the criteria of what it is to be masculine and the social incentives created for those that embody such images are a driving influences that continues to reinforce the negative socializing messages and images that are reinforcing male reliance on this ideology within sports.

> The stronger women get, the more men turn to the safe haven of sports, where they can display emotions and develop bonding loving relationships, especially to sports from which women are excluded. Unfortunately, what this reinforces is more hatred of women, because women no longer want to be controlled – women are the cause of this loss of control; women have undermined men's manhood. So men who reason this way turn to what they believe allows them to be real men and what keeps real women out – football (Boxill 2006: 117).

There have been significant leaps and bounds that women have experienced over time within the realm of sports. Before the passage of title IX, collegiate athletic scholarships for women were a rarity, whereas now almost one third of all athletic scholarship funds are offered to women (Boxill 2006). There are also large amounts of women that identify themselves as sports fans and engage in the same sports consumptive behaviors that men do, making up at least forty percent of National Hockey League, NFL, and Major League Soccer fans in the United States (Wann et. al. 2001).

Representing nearly half of the spectator audiences within major sports markets, women are considered a significant demographic of sports viewing audiences that are gaining recognition by league executives and their affiliates. Despite this, there remain differing

expectations between men and women regarding their involvement with sports attributed to how those associations are still largely informed by much of masculine ideologies outlined earlier. Men are expected to participate in significantly more fan related behaviors than women (Dietz-Uhler et. al. 2000), given that sport spectatorship is generally considered a male dominated activity (Wann and Waddill 2003). Looking into what the predictors are of who is more likely to be a sports fan brings insight into this issue. Wann and Waddill (2003) found that masculine gender role orientation is a better predictor of sport fandom than anatomical sex, highlighting how sports can be a way that families are brought together. Information like this helps explain the growing presence of women in sports and their positioning as a significant viewing audience.

We can learn more about the affects of masculinity on sports fans and how those ideologies stemming from sports affect society by recognizing that media is a significant driving force in delivering those messages. Fantasy football players are major consumers of sport related media and it can be argued that they would likely be influenced by the media more than traditional sports fans. Images we are exposed to involving athletics also influence the dominant discourses about masculinity that reside outside of sports (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005). Men's professional sports are widely broadcasted across the world, and events related to significant happenings within these leagues are delivered to the public through various forms of mediated technology. Some events within men's professional sports are revered to the point that iconic cultural symbols are publicly associated with an event for the purpose of broadcast to mass viewing audiences. In the United States, the influence of men's professional sports has been increasing due to its popularity and visibility (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005). Large volumes of media provide consumers with images and messages that cast influence upon the masses, reinforcing masculine ideology and portraying its dominance.

Gee (2009) explains that media and mediated sport are a strategic means that particular ideas surrounding gender are generated as normal, which are reproduced for a large audience. "As a highly segregated, homophobic, sexist, and misogynistic gender regime, sport not only contributes to the gender order, but it also reproduces a conservative and stabilizing form of masculinity that renders considerable costs for both sexes" (Anderson 2008: 260). Knoppers and Anthoissen (2005) argue that media has become a major area for reinforcing ideas surrounding principles tied to hegemonic masculinity. Most would agree men's professional sports leagues like the NFL certainly meet this criterion through its widespread visibility and hyper-masculine imagery. This level of public exposure provides social messages that translate themselves into benchmarks for male self-appraisal and socialization (Gee 2009). Because fantasy football players are immersed in this type of media through various mediums, their perspectives are undoubtedly affected by the masculine portrayals present.

Emotions

A significant aspect of male socialization in the United States is informed by sports and what it means to be masculine. Despite the hyper-masculine and hegemonic ideals within the NFL, emotions remain a significant part of the football despite conflict residing between what it is to be masculine in society and emotive displays. Emotional experiences and behaviors are products of socialization, with social interactions influencing how people interpret and show emotion (Hochschild 1979). Emotions are something experienced by the self, where the social context of the emotions is the determinant of what is felt (Fine 1993).

Feeling rules dictate the how much of an emotion, what type of emotion, and for how long should someone experience an emotion as people manage their emotions in alignment with

feeling and display rules that are present by selecting preferred ones and subduing others (Hochschild 1979). People are socialized at varying levels regarding how emotional experiences are masked or subdued, and people bring with them varying competencies when it comes to emotional resources they have available to them within a given social context (Greer 2002). Feeling rules essentially tell people what and what not to feel and navigated through the use of emotion management techniques and the interpretation of rule reminders (Hochschild 1979). Men are generally socialized to be more restrictive with certain emotional displays because feeling rules indicate that those displays may be unmanly. Inversely, in football it is fully acceptable for men to show their emotions (Boxill 2006) and making the case that the same applies within fantasy football leagues. This contrast in emotional expectations between society and sports informs men that emotions are ok to display during a game but not in society stems from commonly held perspectives surrounding men (Boxill 2006).

Sports spectators experience emotions that are almost the same as those felt by athletes (Dimmock and Grove 2006) and highly identified sports spectators will invest themselves in sporting events. (Hillman et. al. 2000). Hillman et. al. (2000) posit that people often develop intense personal and emotional interest in sports contests, and during the course of events, highly identified fans typically demonstrate strong emotional and behavioral responses based on the outcome of athletic performances and events. In interactive sports, there are both winning and losing teams which creates positive and negative experiences for both spectators and players depending on the outcome of the game (Park et. al. 2009). Many NFL fans are extremely dedicated to their sport, and fantasy football players represent a highly identified NFL fan that is active with the sport and experience winning and losing like those formally affiliated with the NFL do. Bernhardt et. al. (1998) describe positive emotions experienced from winning involve

feelings like happiness, which contrasts from emotions experienced form losing like anger and frustration. Disappointment occurs when unpleasant surprises happen or the outcome of an event does not meet a fans expectation (Rainey et. al. 2002). Because sports have the power to incite such contrasting emotions that are contingent upon uncertain outcomes, the emotions are amplified even further through fantasy sports due to the compounding effects of both the result on the NFL playing field and the results seen within a player's fantasy football franchise.

Fantasy football players, in alignment with others affiliated with sports, engage in impression management when interacting in the fantasy football arena where what they are willing to publicly share with the audience is actively controlled. The sociology of Erving Goffman (1959) views actors as actively managing outer impressions. What NFL fans and fantasy players choose to share with others are subject to the feeling rules that are present, where reflexive techniques are used to gauge how others would react to our emotional claims. Liu and Li (2009) argue that actions of group members affect both themselves and others, and the emotional happenings that collectively affect a group have an impact on the emotional climate that is experienced (Rime 2007). When looking at player emotions in fantasy football, experiences as a NFL fantasy franchise owner prompts sharing of feelings experienced at a certain level. Emotions that individuals experience privately are typically shared socially (Rime 2007). People will talk to others about significant emotional events they experience, especially if there are common experiences to draw from between individuals. Rime (2007) argues that sharing your emotions with others is a repetitive process that usually involves more than one person, with more intense emotions shared more often and with more people for a longer period of time. Significant events that prompt emotion through fantasy football would then likely be

shared among league members and others that take an interest in what is taking place or share the

status of fantasy football franchise owner.

> Emotional episodes open upon a process of spreading of emotional information
> through which they propagate very easily across social networks...through the
> spreading of emotional information, members of a community are able to keep
> track of emotional experiences affecting their peers (Rime 2007:311-312)

Because fantasy sports takes place in an online league setting, it welcomes the sharing of

personal and collective emotional events experienced by participants. Examples of this include

players in the league with shared or conflicting interests, where mutual victories or losses would

classify as collective emotional events and likely spark a chain reaction (Rime 2007). There are

also ritualistic aspects of fantasy football, like the draft that takes place at the start of the season

and the crowning of a champion at the end. Through sharing positive emotions, it enhances the

positive effects that stem from participation and strengthens social bonds with others that share

or can relate to those experiences. Because there is a great deal of shared experiences within

fantasy football, it is important to consider the connections and experiences created through

league participation. Professional sports, particularly the NFL, welcome highly identified

populations of sports fans. Fantasy football players represent both highly identified and actively

involved fans. Because there is a great deal of importance allocated to events within the NFL, it

seems logical that strong emotional experiences are a product of the game experience for all fans.

Fantasy football players are additionally engaged in a vicarious version of NFL participation that

emulate the experiences of those formally affiliated with the NFL, where it is fully acceptable

for men to show their emotions in football (Boxill 2006).

Through the influence of sports and mass media, along with the fan populations affected,

we can learn more about what impacts the social identity of sports fans, their collective

associations, and emotional elements that are embedded within sports while taking into account the significant influence masculinity has on those impacted by sport images and messages. Fantasy football players represent a significant demographic of sports fans that are not only included in groups that are influenced but also actively participate in their interest creating a greater investment concerning NFL related happenings. Media is the vehicle that delivers its influence and helps spread masculine sentiments in sports, and fantasy football players are arguably more connected to NFL related media than those who are considered traditional fans. The subculture of fantasy football players are sports fans that have an intimate connection with NFL football and represent an active form of highly identified sports fan that is important to consider when developing an analytical perspective surrounding their social existence. Through analyzing their social identities, it brings further insight into how these relevant influences impact their identity construction and inform cultural elements that align with and distinguish fantasy football players from traditional sports fans.

Social Identity

Through further analyzing fantasy sports leagues and participants we can learn more about what elements contribute to the social identity of sports fans and the meaning behind identifying oneself as a fantasy football player. This involves looking at principles and theories used to bring insight into traditional sports fans and apply relevant principles as they relate to the social identities of fantasy football players. Social identity theory has been used extensively within the realm of social psychology (Dimmock and Grove 2006) and used in application to studies surrounding a variety of sport fan populations. This interactionist perspective suggests that being a fan can be a personalized role, aspect of self, and also a way that people can manage their self-conceptions (Laverie and Arnett 2000). Individuals navigate their social world by

prompting hierarchically organized identities within various contexts (Laverie and Arnett 2000) and selecting identities that fit both preference and situation. An example would be highly identified football fans that call upon their identity an NFL fan in situations where it is appropriate and they would likely receive a positive social response, while not expressing that identity at times where it either has no relevance or is unwelcome. The goal of social identity theory is to understand the rationale behind people selecting certain identity related behaviors with respect to all of the other possibilities they could also choose, illustrating the concept of identity salience (Laverie and Arnett 2000).

Identities that we assign importance to are known as salient identities, and the focus of social identity theory research has largely been on the relationship between salience and behavior (Laverie and Arnett 2000). Armstrong (2007) suggests that once a person decides what aspects of their self-image are salient; individuals will then look for ways to express it. We routinely display our salient identities in ways that are likely to be easily identifiable and influenced by social connections, much like a sports fan wearing a jersey to their favorite event (Laverie and Arnett 2000). Fantasy participants are identified with sports to the extent that they actively create a new element of sport consumption and devote their attention toward fantasy football. The attitudes that these fans possess in regards to their perspective on the NFL is likely positive considering how attitudes related to spectator sports are indicative of favorable or unfavorable assessments and emotional feelings toward sports (Gau and Kim 2011) along with their identity selection being the result of social interaction and self expression as ways to solidify those identities (Laverie and Arnett 2000). Social identity as part of an individual's self-conception, which is partially derived from their awareness of membership to social groups along with the significance that group membership represents (Dimmock and Grove 2006). This is applicable to

fantasy football players because participation typically involves a high level of attention and commitment to NFL related events and an upfront fee in order to participate, which is collected and allocated to winners at the end of the season.

Sports fans perceive themselves as in a group even if they are not formally recognized in an organized group, like a fan club for example (Reysen and Branscombe 2010). People gain a sense of worth and who they are based on their memberships in social groups (Dietz-Uhler et al. 2002). NFL related social groups have cultural norms and values that those identified with a given team will likely promote. Fantasy football league members share a similar collective group attributes that differ from traditional sports fans, equipped with a distinct set of rituals, language, and collective sentiments surrounding a player versus team focus. Rime (2007) suggests that social rituals are especially effective when it comes to the enhancement of participants' feelings of group belonging. One way people gain a positive self esteem is through making positive comparisons between "in-group" members to other "out-groups" (Reysen and Branscombe 2010). The behaviors of NFL fans and fantasy participants are largely consistent with the behaviors from others in their group and they typically categorize themselves as belonging to one group and not another (Reysen and Branscombe 2010). The main difference is traditional NFL fans generally identify themselves as fans of a franchise or selected players, whereas fantasy football players are identified within their social group as the owner of the teams they have assembled. Because being a sports fan involves a great deal of identifying in-groups and out-groups, social identity theory is an appropriate means of studying fan populations (Reysen and Branscombe 2010).

Categorizing oneself as a part of a group is enough to invoke in-group bias, where people typically offer more favoritism or reward to those that belong to their respective group (Dietz-

Uhler et. al. 2002). This involves a collective in-group perception that the behaviors of your own group members are typically correct, creating the possibility of a good versus bad mentality being created (Dietz-Uhler et. al. 2002). Jonassohn et. al. (1981) support this by suggesting that for the audience, sport competitions promote a good versus bad mentality that confirms boundaries groups create. Boundaries are then established and competition within the NFL among groups can be intense. Dietz-Uhler et. al. (2002) explains that if an in-group member does something negative, they are likely to be scrutinized in a more extreme manner than someone from an out-group would be. This could be a result of biases that often reflect overly positive assessments of in-group members and unjustly negative assessments of those who represent out-groups (Wann and Grieve 2005). Having in-group bias is a way that identified sports fans can protect and endorse their social identity, likely attributed to the personal stake involved with becoming identified with an NFL franchise or select players.

To identify with a team means that there is also a psychological connection is made with a team (Wann 1997) and when people offer themselves as team members they vicariously experience team events (Sloan 1979; quoted in Gau and Kim 2011). Because being a fan is a significant part of a social identity (End 2001) fans may possess high levels of personal and emotional commitment. Fantasy football players experience commitment and vicarious experiences that traditional NFL fans do not because of the personal stake involved with creating their franchise rosters and the player oriented vicarious experiences that are created as a result. Stone (2007) suggests that "experiential symbolization" occurs when a fans commitment level welcomes the symbolic cultural influences and self to fuse together, making the "club" a "part" of themselves. If highly committed fans experience such a fusion between culture and self, fantasy football players likely experience the same phenomena but in the context of their fantasy

franchise(s) in addition to their connections as a traditional fan. Interactionism is significant within these analyses, and Armstrong (2007) posits that a central focus of interactionism looks at the symbolic meanings that are associated with people's experiences related to their self identity and centered on social interaction. Furthermore, she argues that people typically formulate their behaviors in accordance with extrinsic expectations, illustrated by sports fans being aware of their sense of self when in a sport environment. When looking at traditional sports fans and fantasy football participants, the experiences are similar in many ways as they relate to social identity. The differences lie within the content and contexts of experiences, where fantasy players are exposed to a unique experience that is distinguishable from the traditional NFL fan experience.

The valued connections that fans have to the team(s) they follow is significant to their behaviors and experiences (Wann and Schrader2000), and team identification helps harbor social well-being and create both temporary and long-term social connections (Wann et. al. 2009). Furthermore, Wann et. al. (2009) explain that those who identify with multiple teams are at a social advantage to other fans that may only identify strongly with just one team. Because the connection between fan and team is significant, it is logical to think that highly identified NFL fans that are presented the option of an even further in depth vicarious experience would take interest. Both highly identified NFL fans and fantasy participants are fans that likely attribute salience to their fan identities, and Laverie and Arnett (2000) argue that identifying with a certain team has a significant impact on the amount of enjoyment experienced. Wann and Schrader (2000) explain that team identification incorporates how involved a fan is with and connected to a team. Avid fans are more likely to discuss aspects of their team frequently with others, actively seek social places where others share their interest, and engage in discussion related to their

favorite team (Laverie and Arnett 2000). Because those who strongly identify with their team(s) assign value to that role, they are often expected to have more intense reactions when it comes to happenings related to their favored team (Reysen and Brandscombe 2010). Typical sport fan reactions generally come in the form of emotive displays like aggressive actions and anxiety (Reysen and Branscombe 2010).

Dietz-Uhler et. al. (2002) found that highly identified sports fans typically see their favored team as a reflection of themselves, which reinforces the idea that strong reactions can occur within fans that fit this profile. They also point out that these fans can experience significant joy when watching their team compete and are more likely to attend team related events along with possess a greater knowledge about their team and the sport in general. Wann, Keenan and Page (2009) found that fans of teams who typically perform poorly gain a sense of value by being loyal to their organization under the assumption that they are able to gain social connections stemming from their involvement. Within fantasy football, players have no choice but to support the team that they have created. The franchises that a player creates and puts into play are a reflection of the franchise owner, their gaming strategy, and advanced football knowledge that is generally required to succeed. Fantasy football players are seemingly more connected to highly identified NFL fans despite the differences that exist between the two. Fans that are not highly identified or do not have a strong connection to a team may view their role as a fan significantly different, with their identity as a fan being anything but a central contributor to their self-conceptions and a team's performance having little impact on their fan identity (Wann and Schrader 2000).

When studying fantasy football participants, it has been shown that their experiences and identities as a fan are different in many ways in comparison what is considered the traditional

NFL fan. This can be attributed to a change from analyzing a tangible or real life realm of sport spectatorship and the use of mediated technologies to the incorporation of a virtual online realm that provides a greater vicarious experience. Computer-mediated communication has become a recreational means where people connect with others for leisure, social connections, and other enjoyable activities (Waskul and Douglass 1997). The widespread popularity and growing population of fantasy football players make it a particularly rich environment for large numbers of fans connect with each other and engage in competition. To play fantasy football you must have an online identity through the creation of a username and profile(s). Waskul and Douglass (1997) call these created personas "cyberselves," and fantasy football participants interact with others under such personas. "Although on-line selves emerge within the same processes by which any self emerges, alterations in the means by which persons interact will subtly, yet powerfully, transform the boundaries and nature of self, social world, and the self-social world relationship" (Waskul and Douglass 1997: 379). The communication abilities that an online mediums provide users harbors the creation of personal identities that have meaning, with meaning being created through social interaction with others (Waskul and Douglass 1997). Beyond the identities fantasy football players present, Waskul and Douglass (1997) suggest that the online environment fosters a unique version of social interaction that goes beyond what we are traditionally accustom to offline.

Communication in fantasy football leagues does occur within league websites, but it also occurs face to face and over other technological mediums like cellular phones, email, and smart-phone technologies. The virtual environment has the ability to create new social situations in a new environment (Waskul and Douglass 1997), with the new environment that is created by fantasy football players encouraging their own unique set of interactions whether that is online,

through cellular telephone, or in person. The uniqueness of the online environment offers fantasy football players many opportunities to interact in ways that they otherwise could not offline. Mediated technologies, ready access, and the internet allow fantasy football players to enter a realm that brings them closer to professional football than ever (Randle and Nyland 2008). By the mid-1990s, most all fantasy games moved to online leagues (Oates 2009) where communication and information are easily exchanged. As a result, fantasy sports players have moved beyond traditional offline spectatorship roles and entered a world where they are immersed in real-time information and opportunities to compete against other fans regardless of geographic location.

The unique opportunity available for fans to engage in vicarious competition is accomplished by having an online medium available. However, the social interactions that NFL and fantasy league competition create are carried out through various means. An important distinction between fantasy football players and traditional NFL fans is the element of online interaction. By bringing insight into how online fantasy sports differentiate themselves from other online games we can illustrate a better idea of how fantasy sports games are played and what those features offer users. Games and gaming theory is a useful lens when attempting to portray the similarities and differences between the two.

Games and Gaming Theory

Online gaming is one of the fastest growing internet-based entertainment industries over the last ten years (Lee and Tsai 2010) as digital games are considered an expanding popular cultural manifestation (Murray 2006). Games are foundational to people and computers are a way that people can expand their knowledge create different ways to represent the world to vast

amounts of people (Murray 2006). Fantasy football players represent a population of online gamers that engage in their own unique form of internet gaming. Players assume the role of NFL owners and through created personas experience a fantasy reality that compares to other widely popular online gaming genres such as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). By comparing literature that analyzes online games and game play, we can draw relevant connections to how those principles apply to fantasy football.

The word fantasy itself suggests imagination and mental imagery. Most fantasy role playing games operate in realms that are separated from the rest of life and take place in imaged settings (Waskul and Lust 2004), which fantasy football does indeed do but using real life events and information related to NFL game play. One thing fantasy role-playing games and fantasy football have in common is that participants create a persona that he or she plays while engaged in the game within the limitations of the website interface. The make believe identities created are affected by the same symbolic happenings that influence public personas (Waskul and Lust 2004). "They let us play with the complex representations that are similar to the system models we are building in every domain of human knowledge" (Murray 2006: 198). Games are interpreted by those logged on in ways that allow people to separate reality-based behaviors and symbols from their real life context (Murray 2006). Fantasy football is an excellent example of this, where game play experiences require the use and interpretation of meaningful symbols in an online environment where users exhibit behaviors that are constructed from reality based knowledge.

There is a great deal of fluidity between fantasy and our ability to shed and adopt new roles within fantasy realities (Waskul and Lust 2004). Murray (2006) explains that computers in particular allow players to take on new roles, especially considering how games can be

programmed into computers creating complex environments. The internet accomplishes much

the same by allowing people to log onto websites that provide users with alternate realities in

which they can explore. Waskul and Lust (2004) explain to great extent this type of phenomena

in their article "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy

Role-Playing," positing that humans can reach an appreciation of their social existence through

analyzing the areas between the realms of fantasy, imagination, and reality. Further, they explain

that understanding that there is an inherent fluidity between these areas we are then able to learn

more about the processes of taking on new roles and placing others to the side within an out of

this world reality. Our understanding of roles starts with what we comprehend in reality, where

our methods of navigating social situations and the interactions that we engage in are a product

of our real life experiences (Waskul and Lust 2004). The roles that we occupy inform the self

(Waskul and Lust 2004), with Mead (1934) positing that self is accomplished by taking the role

other. In fantasy football, you are taking the role of an NFL franchise owner and stepping out of

normative reality-based roles.

Video games are a popular means of gaming and millions of dollars every year are spent

on games that are premised upon sport. Sports games allow players to experience rewards from

goal oriented behaviors that are used to compare competitors (Murray 2006). Grimes and

Feenberg (2009) point out that professional sport experiences are available through media

technologies and are representative of how gaming has become rationalized. They explain that

rationalized games are simulations of game play that contain specific set of standard rules and

are distilled into predictable and measurable portions. Examples of rationalization are also seen

in media coverage of sports, where the game has a set of rules that are reinforced by experts and

officials and coverage is segmented into predictable portions. Many sports games are a first

person emulation of a player within a game where users assume the role of a player but in fantasy football there is no first person emulation. Rather, there is a front office experience where players deal with budgets, deadlines, and personnel in the name of the success of their franchise. Games are a particularly effective way for players to consume and critique events that occur during game play, with the goal being improvement for individual and collective performances (Murray 2006). Players are rational, with their rationality contingent upon their ability to identify and select outcomes (McCown 2010), with a relevant example from fantasy football being the selection of certain players based on performance. Fantasy football websites provide participants with a medium to exchange messages and regulate game play, where the social rationality in games is found within exchange, rules and scorekeeping (Grimes and Feenberg 2009).

Within social interactions when engaged in a gaming situation, cultural and normative elements associated with game play are significant. McCown (2010) argues that established interactive and cultural attributes mold the incentives, rewards, and strategies that all players engage in. In fantasy games of all types there are cultural norms and incentives provided to behave in certain ways. "In many ways, all game play ultimately depends on the participation and buy-in of the players, who voluntarily engage in the act of play and, through consensus and collaboration, formulate the parameters, fictions, and fantasies of the play experience" (Grimes and Feenberg 2009: 109). Fantasy football leagues certainly depend on collective participation and voluntary engagement, and players are affected by their own distinct game play experiences. Interacting with other fantasy football players are a way that your behavior as a fantasy football participant is informed. The overreaching question is how are online fantasy football players

different from traditional sports fans and what are the driving influences that inform their social

identities and behaviors as they relate to the experiences of participants?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study examines fantasy football participation online and the experiences of those who participate in fantasy football leagues. I conducted a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews, using open-ended questions while adopting a pragmatic approach to data collection by interviewing participants while they were active in their fantasy football leagues. Interviewing participants face to face was my desired approach due to the way fantasy football players typically express significant aspects of their participation, which is in an offline context through conversation. I also used participant observation of a fantasy league as a way finding interview respondents and reinforcing themes found in the interview data.

My sample was a group of ten interview respondents and interviews generally lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. I connected with them using a non-probability sampling technique, approaching men through the league where I conducted participant observation and also through social ties with other fantasy players. I also asked the people I connected with for additional references to gather respondents using snowball sampling. The group I examined was men ages 18-60 who were preferably fully employed and/or married. This was a largely homogenous group that aligned closely with the demographics of the population market data suggested plays the most. This was an intentional choice in order to reduce the amount of differences within the group and derive common themes and patterns (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The sample group that I conducted in-depth interviews with was limited to people that I had previous contact with and others that they knew; making it a very narrow group that likely shared similar perspectives and/or experiences when playing fantasy football and had comparable social positions. I justify using this sampling technique simply because it was something that I could accomplish as a graduate student with limited funds who

was working independently with the guidance of an advisor. Furthermore, there is little information out there that leads me to believe that the experiences of the fantasy football players I interviewed in the Midwest region are much different in comparison to other groups of men that play from other regions in the United States. Because league play took place online and players could access their leagues from any geographic location that had internet access, it provided a common virtual realm where all players meet, interact, and navigate. Thus, I felt comfortable assuming that the experiences of the fantasy football players I interviewed in the Midwest region would mirror the experiences of players in other regions. Furthermore, the media that participants were immersed in as a result of participation were generally the same because they used the same resources when researching NFL related information and consuming NFL images and messages. For these reasons, my methodology is even further justified and one that contributes to our understanding of fantasy football players as a whole.

The interviews took place in a setting where both the interviewer and respondent felt comfortable, such as the respondents residence or a mutually agreed upon public location. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All information shared along with the identity of the interview respondents remained confidential through the use of created pseudonyms in the transcripts. All respondents were asked to complete and sign a consent form (See Appendix A) which explained the nature of the study along with their rights as a participant and the data management procedures. Audio recordings were transcribed immediately after the interviews and then destroyed. Copies of the consent forms will be kept in Dr. Emily Boyd's office for 3 years per IRB requirements.

Data Analysis

Study participants explained their experiences and their perceptions, and the researcher guided the interview by asking questions and connecting interview information with observed phenomena. The data was analyzed using a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), where data were inductively analyzed to look for themes and patterns that emerged from within the data. The collection and analysis of data occurred simultaneously and were interconnected with one another. As interviews were completed, data was analyzed using line by line and focused coding schemes and examining themes which emerged from the analysis (Charmaz 2006). Each interview was transcribed verbatim and coded for relevant data. This allowed the data to be identified, categorized, extracted, and compared using the ideas provided by the respondents. The prevalent codes and themes that emerged from this process were further analyzed in memos. The memos helped refine themes and reflections on findings as well as methodological processes, allowing the researcher to conceptualize the meaning within the data and influence the process of future interviews. Furthermore, memos were drafted throughout the process analyzing my own interviewing techniques and ideas related to the study (Charmaz 2006). Through the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967), themes and data points that emerged as the strongest were comparatively organized and incorporated into the findings.

Research questions

User identity construction is a major aspect of this study and I intend to look at how a participant's identification as both a fantasy football participant and NFL football fan influence connections to certain groups or communities, potentially promoting a further sense of belonging within other league affiliated realms. This is an area that where significant influences regarding

the kind of connections that a fantasy football participant makes as a result of their participation and identity as a participant are made. Furthermore, how does being a fantasy football participant invite interaction and potential acceptance into other realms that don't exclusively reside within fantasy football leagues? What is the significance of masculinity when it comes to participation? These could be strategic places for examining motivating factors, both on and offline, for people to participate and what participants feel are the key elements to persuading them to take part in fantasy football leagues.

The feelings and emotions that people experience will be a significant aspect of this study, uncovering how fantasy football participation can be directly linked to experiencing both positive and negative emotions as a result. This inquiry should provide detail into the emotional experiences that can be ties to this kind of NFL fan. What are the specific factors that produce emotion in football? How significant is the connection between relevant events and happenings and fantasy football players significant to emotional experiences? What aspects of life outside of fantasy sports are influenced because of competition evoked emotions? What is the significance of these emotions? Do the emotions experienced become routine or develop into any kinds of patterns? What is the role of emotions within the online fantasy football gaming experience?

The NFL and fantasy football as a pervasive market and media force are central to my investigation also. I analyzed how commercialized aspects of the game affect participants throughout their participation; investigating the significance of media messages, propaganda, and commoditization of the NFL. How much resource do you devote to your fantasy football league participation? How does it affect you as a consumer? What types of NFL related merchandise do you own? How does playing fantasy football affect your media consumption? What forms of media do you consume and at what frequency?

This study is to explores how participation in online fantasy football is significant to participants on a variety of levels. Through the incorporation of the experiences of those who interact and participate within this realm, I intend to provide grounded examples of how playing fantasy football is a significant socially constructed experience where seemingly limitless variables of interaction are present. Conducting a study within this framework should expand our understanding of fantasy football and its widespread popularity through insight that is experienced by the users themselves. People who participate in fantasy football leagues provide a glimpse into the world of the online fantasy football participant that is not as easily observed or what others would describe as nuanced or mundane.

I provide examples of questions that I used when conducting my interviews in Appendix B. These questions are organized as initial open ended questions, intermediate questions, and ending questions. In a previously completed qualitative study, the method that worked best for me was to have general outlining questions I would ask. Based on the responses provided, I created probing questions as the interviews went along. The probing questions were intended to prompt elaboration on the behalf of the interview respondents.

FINDINGS

Fan to Fantasy

Playing fantasy football starts with traditional fans seeking out ways to become more involved in their interest as an NFL fan. I did not interview traditional fans but rather addressed what it means to be a traditional fan with the fantasy football players I interviewed. People typically become involved in fantasy leagues through other people they know, whether that be invitation into a pre-existing league that is already set up or into a new league that is being created and recruiting people to participate. NFL fans can also join public leagues online that welcome players from all over the world to compete against each other in fantasy football. Fantasy football provides participants with an effective way that NFL fans can become actively involved in professional football. Players become closer to the game by familiarizing themselves with highly detailed aspects of the game, creating celebrity rosters of the top statistically performing NFL athletes, and managing their team(s) through league wide analytics. This chapter explains how an interest in the NFL begins starting with the role of a traditional NFL fan and eventually blossoms into a fantasy football player. Traditional fans are those who are a fan of the NFL team from the geographic region they are from or other team that carries some kind of personal connection to the fan.

The men that I interviewed expressed that their interest in the NFL began as a youth within their formative years. I asked them to think back as far as they were able to and describe their earliest experiences with NFL football. All of my respondents were able to draw memories from their youth and in some cases as far back as pre-school age or earlier. Developing an interest in football is something that interview respondents see as socially acceptable, if not

encouraged, for young boys. They all expressed that the people in their lives advocated for them to become NFL fans and engage in the recreational playing of football. Common ways that they would play football for fun were at the park with friends or family and at school during recess. Andrew describes what it was like being a ten year old fan of the NFL. He talks about going to the park and playing football with friends, suggesting the importance of what team his friend associated with through the logo on his friend's jacket. "It was just cool you know, you and your buddies would go to the park and play football and I remember one of my buddies, he had a starter jacket, Dallas Cowboys, and you know that wasn't cool." Other recreational mediums like NFL video games were also a popular way kids with a budding interest in the NFL would entertain themselves, identifying popular games like Tecmo Bowl and Madden. Douglas describes his favorite NFL video game growing up and indicates the significance of the NFL in his life during that time. "And so, that was my favorite game growing up, Tecmo Super Bowl. But, that's how far I go back. I mean, that's always, football's been a part of my life ever since I can remember." Because an interest in football was encouraged by others, it shows that the social environments that young boys occupy generally agree with being an NFL fan. I found that the acceptance of boys as NFL fans even helped create an appeal towards them from others, coming in the form of things like social popularity among peers and perceived attraction from the opposite sex.

As Andrew suggested, the team that you choose to represent or support is significant to other NFL fans. Traditional NFL fans generally support the local team, which carries the potential for strong emotional connections to develop. All study participants expressed an emotional connection with their favorite NFL team, which has deep roots in the social experiences they've had throughout their life. The development of this type of emotional

connection to a team and an interest in the NFL was something that developed eventually over

time as their exposure to the game continued to grow. Study participants earliest experiences as

fans started with family members and others around them encouraging an interest in football and

introducing them to an NFL team. Jack describes his thoughts on how an interest in the NFL

develops and how he feels an interest in sports is ultimately created.

> Yeah I think, I don't know how many kids when they're, you know six years old
> sit down and think oh, sports are what I love to do and this is what I want to do. I
> think you just kind of go with the flow and that genuine interest develops down
> the road

Jack suggests that his interest in the NFL and his identity as an NFL fan had less to do with his

choosing to have an interest in sports at a young age and was instead more of a result of his

experiences. In all cases, study participants could recall significant events from their youth

concerning their favorite NFL team, indicating the significance those events had on them as

children. Brad describes a memory he had of being five years old and watching his family's

favorite NFL team play in an important game. He recalls bonding with his father and the

emotional meaning surrounding those events.

> Well, I don't remember much about the game but I do remember that it was a big
> deal. I was five at that time, just kind of like; I don't remember much of the
> season. But, I do remember the game and watching the game with my dad, and
> then at that point after the game was over and they lost in heartbreaking fashion I
> don't remember much about the game but I remember it being a heartbreaking
> loss for everybody and everybody being in a poor mood in this area for a couple
> of weeks afterwards

Brad was even able to elaborate on how the outcome of the game affected the people around him

and describes the loss as heartbreaking despite being extremely young. This helps illustrate the

significance of a local NFL team on a community and how team related events have the potential

to affect large groups of people. It appears that he and the other men from this study were

encouraged to emulate the role of a traditional NFL fan to the importance placed on it by others,

where Brad was influenced concerning what a fan was and how men react to football and loss very early in his formative development.

The men that I interviewed were raised in an era where the NFL was still a highly influential aspect of social life. They were born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which makes them well into their lives as adults and in their late twenties or early to mid-thirties when interviewed. All of them experienced a childhood before fantasy football was a widely popular fan activity. Fantasy football leagues did exist in the 1970s and the decades leading up to the turn of the century, but they were significantly smaller and played differently than how fantasy football leagues are played today. Before fantasy football leagues were played online, video games became the main electronic medium for NFL gaming starting in the 1980s. These games allowed users to emulate NFL game play through a console based system. This is different than online fantasy football because video games do not provide any direct statistical competition using drafted players, competitive outcomes reside solely within the emulated contests, and none of them were played online.

There were only two men from my study that played fantasy football as youth prior to online game play. Playing fantasy football back then involved reporting what players each person would start to a commissioner and hand writing each player roster, eventually tallying up the weekly statistics. Statistics are calculated based on the results of player performances from the previous week and accessed using resources like newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts. Douglas describes how he and his friends would play fantasy football when he was ten or eleven years old. He explains the resources and processes that they would engage in order to play fantasy football, which is much more labor intensive and less in depth than playing today over the internet. "And, ah, and so I used to go and make their line-ups, and on the newspaper

just go through and hand score all the, just the starters." Brad describes how he would access

statistics for his league, pointing out a technological limitation that was not available in

comparison to what he is accustomed to now.

> Probably find a newspaper or, um maybe if sports center was still on but you
> would have to like sit and watch and write down as they are running out the stats.
> They didn't have DVR where I could pause or anything

The experiences of these two men playing fantasy football in their early years helps illustrate the

state of fantasy football during those times, when these men were still children and developing

an interest in the NFL. By no means were there near the amount of people playing fantasy

football in the years prior to the development of online leagues. Rather, these men were

introduced to the NFL and prompted to assume the role of a traditional fan given that type of fan

was how the vast majority of NFL fans represented themselves during that era.

Traditional NFL fans typically limit their interest to one or two teams, and being a fan of

a team outside the local geographic region where someone presently resides is likely often due to

a family connection or ties to an area that they themselves or an elder family member used to

live. Douglas elaborates on what kind of NFL fan he was when he was young and points out that

his local team, the Minnesota Vikings, was the NFL franchise that he paid the most attention to.

> Because before, when I first was younger, I was a Vikings fan. And now when
> you get older you just get more in depth of the league and you start knowing more
> players, following different teams, more but yeah definitely starting out it was
> more just the Vikings, and now it's the NFL

 Some of the men that I interviewed described that as children they expressed interest in other

NFL teams, but in all cases it was nowhere near the level of interest they had in their

traditionally favored, typically local NFL team. Study participants all agree that there was

extrinsic encouragement to like one team and to support them as a fan. Encouragement came in

the form of family and friends, but also through other influences like media and geographic

social sentiments. Being a traditional fan also entails being a fan of the stars on that particular

team, where popular players from each NFL team are widely recognized by their fan following.

Brad explains how the NFL was significant to him as a youth, idolizing NFL players because of

their physical abilities and their status as elite athletes.

> NFL football to me was something that was, something that you could look up to.
> You could always look up to these professional athletes and know that they were
> so much better than anybody else playing football at recess somewhere. Even
> outside of school, high school football games, these guys were on a whole
> different level. They were what you would shoot to bee if you wanted to play
> professional sports.

Fans place particular focus on these players and glorify them so they are viewed as

celebrities among the local fan base (Alder and Alder 1989). Brad also describes how he

perceived the celebrity players from his team growing up. "Oh, these guys were gods. I mean,

these guys were my heroes. I paid more attention to NFL football than I did in school. I mean,

these guys were, they could do no wrong in my mind." Brad does a nice job of illustrating the

status of celebrity players and their importance to others in the community, how they assume the

position of role models. Given their celebrity status and the importance many of these players

have on the outcome of NFL games, the most significant memories that interview respondents

expressed stem from significant player performances that lead to positive outcomes for their

team. They were quick to remember particular players that influenced certain historical

situations, like a game winning touchdown or a massive individual performance. Brad's father is

a fan of the Pittsburgh Steelers and he recalls the importance of certain celebrity athletes in

helping the team win multiple super bowls.

> In my lifetime there has only been two, but they've been to three or four super
> bowls. They actually have a few good losses, or a few good wins in the seasons.

> Before I was born in the 70s, they won a bunch of super bowls with Bradshaw
> and you know, Silkert.

Celebrity idolization of players by traditional fans is not isolated to their preferred team alone,

although the players from their favored franchise receive the most attention and are assigned the

greatest importance. In all cases, celebrity players are identified as sources of encouragement for

fans to purchase apparel and attend NFL games, where the athletes from a preferred team

motivate fans to get involved. Adrian describes how certain celebrity players from his favorite

team influence ticket sales.

> I think A.P. should be more of a draw because you look at how big of a draw that
> Randy Moss was. That was the reason this huge sellout streak even began that we
> had. A.P. should be enough to keep it goin, he is the number one running back in
> the NFL. I also think it speaks loudly to what fans give a shit about these days

Outstanding performances by players from the home team invite a great deal of praise from fans,

acting a source of positive emotions and encouragement for continued support of the team.

Contrastingly, when the players from your favorite team perform poorly it invites harsh

criticisms. In both cases, this is attributed to the strong connection that exists between fan and

franchise.

The men I interviewed all claim that the most important part of being an NFL fan is

loyalty to your team, which is due to a history of support and emotional connection to a certain

team. Chad's favorite team is the Minnesota Vikings and there have been rumors circulating that

his team might be uprooted and moved out of the Twin Cities. He does a nice job of portraying

what that experience would mean to him and how it would impact him emotionally due to the

historical connection he has with his team.

> I mean it's emotional, and even now with the Vikings saying you know we're
> going to leave without the new stadium and stuff like that. I have a certain part of
> myself that's invested in being a fan of the Vikings, where I don't want them to

leave and if they left it would be pretty emotional, where they are taking a big chunk of my childhood and the sports team that I have always rooted for out of my life

Study participants all expressed a strong emotional connection to the team that they most identify with. This is credited to having a history of supporting that team during the good times and the bad. Further, they expressed that they were taught at an early age that it is important to be a loyal fan. Being a loyal fan means always remaining supportive and willing to express tour affinity for your team. Showing support for an NFL team is accomplished in a number of different ways. A popular way of supporting your NFL team and getting up close to celebrity players is by participating in NFL related events, typically in the form of attending or watching particular NFL games.

The men from this study have all attended at least several NFL games in their lifetime, ranging from when they were children to the present day. Attending games is a common way that NFL fans show their support for a team and experience an event with friends or family. If a fan is unable to attend an NFL game, they likely resort to watching it on television. Watching games on television is the most frequently observed way that fans support their favorite team. Fans typically consume NFL games in ways that encourage social interaction, like meeting others somewhere to watch a game. Typical places to meet would be places like sports bars or someone's residence. NFL games are also consumed by fans in isolation, but it is most common that when attending or watching a game it is with people you know or others that support the same team. Darren explains his experience as a traditional fan when it comes to connecting with others to watch games.

Friends were definitely an influence, getting together with the guys and watching the game, having people over to watch the game, making it an event and

something to look forward to. Going to the game whenever you can, that was
always something you would look forward to as a great hobby

There are patterns and rituals when it comes to NFL media consumption that come in the form of

social events that others will coordinate or participate in. Entire parties are hosted by NFL fans,

especially during the more popular events like high profile games such as a championship or

when the local team is competing. There are many options for fans when it comes to what games

they choose to watch and traditional fans are most apt to limit their viewing to when their

preferred NFL team is playing. A popular exception to this are high stakes games such as the

super bowl championship. In fact, all ten men that I interviewed expressed that prior to playing

fantasy football they would not watch any other NFL games outside of their favorite team on a

regular basis.

Displaying your favoritism to an NFL team is not limited to game attendance or

television consumption. Purchasing team related items, wearing apparel, and allocating resources

like time and money are all seen as ways fans can show support for their team. Today, fans have

a significant options when it comes to the types of items they can purchase. The NFL publishes

catalogs and hosts online stores that contain hundreds of options for incorporating your favorite

NFL team into your life. This includes everything from team endorsed kitchen wear or room

decorations to the actual clothing that the NFL players wear on the sidelines. The NFL has made

it easy for fans to show support through access to these products. Whether it is mundane or

outlandish, you have options when it comes to representing your favorite team. Darren explains

his experiences being loyal to his local team the Minnesota Vikings through purchasing team

related items and making sure they were observable to others.

I was always generally wearing something Vikings on game day and I was always
buying a Vikings hat and wearing that. I've lost several of them in the lake, but

> I've always gone back to the store and bought another one. I guess back then
> [growing up] I would always support the team by buying their merchandise,
> clothing, wearing it, sporting it at public places whether it is the state fair, other
> events where you are out social, where you know that you might have the
> opportunity to advertise for that product, that's where your hat means that you're
> a fan

Interview respondents all agree that being a loyal fan entails wearing apparel and purchasing team related items. Even making a conscious effort just to watch your one team play on television is considered making an effort. These items and behaviors are significant to NFL fans because they indicate your positioning as a fan and what team you support. This is important because each team and its fan following has unique cultural symbols and rituals that make them distinguishable from fan groups that support different NFL teams. The symbolic representation that a fan puts forth expresses to others that they observably support an NFL team or player, with team related apparel acting as the greatest form of expression when it comes to franchise loyalty (Laverie and Arnett 2000). Brad talks about his NFL apparel routine when he was going to school growing up.

> I would, if the Vikings won on a Sunday, that following Monday I would make
> sure to wear my Cris Carter, John Randle, Rich Gannon, I actually had a Rich
> Gannon jersey. But, every Monday I'd be wearing that jersey and every Friday I'd
> be wearing a sweater or a hoodie to school.

Brad suggests that he would wear this kind of clothing in places where he could be observed, which agrees with the majority of interview respondents that claim they intentionally will wear a jersey or team apparel to places where they can be seen. Respondents also report that when they wear a jersey or other team related clothing in public it becomes a camaraderie thing, even if you do not know someone they instantly become approachable because they are a fan of the team that you mutually support. Douglas explains how when he is watching his favorite NFL team in a

public setting he feels like he is a part of the teams fan group when he is wearing their jersey, and even seeks out others that represent the same team.

> Aw, you know, it's, I would say, when it's the same team, I mean like I said, it goes back to that camaraderie thing. I mean, you know, you go like for example, tonight we're going if we go to the bar or whatever, when you wear that Vikings jersey you feel like you are a part of something. So, obviously if they are not wearing a Vikings jersey you don't know what they're, um, who their support goes to. So if they are not wearing the Vikings jersey they're not like calling it out, hey I'm a Vikings fan! But if they are, Vikings make a touchdown, you just turn around, who the hell's wearing a Vikings jersey?! Lets fucking high five!

The importance of expressing your support for a team stems from the significance of cultural symbols like team logos, colors, and so forth. Fans place importance on those symbols and use them as a way of distinguishing themselves from other fan groups. There are clear differences in the symbols a fan group deems important along with the cultural norms values they adhere to. When comparing NFL fan groups, each franchise following has its own unique location and cultural elements like chants, cheers, team affinity, and so forth. Whatever team you physically represent indicates which NFL fan group you belong to and your position within NFL fan culture.

The NFL influences groups of people to form the unique fan cultures that are observed across the United States. Wearing team clothing, accessing NFL media, watching the news, conversations with other fans, seeing a bumper sticker, or listening to the radio are all ways that the NFL enters visibility in daily life. The men I interviewed feel that this influence is continuing to expand and grow even further. The NFL has assumed a normative role in American social life, where people feel that society is accepting of NFL fans, fantasy football players, and all together those that devote much of themselves to professional football. In fact, having an affiliation with the NFL as a traditional fan or as a fantasy football player generally help enhance social bonds

with others that share that interest. Essentially, having an interest in the NFL is a way that people can relate to others. Patrick explains how he feels the NFL draws people together as a form of entertainment and the influence of the fantasy football is helping the NFL itself grow.

> I think that the brand is larger than it has ever been now because of fantasy football and the relationships that it builds. Because everyone likes getting together... we are human social creatures, and the NFL does that, it brings people together. That's what it's meant to do. It's not a, uh, you know, it wouldn't be so popular unless people loved it and were obsessed with it

Patrick suggests that the incorporation of fantasy football into the subculture of NFL fans has added a unique element that was not observed among traditional NFL fan groups. Participants claim that the NFL has changed for them since they were introduced to fantasy football and that it has become a significant part of NFL culture. Jack explains the scale of fantasy football within NFL culture and his perspective on its presence.

> [Fantasy football is] big not only just in size, but the fan base is enormous. The people that play fantasy is enormous and growing. Um, just to see how big a part of the culture it is, I think that has been hit home by fantasy football

Fantasy football creates an opportunity to compete with other NFL fans using the vicarious accomplishments of the NFL athletes. This is what study participants expressed as a critical difference between being a traditional NFL fan and a fantasy player, that fantasy football brings an added relevance to each week of NFL play through competition. This progressive perspective of NFL fans has helped create significant changes within the NFL, influencing how people interact with the game and the choices fans have when it comes to their experience.

Playing fantasy football prompts a change in NFL fans after they begin to participate in a league. The traditional fan is generally most loyal to one NFL team, and the fantasy football players that I interviewed express that their loyalty has changed since becoming a fantasy franchise owner. Eight out of the ten men told me their loyalty has shifted from their NFL team

that they traditionally support over to the celebrity athletes that play on their fantasy football

team. This is hugely significant because traditional fans are considered intensely loyal to their

preferred NFL team considering the deep emotional connection present. The experience of

fantasy football has created fans of the entire NFL and players from all teams, which provides

additional reasons to watch other teams each week and focus on aspects of the league that reside

outside of a preferred team. Having a reason for being interested in the entire NFL as opposed to

one team motivates fans to be involved with the NFL even when their team is not playing or

playing poorly. What this has done is create a subculture of fans that see and experience the

NFL differently. Brad explains the conflict of interest that he experiences as a loyal fan of his

favorite NFL team the Minnesota Vikings. He elaborates on how fantasy football has influenced

a change in his loyalty as an NFL fan.

> One of the things I realized is how much I pay attention to football or my fantasy team. Another thing it made me realize is how much my original viewpoint has changed. For example, like I never ten years ago, I never woulda thought about picking up a player who is playing against the Vikings that would benefit me from cheering against the Vikings in any way shape or form. And now, like over the last couple of years, I look at the Vikings past defenses and if that quarterbacks available I don't care if I have Aaron Rodgers playing, I wouldn't consider starting the other quarterback because he's playing against the Vikings defense. It's an opportunity that week, so those are things I've realized that, yeah, those things have changed because there is a conflict of interest being an NFL fan of a specific team and a fantasy football player or a team owner.

Brad expresses that his loyalty has changed from never thinking of starting a player against his

favorite team to taking a more objective approach by identifying weaknesses within his team and

acting in the interest of his fantasy football team. Admittedly, fantasy football players become

emotionally attached to their fantasy football team(s) and players, much like a fan becomes

emotionally attached to their NFL team. This is not to say their traditional fan attachment to their

favorite NFL team disappears, but rather fantasy football affects the traditional fan role by

adding reasons to develop attachments to specific players across teams that are on their fantasy

rosters. This is at least partly attributed to the competition of fantasy football, how each franchise

owner creates a personally tailored team, placing their NFL knowledge and team management

skills in competition against other franchise owners.

A prerequisite to join a fantasy football league is an interest in NFL football. Leagues are

now almost exclusively played online, which provides players with a much different experience

in comparison to the pre-online fantasy football leagues that were explained earlier. Fantasy

football has observably evolved with technology in recent years considering the availability of

the internet and computers access. The team management aspects of the game are all accessed

online. The website platforms are there for players to log on to and manage their virtual

franchises, with the most commonly used websites being ESPN.com and Yahoo.com. The

hosting of fantasy football online allows participants ready access to their team(s), statistics, and

other NFL news. The websites also coordinate the weekly competitions among franchise owners,

where study participants relate the experience to playing for a sports team through a form of

athletic competition that requires no physical involvement. Frank talks about the way he sees the

competitive elements of fantasy football and the added relevance that playing fantasy football

provides him concerning the NFL

> Well, obviously it's another form of competition, more so a lazy competition. I
> don't have to do anything you know what I'm saying? If you just want to know
> the truth, that's exactly why it is, so I can talk crap to my friends without actually
> having to do any physical things because they could probably beat me in all of
> them. But I mean also, I mean, playing fantasy football makes every game matter.
> Every football game. You know what I mean? It makes you want to watch every
> football game. On a Sunday, you will find me right here, [and for] reference I am
> sitting on my couch

For players, fantasy football becomes an exciting way that NFL fans can enhance their experience with the game. It is apparent that playing fantasy football offers something different to fans in comparison to the traditional fan role. Traditional NFL fans limit their exposure and support within the league, where in fantasy football you are still a fan of your team but also the players on your fantasy squad. Your franchise is something that you take personal ownership of and through participating you apply the knowledge that you gather to your franchise. Playing fantasy football involves actively creating and implementing teams into competition based on that knowledge through the discretion of the franchise owner.

Fantasy football players experience an element of competition using a team that they create which requires occupying roles associated with owning and managing a successful team. They take on the responsibilities of a franchise owner, which entails personnel management, player analysis, news analysis, and head coaching. What fantasy football has successfully done is create a competitive arena for NFL fans that desire a more active role in their interest, where they are able to experience the NFL from a different vantage point and create a more in depth connection with the league as a whole. Frank describes the impact being a fantasy football player has had on his relationship with the NFL. He makes a good comparison concerning what it used to be like as a fan before fantasy football.

> It's more entertaining because it's not just one game you're looking at with just like the Vikings. It's just like, oh the Vikings are done, ok cool I don't care anymore. I just cannot wait to see the next game, the Sunday night game, the Monday night game, check in what's it called live stat tracker during all the games

Fantasy participants express that the NFL becomes a bigger part of your life when you are a fantasy football player, where every week in the NFL matters because you likely have a stake in nearly every NFL game. Part of what also makes leagues appealing to play in is the gambling

aspect of fantasy football. Most fantasy football leagues require an upfront fee for participation

and allocate the league winnings to the highest performing teams. Players feel that this adds even

further to the competitive element of fantasy football, where the potential to win money acts a

motivation to dedicate themselves to their teams. Patrick describes the gambling aspects of

fantasy football, explaining the way that players can make money from their leagues.

> You're winning one way or another. At least you can make money off of this I
> guess, I mean there's a way to put together your best team that you think is the
> best with the people that are available to you. Make the best team available and
> we'll give you money. I mean that's just the way it goes I guess, that's how the
> game works

To create the best fantasy football team possible it requires being a successful team manager.

Patrick suggests that the gambling is a natural part of fantasy football, where putting together the

best team possible equates to financial reward.

Within competitive elements like vicarious team performance and the possibility of

financial gain, there is another significant part of the fantasy football experience. Because

participants are placing their teams in competition with others in their league, it creates a

motivation to be better than the other player and assume league dominance. It becomes clear now

why some people are motivated to be fantasy football players, how there is an allure of

dominance in connection to the masculine competitiveness observed in sports. Because this is a

progressive form of NFL activity that can require a great deal of time and information, it comes

as no surprise that fantasy football is a common topic of conversation among NFL fans.

Engaging in fantasy football related conversations are common for participants, with these

conversations taking place between others that play both in and outside of their leagues. The

subject of fantasy football itself is said to be a reason that men can socially connect with one

another and stay in touch with people that share a common interest. The next section provides

information on the social experiences of NFL fans and fantasy football creating an added

element within these relationships that result in a unique experience that is distinguishable from

traditional NFL fans.

Social Relationships

Traditional NFL fans and those that became fantasy football players occupy roles that

provide opportunities for social interaction and membership into a social group. As explained in

the previous section, the team that an NFL fan supports is significant to the extent that fans will

generally interact with one another based on their team affiliation. The mere proclamation of

support to a specific team is enough to be considered a part of that fan group, where traditional

fans of all NFL teams are able to declare their membership as a fan. Membership to an NFL team

group is largely informal and open to those that represent themselves in accordance with a

team's fan culture. Although there are formal NFL fan clubs, the vast majority of traditional fans

do not formally affiliate themselves with an organized group. Instead, fans can publicly display

their support for a team to declare their membership. The word camaraderie is repeatedly used as

a way of describing how it feels to be a part of something like an NFL fan group. Douglas

explains how he perceives the camaraderie that fans have among each other.

> ... like I said, it goes back to that camaraderie thing. I mean, you know you go like
> for example, tonight...if we go to the bar or whatever, when you wear that Vikings
> jersey, you feel like you are a part of something

Anyone that can be identified as a part of a team's fan group is welcomed as a loyal follower,

regardless of if they have a historical connection with a team or not. Proclaiming your support

for an NFL team is what connects you to others, even complete strangers. Preference for a team

is considered something that all NFL fans have in common. Fans that follow the same team will

mutually support each other and collectively advocate for their team's success. Andrew describes

the connection he has with other Vikings fans at home games. "Yeah I mean, if you're at like a Vikings game, it's just like I said earlier you're friends with everyone, everyone who is a Vikings fan." The connection present among group members is part of what motivates fans to seek out locations where they can find other members of their fan group, like a home field venue or public place where like fans congregate. Because an NFL fan is considered an insider into the team culture they support, it invites certain social privileges like friendly social exchanges or even being invited to social gatherings that involve watching your favorite NFL team. Douglas explains how after his team scores a touchdown at his favorite sports bar, he simply looks for other fans that belong to his group. "[If the] Vikings make a touchdown, you just turn around [and look for] who the hell's, who's wearing a Vikings jersey?! Let's fucking high five!" This is another example of how a bond among group members exists, where simply a mutual team affiliation generally invites friendly social exchanges.

The way that traditional fans differentiate between one another is through the use of observable symbols that announce your group affiliation. Fan groups across the NFL are divided in the sense that their team logos and cultures are designed to be unique. Each teams fan following represents its own unique location, culture, and symbols. This creates significant differences among NFL fan groups, depending on what team you support, you have different social experiences as a fan. An excellent place to observe this phenomenon is at NFL games. NFL games are typically what traditional NFL fans premise social events and gatherings upon. Games and NFL related social gatherings are where the majority of fan interaction takes place, with games offering a unique experience that act as a source of appeal for NFL fans. The energy of games is part of what is considered enticing, something that fans feed off of and have a hard time replicating anywhere else. Patrick describes his experience going to historic Lambeau field,

home of the Green Bay Packers. He describes his feelings concerning what it is like to attend an

NFL game there.

> Well, what comes to mind when you ask that question is my little trip to Lambeau
> field in 2009 when Brett Favre returned to layeth the smack down upon the
> Packers. Let me tell you what, there is nothing like an NFL game day in a town
> that is charged with the NFL. Um, say what you want I hate Green Bay more than
> anybody, but they really have the best home game atmosphere.

Location and team affiliation seem to be the greatest determinant of what kind of social

experience fans will have. For example, you will find more fans of the Miami Dolphins in the

city of Miami, therefore creating the likelihood of greater social interaction with Dolphins fans at

an event in Miami. Fans of the home team at their home venue are welcomed regardless.

Conversely, attending away games or events with fans of rival NFL teams, study participants

reported consistent examples of negative interactions between the different groups.

Some event locations are hospitable and welcoming while others are hostile. Fans in

hostile or rival locations will remind you that you are not a part of their group simply based on

their dislike for your group and symbolic affiliation, similar to when fans of rival teams interact

in a fantasy football context. This is an example of the cultural clash between groups, where two

teams that consider themselves rivals are most apt to dislike attributes of their respective

cultures. This often comes in the form of verbal or gestural exchanges. Patrick shares another

story about his trip to Lambeau field. Because he is a Vikings fan and considered a rival of the

Packers, fans of the home team reminded him that he was an outsider.

> [The Packers] really have the most awful fans that will remind you at all times
> that they don't like you and they will do whatever it takes to remind you just
> because of your allegiance to a certain team. I had old ladies in the stands cussing
> at me, call me a whore and calling Brett Favre a whore. Calling him a two timer,
> not to mention having beers poured on me. But, when we were winning and then
> we won I was really the smart one.

Most respondents were able to identify instances of negative experiences that stem from NFL

fans from rival groups. There were many examples of negative verbal exchanges between rival

fans, which were largely attributed to excessive alcohol consumption. Alcohol consumption

seems to be a cultural norm among all NFL fan groups and a potential source of conflict. The

rivalries between fans stems from the strong emotional attachments they have with their team,

which can result in strong reactions in a competitive environment. Brad describes his perception

of other NFL fans and some instances he has experienced concerning fans from outside groups.

> I wouldn't say negative just because there were a lot of people who were really
> nice, there were just the select few who've had too much to drink and you are
> wearing a Vikings jersey, and they hate Brett Favre and they hate the Vikings and
> they will go out of their way to be assholes. That's just a select few. But when I
> was in Carolina people were being obnoxious, having fun, but they are supporting
> their team. I'm in their territory and I'm wearing my jersey, I am a visitor in their
> area, so it's more me knowing to keep my mouth shut

Brad is cognizant of the potential for negativity among rival fans and chooses to avoid it. Despite

the potential for the negative experiences described here, the men I interviewed unanimously

agree that participating in NFL events as fans is an overall positive experience. The experience

of participating in an NFL event as a fan of your favorite team is sought after by traditional fans

and fantasy football players to the extent that a few negative experiences are not enough to deter

them from remaining a fan.

Many of the positive experiences reported in this study illustrate the connection that NFL

fans have with each other considering the common ground they share as fans of professional

football. Of course the experiences interacting with fans of your own group at a home game will

be more positive, but there are many examples of positive experiences at away events also.

Patrick explains the differences that he notices when traveling to watch his favorite team at away

venues. He provides an excellent description of how fan cultures are different, including how

fans can still be friendly with one another despite representing rival groups.

> Well the Chargers stadium they are totally different. In San Diego, they take a much more relaxed approach to their game, they take it more like tailgating. That's why they go there to party outside and to chill, be together as a family. Not to mention Green Bay is like that too, people let you pull up on their lawn and you can party with them. They'll let you into their houses and let you go to the bathroom in their house. They don't even know you, you're just parking on their lawn and you could be a fucking killer. But that's people from Wisconsin, it's just its unbelievable, ya dude I hung out with these people, they didn't know me and I didn't know them. They just fed me hot dogs and even though I was wearing a purple Favre jersey, which you know saying that is pretty good that they were nice to me and they didn't have to be, they could have keyed my car. But in other settings like being in a big bar situation where you're watching a game with probably a hundred, two-hundred fans from each side like a border battle or something, there's nothing else like it because fans are pretty interesting. They have their beliefs, everyone does and they don't change that very well.

Despite the division among fan groups, negativity can be isolated to a few instances and overall

there are more examples of tolerance among fans. Winning and losing can be highly influential

on the social climate of NFL events and impact the social interaction between fellow or rival

fans. Winning promotes positivity and greater interaction among fellow fans, and losing the

opposite. Winning can also create greater social interaction among rival fans, in situations like

fans choosing to make a point that their team is doing better. Andrew explains what the social

climate is like when he goes to home games for his favorite team the Minnesota Vikings.

> Yeah I mean, if you're at a Vikings game it's just like I said earlier you're friends with everyone, everyone who is a Vikings fan. And it's really the game is the, for example if you were at a game with a few people and the Vikings were doing great and they were winning, maybe you are more into it and you talk to more Vikings fans. But, if they are losing bad you wouldn't care and you would leave at the third quarter, you wouldn't be as happy.

The collective sentiments of fans at an event are significant given its ability to alter the nature of

the social environment. The men from this study all agree that they would not be NFL fans if

their experiences weren't something that they deem positive. Because the NFL proves to be a

positive influence in their lives, it makes sense that some fans desire to get a closer and more involved experience with their interest.

Just as the role of NFL fans harbor the possibility of social interaction; fantasy football leagues effectively take the social experiences of traditional fans and incorporate the added element of fantasy football. Since all of the men from this study started off as traditional NFL fans and then became fantasy football players, they were able to describe what it is like to occupy both roles and identify differences between them. There are similarities and differences concerning the types of social relationships and social interactions that occur among fantasy football players in comparison to traditional NFL fans. Fantasy football acts as its own common ground, where participants will interact with other participants simply because they are a part of the fantasy culture. Frank describes the affect fantasy football has on his social relationships and how it becomes a common topic of conversation.

> I think it enhances it, you know, in a way. Even in the families, like my cousin is crazy about fantasy football. I mean we talk so much shit to each other, but its fun, you know every time we're together with our family during football seasons we talk about fantasy football with the guys. It just gives you another common ground thing that if you didn't have it, what would we be talking about? I dunno, probably some other things, but it totally dominates conversations with the people in the groups that I'm in leagues with when we're together during the football season. Fantasy football talk dominates conversations

Fantasy football players do not have any way of symbolically representing themselves as fantasy players like traditional NFL fans do. Rather, they still represent themselves as traditional NFL fans but declare that they are fantasy football players through social exchanges among NFL fans. Despite a lack of observable declaration, fantasy football players possess their own unique cultural elements that make them unique from traditional NFL fans. Cultural factors like the pre-season draft, fantasy football jargon, team ownership, management obligations, and statistical

prowess all contribute to the unique fantasy football identity. Jack describes social interaction

that is premised on fantasy football. NFL information is paramount to participants and the

success of their teams, which impact the nature of discussions among players.

> Yeah, I think [fantasy football is] a topic for discussion. Like, who do you have
> on your fantasy team? Or someone volunteers that information and then you talk
> about how your team is doing, and I don't want to say strategies, but I think that is
> the word. You know, any strategies you could have moving forward

Information concerning the NFL and its players are what fantasy football players are after. This

helps explain the social interaction among participants, how it is premised on the gathering of

information with examples being watching games, discussing their fantasy teams, and staying up

to date on relevant NFL happenings.

League members are brought together by the mutual interest in engaging in statistical

competition using NFL players, but they are also drawn to each other because everyone has

something at stake in these leagues. This could come in the form of a participant's reputation as a

knowledgeable franchise owner or the fee that all players are generally required to pay up front

in order to participate. Jack shares his perspective on what it is like to occupy the role of a

fantasy football player

> Yeah I mean, [fantasy football is] just another reason to have a vested interest. It's
> giving money on the game essentially but in a more abstract way. You build a
> team where you're accumulating points rather than just putting five bucks on the
> game. I think it's a way to make that same amount of interest go league wide. You
> know, you're watching all these different games and checking these scores, it's a
> routine. When I get back, um, I've got school commitments on Sunday so I don't
> get to watch the games this semester. But, then I come back and you know go
> through the scores of the day, watch the highlights

The result of having common behaviors and perspectives helps distinguish the role of a fantasy

football player in comparison to traditional NFL fans, where others that play in the league

consider you connected through the common activity of fantasy sports. Playing in a league with

someone helps people familiarize themselves with each other by providing reasons to stay in touch socially. Reasons include discussing relevant league happenings and franchise matchups as the season progresses. In fact, the majority of men from the study agree that simply playing in a league with someone is enough to consider each other friends. This is similar to the camaraderie among fan groups, where fantasy football participants exhibit the same feelings and sense of belonging that fans of NFL fan groups do but without the division among fans that is caused by group affiliation. There are no teams within fantasy football that could create a group rivalry like what's seen in the NFL, instead every participant owns a team and places it into competition against others. This creates an individualized perspective in the sense that you are the only advocate for your team and assume all of the control. The competition of these individual teams helps welcome further social relationships with other team owners. Brad explains what it was like being a newcomer to a league and then becoming comfortable with the other guys in his league.

> The league that I'm in with some of my college guys, I originally started only knowing a couple of the guys cuz I mean they were a bit older than me. So I got to know them a little bit more personally through fantasy football, and then it's kind of funny because now I feel comfortable enough after a couple of years talking smack to these guys. As of four years ago all I knew about them was their name. Now we've, we talk smack, we set up trades, we team up on other guys

The creation of new social connections is a possibility for league participants, where conversations can start from a common interest in fantasy football. New connections that develop generally come in the form of being a new player in a league, but they can also occur among strangers when fantasy football is brought up in casual conversation and a common interest is expressed. Having a mutual interest is said to make social interaction easier among friends and strangers alike, which is attributed to the perception that they are all competitors in some way. The workplace is an excellent example of this phenomenon in action. The men from

the study were all employed at the time of their interviews, reporting that they either presently

play in a league at work or know of one.

Fantasy football leagues are starting to become more common in work settings, where all

study participants that their coworkers at least know they are fantasy football players.

Participants express that their leagues are a common topic of conversation among co-workers

regardless of whether they play in a league together or not. Further, the workplace is a setting

that players can routinely access fantasy football related media during the season. Darren

describes the role of fantasy football at his place of work and the affects that it has on his

relationships with coworkers.

> It's common for people at my work to talk to me about fantasy football even
> though we're not in the league. I talk about my league, they talk about their
> league. Most of the people are in several leagues that I work with and, you know,
> so we definitely just overall talk more about the NFL because we know that we're
> involved with fantasy football even though we're not in the same league. There's
> a couple of guys that are also not in the work league and even then we talk fantasy
> football together even though we are still in separate leagues. It enhances our
> relationship as coworkers; it enhances our relationships as NFL fans to be more
> informed with the other guy's opinion in that regard

Darren points out that fantasy football is a way that co-workers connect with each other, creating

something in common that might not exist otherwise. He explains how playing in a league

encourages social interaction between colleagues regardless of league affiliation, with social

interaction often premised on information concerning improving their teams and the performance

of their players. In most cases, fantasy football leagues are well established at the workplace and

seemingly incorporated into the culture. This can be a point of controversy because four of the

men interviewed indicated that they were aware that it impacts their productivity at work, with

two out of those four explaining that it has been a point of controversy in their office. Frank

explains how fantasy football has affected his workplace and his own media related consumptive

behaviors.

> My bosses say production has gone down and they even talk to us. Our boss like
> sent this big email saying "hey let's keep the fantasy football talk to a minimum",
> cuz we're not just looking online for stuff we're all talking about it and it is still
> affecting us working [laughs]

Men are generally the most involved in fantasy football leagues at work, although all interview

participants reported that women play in these leagues also. Because the men and women

playing in work leagues are colleagues, the social behaviors that participants exhibit are tailored

to their audience. Chad has a work league with co-workers and clients. He suggests that he takes

into consideration the context of work within his behaviors on the league website.

> I am say, in my work league where I play with clients, that one I am going to be a
> little bit more you know, borderline and say 'making it Wayne' which is still
> clever but it's not on the racy side

Chad's use of the team name 'making it Wayne' refers to the phrase 'making it rain', which

means accumulating extremely high scores. He replaces 'rain' with 'Wayne' because the wide

receiver from the Indianapolis Colts, Reggie Wayne, is on his team. Using a team name like this

is considered non-offensive to others and is done as an effort to remain professional and avoid

making offensive comments. I found that in all situations, league participants will take into

account their audience when communicating with league members.

Active participants in fantasy football leagues will utilize a number of mediums when it

comes to communication with one another. Although the league website is used to manage

teams, post bulletin messages, or send messages to other players, the vast majority of interview

respondents indicate that they prefer other communication mediums like email, text messaging,

phone calls, or face to face interaction. Andrew describes his rationale when it comes to

contacting someone from his fantasy league.

> Well yeah. That just mostly depends on how good you know them you know. If it's one of my close buddies I will call him and be like "oh you're going down" or maybe be like "oh hey we should hang out this weekend, maybe we should watch football we are playing each other in fantasy"

The medium that players select is contingent upon a variety of factors. When you see someone

from your league frequently or are close friends with them to begin with, players will most often

talk face to face, over the phone, through text messages, or email. If people are geographically

displaced, the primary forms of communication then become email, text messaging, or league

websites. Chad describes how he communicates with other league members.

> A lot of [communication among league members] is in person. But even so, a fair amount is over email. With college buddies that I don't see that often a lot of it, I mean its all email. I think a lot of it has to do with we'll set up one email chain at the beginning of the year and then everybody just responds to that same chain

There was a pattern of how different mediums were used for different forms of communication.

The daily communication among players overwhelmingly took place outside of the league

website. The league websites acts as a public forum with a message board and messaging

capabilities. The board is typically used to post brief messages or to inform users of league

happenings like trade offers, rule changes, and so forth. Players lack a reason for logging on

many times because any messages, postings, or changes are generally forwarded to their personal

email accounts.

The league website is still a significant part of the fantasy football player experience

considering that's where you manage your team and where players create profiles. The fantasy

franchise owners all start with a generic profile that has a blank profile picture and the option to

create a team name. The profile is what is visible to others in the league when they access the

league website, and participants are free to amend their profiles as the website allows. Although

the majority of interview respondents expressed that their profile was not significant to other

players in their leagues, they conversely articulated that their profiles were generally set up in

ways that were humorous, represented who they were as an NFL fan, and in ways that sent

messages to others in their league. Darren describes his fantasy football profile along what he has

observed concerning other player profiles.

> My profile is pretty basic, I've tried to really focus on the team itself I guess than
> my profile. I guess I've changed my image a couple of times, changed my name a
> couple of times, right now its team ritch, pretty generic. People can get very
> sophisticated with their names, people change their names frequently and some
> don't change them as much as others.

Darren's use of the name 'team ritch' refers to his nickname among his friends. Frank describes

how he sets up his fantasy football profiles, using the names of professional wrestlers as a way

portraying his team as good.

> I used to have a bunch of different names and all that stuff, and for some reason I
> got in this thing a few years ago where I was doing pro wrestlers. And so, my
> team name would be like "the million dollar man" and I have a picture of Ted
> Debiase. You know, because my one buddy likes wrestling and it gave me an easy
> way...I'm not super creative, like some people make some really funny names but
> I just thought it was fun to do that. Now this year, for the last two years it's kind
> of pathetic, [my team name is] Mr. Perfect, which is for me one of the greatest
> fantasy football names ever just because when your team is doing awesome, and
> with a picture of Kurt Hennig; Mr. Perfect

There are two main ways that players can design their profiles; by creating the name of their

team and using an avatar or picture. Team names were either geared to represent the franchise

owner himself or used to be in humorous or clever ways by making a play on words or mocking

an opponent. The name of a person's fantasy football team can also change as the season

progresses. Profile pictures were described as largely consisting of cultural symbols like

celebrities, NFL players, humorous images that suggest dominance over an opponent, or even

left blank all together. Examples of profile pictures are Vikings fans using photos of their rival,

the Green Bay Packers, quarterback Aaron Rodgers being tackled aggressively, Vikings fans

using pictures of celebrity athletes like Randy Moss scoring a touchdown when he played for

their team, and even popular culture figures like the professional wrestlers Frank mentions. In

most cases, there was some connection to the profile pictures used, the team names, the franchise

owners themselves and their position as NFL fans. Brad talks about how he manages his profiles

appearance, using it as a way to mock rival Green Bay Packer fans that play in his fantasy

football league.

> So, the majority of my friends were Packer fans and it was such a heartbreak for
> them to see Favre playing for them, so my fantasy name was "Got Favre?" So just
> like those, I have team names geared towards the group I'm with, whatever it is to
> piss them off

Players will take into account their audiences when altering their team names and appearances,

much like they do in workplace leagues. The profile acts as a symbol of your virtual team, but

despite this all ten men interviewed declared that the players on their fantasy football team(s) and

the performance of their team(s) were more important than the appearance of their profile.

The performance of your fantasy team is what feeds the competitive elements present

within fantasy football leagues and helps prompt social interaction among league members.

Being a part of a fantasy football group results in an NFL fan experience that is unique in

comparison to traditional NFL fans. Fantasy football incorporates elements into the fan

experience that ultimately provides a one of a kind journey through the NFL season that has an

impact on the social relationships and behaviors of participants. There were instances of social

relationships being impacted both positively and negatively as a result of the social interaction

among league members, which I will highlight in the final section that deals with masculinity

and emotions. A significant difference in fan behavior after becoming a fantasy football player is the elevated level of media consumption. The next section explains the change that traditional fans experience concerning their consumptive behaviors and the implications that it presents on the NFL fan experience.

Media Consumption

Media is a significant driving force that has helped make the NFL an influential sports entity in the United States. The public is exposed to large volumes of NFL related images and messages due to games being broadcasted for national audiences, often during what are considered prime time hours. Traditional NFL fans can watch their favorite teams play on these nationally televised broadcasts that air on Thursday, Sunday, or Monday. This chapter describes how fans that become fantasy football players engage in elevated levels of media consumption. This has an effect on the NFL experience a fan has along with the level in which the NFL is incorporated into a fantasy football player's daily life. There are numerous ways of accessing NFL media in the present day and fantasy participants are shown to employ a variety of mediated technologies in pursuit of a more connected NFL experience.

Since traditional NFL fans typically limit their televised game intake to their favorite team and high profile games, there is a great deal of NFL media that is broadcasted concerning the other teams in the league that they largely ignore. All ten of the men interviewed claim that since starting to play fantasy football, their level of media consumption has increased significantly in comparison to being a traditional fan. Fantasy football leagues encourage participants to devote a great deal of time to the NFL as a whole due to the league wide focus

present and the fans desire to be closer to the game. Darren explains his media consumption

before he started playing fantasy football.

> Well, I remember watching the Vikings on TV all the time, and certain events of
> them losing all the time, I was still a fan and I always seem to stick by them. I
> guess ya know, I've seen a lot of good guys traded in the past but you know
> we've had a lot of opportunities, and the Vikings have been the team that I've
> followed. They are the local team and I support the local team

A more intimate NFL experience is accomplished through fantasy football players becoming

well versed in the finer aspects of professional football or details that traditional fans might find

mundane or uninteresting. This includes factors like positional matchups, off the field events,

personnel changes, injury status, and the overall state of all NFL teams. Becoming familiar with

this information requires players to conduct research as a way of bolstering their overall NFL

knowledge.

The resources that participants utilize are televised and online media, where watching

more games and accessing NFL websites is considered helpful in the pursuit of greater NFL

knowledge. Douglas describes how there are entire television shows on days that NFL games air

that devote themselves to fantasy football during peak viewing hours, such as Fantasy Football

Now on ESPN 2. This is a progressive phenomenon observed throughout the NFL viewing

experience as fantasy sports have become more influential.

> I feel that it's a huge market that's going to keep growing and growing and
> growing. I think it's going to eventually, they're so big now I mean now you look
> at ESPN 2 before, fantasy football now is ten thirty to noon. I mean its huge, it
> used to be magazines that were hard to find, and then it started coming with the
> internet a little more, and then they used to have fantasy football in the morning
> from like eight to nine, but they don't want to take away from prime time
> television. Well, now since it's so big, from ten to noon they have a channel
> devoted to fantasy football. They have radio stations that are for fantasy sports.
> Um, its huge, I mean, there's no other way to put it besides the fact that it's grown
> to be such a big element in football

Fantasy players will watch more NFL games than traditional fans simply because they are

involved with other aspects of the NFL that reside outside of their favorite teams. In fact, the

fantasy football players I interviewed reported watching most if not all NFL games broadcasted

in a given week of game play. Douglas shares his typical consumptive habits as they relate to

NFL media. He describes some of his research behaviors and the amount of NFL games he

watches.

> [Researching online for] a couple of hours, and a half hour at work. And then,
> Sunday morning I probably spend about between ten to noon looking at [fantasy
> football website], making sure it's all right. It's all online, the only research I do is
> online. And then during football yesterday, I turned it on at noon and I sat down
> and watched football until about six [laughs]

Media consumption by fantasy football players goes far beyond watching games on television as

they are encouraged to employ other technological resources like smart phones and online

technologies as a way of gathering additional information that is useful within their leagues.

Accessing media is a daily occurrence during the football season for the majority of the men

interviewed, where they report using mediated technologies on a daily basis. The fantasy

football players that I talked to shared similar examples of their behavioral patterns much like

what Douglas reports, where consuming NFL media for hours on end daily is a common thing.

The organizations that provide NFL media to fans are starting to cater to the fantasy

football audience more and more. Speaking to television, there are additional media packages

that some players purchase that provides in depth coverage of NFL games tailored specifically to

the fantasy football audience, with the most frequently identified package being the NFL Red-

Zone. The NFL Red-Zone is a channel that viewers can purchase and highlights all NFL games

being played simultaneously and features every scoring play that takes place in the league. Since

fantasy football is centered on player statistical performance, you can see how a channel like this

would be appealing to participants. Patrick talks about his experience watching the NFL Red-Zone channel and how playing fantasy football has influenced his media consumption.

> It keeps me more involved, absolutely. Because then I have to watch all the games, you know, now I have to watch because you're playing f'ing dude. And some teams I would never watch and that's kind of why I got that Red-Zone thing, so it keeps me abreast of who I'm playing and what the dealio is you know.

There are a number of other ways that media providers can bring a fantasy football focused experience to viewing audiences. The internet is the central medium for game play and ESPN.com and Yahoo.com are identified as the most popular fantasy football platforms. Websites are a hugely popular way of accessing fantasy football media, where fantasy participants can read columns and opinions concerning fantasy league strategies and player reports. When watching NFL games, it is not uncommon for players to employ multiple technological mediums simultaneously because it helps keep them up to date with league events in real time. I talked to Patrick while he was watching NFL games on a Sunday afternoon. He described his routine when watching NFL games and how he keeps his fantasy football team up to date.

> Ya, it's the information age baby. I've got a tablet here with some statistics on it, I've got a picture on picture with NFL Red-Zone on it, and I've got the actual home game on one other screen, I have cell phone alerts, anything you can think of the keep my information flowing in

Players enjoy staying connected to NFL events as a way of keeping track of how their fantasy football team is doing; paying particular attention to events that could impact their team(s) performance. By remaining connected, players can make adjustments to their fantasy football teams as quickly as possible. This is as easy as going online and making any changes that a franchise owner deems necessary. Fantasy football players reported being consistently connected to or having ready access to NFL media during the course of their fantasy seasons.

The media that is consumed is so extensive by these players that the men I interviewed were able

to make brand or product associations from advertisements to the NFL, and at times the player

celebrities that endorse them. Darren describes his exposure to advertisements when watching

NFL games and identifies Budweiser as a frequently observed product.

> Well you definitely are exposed to a lot more advertising. You're always
> watching the game, you're watching other games where you may see increased
> amounts of advertising, so you're just influenced to buy those products even
> though you may not like them. I can't tell you how many times I've seen the Bud
> Light commercial; I mean I'm not even a Budweiser guy anymore. Its repeated
> messages that you see over and over again and being exposed to those constantly
> it probably does have some kind of influence

The NFL frequently airs advertisements during their games that generally appeal to men, like

beer, cars, and sports apparel. Patrick describes some of the commercials he sees when watching

NFL games and one in particular that is associated with the celebrity player, Adrian Peterson.

> If they're wearing Adidas or driving the Acura that's sweet. Adrian Peterson has
> that commercial where he's driving some sick car or something. I mean, I would
> never go buy that car or anything because Adrian Peterson is driving it but it's a
> pretty sweet commercial, I could just never afford that car

Advertisements are not limited to television or game broadcasts, but they can also be found on

professional football related websites and video games. This translates into a significant amount

of product advertisements that are being consumed through mediated technologies that are used

for entertainment purposes.

This elevated interest and intimate connection that fantasy football creates for

participants is seen as a form of entertainment, something that is supposed to be considered

leisurely and fun but competitive at the same time. The desire for accessing this kind of

connectivity to NFL media at such a high level is driven by the fantasy football players' interest

in knowing more about the NFL. By building a superior team and managing your franchise

throughout the course of a season, it creates the closer connection to the NFL in general through

fantasy football while contributing to the fun involved with being a franchise owner. Darren

explains why he started playing fantasy football and elaborates on some of the affects he has

experienced along with his justification for participating.

> I started playing because I thought it would definitely be fun, it would get me
> watching a little bit more of the games that I wasn't quite as interested in just
> because I had guys playing. I wanted to see how that teams doing, follow the
> other teams that were definitely going to impact maybe not even me but other
> people in the league. It just made it more fun really to stay involved.

Part of what makes fantasy football fun is showcasing your NFL knowledge and placing it in

competition with other fantasy league participants. Knowledge is reflected through the courses of

action a participant takes as a team manager, where acquiring certain players and placing them

into a contributing role is contingent upon the information a fantasy owner has concerning the

interests of his team. The competitive edge among players stems from seeking out and

consuming more NFL media and having conversations with other fantasy football players.

Knowing more about the NFL is only to your benefit as a franchise owner. Douglas explains

what makes playing in his fantasy football league fun and his perspective concerning what is

needed to be successful in a league.

> I mean, it's either going to be fun, it can be frustrating your first year. But the one
> thing you do really take out of this is you start learning more about, um, other
> teams and such. I always tell them that the biggest thing about fantasy football,
> what makes you good, is your depth of knowledge

Having increased knowledge of the league is a hugely significant aspect of creating and

managing successful fantasy football teams. This often means immersing yourself in added

amounts of media so you have the right information at the right time. Talking with other fantasy

football players is also considered a form of research, where players can exchange ideas and

strategies moving forward that they can incorporate into their own fantasy football schema. The

information that a player absorbs is only good if they know what to do with it and how it applies

to the success of their franchise. Making informed decisions is said to be a critical aspect of

being successful in fantasy football.

Because fantasy football leagues are scored based on individual player statistics, an in

depth knowledge is advantageous concerning the player celebrities that are chosen for a

respective fantasy football roster. In fantasy football, the top performing players are the most

sought after by franchise owners and are often the topic of conversation. The personal

connection that fantasy football participants develop with the player celebrities that are on their

team(s) is created by their contribution to your personal successes within a league. The

performance of the players directly contributes to the success of your franchise and outcomes

within leagues. Affinity for these players develops through picking them to be on your team and

being statistically productive. Brad illustrates how player celebrities are a central concern to

fantasy football players and how giving an affiliation with players from other teams can be

influential on a participant's consumptive behavior.

> You know it's just um, I think it's for each person it's kind of a similar thing, they
> think that they are an expert. For me personally it's just like, it give me a reason
> to watch a Cincinnati Bengals Cleveland Browns game, you know those games
> you could care less about any day of the year because they're both, Cincinnati had
> a decent season this year, but over the course of my life they have been horrible.
> So if you have, let's just say an Andy Dalton or Cedric Benson, I have Cedric
> Benson in one of my leagues super pick, then like I don't have anyone on
> Cleveland's team but let's just say I'd have Peyton Hillis and they are both
> starting. It gives me a reason to watch the game versus for the three o'clock game
> go and be productive

League participants make the connection that positive player production can equate to financial

gain for them, which can add to furthering their motivation to observe and study these players

throughout the season. Taking a strong interest in the player celebrities on your fantasy football

team(s) and other player's teams is what helps create a larger interest in the NFL in comparison to traditional sports fans, where positive performances will encourage fantasy football players to follow certain player celebrities more closely and see them as potential picks for their own teams. Darren explains how he has devoted a great deal of thought into placing certain players on his team and how poor performances by those players affect him and his perspective of the NFL.

> I would say, maybe has in some regard to the fact that, you know, I've really put a lot of thought into investing in certain guys when putting them on my team and they've really let me down. And that has been a life opening experience because you notice that maybe there's some other guys out there that you shoulda looked at closer than you really didn't even consider, because you were so invested in some guys that ended up getting injured or got in trouble with the law, you know, can't play now or various other influences that maybe they just didn't play or something changed, and even if they played they didn't play well. So it has really changed the way you think about the whole NFL in general, you really try to look at it on a much larger scale and try to learn about it as much as you can

The attention and effort that Darren describes concerning the players he places on his fantasy football team align with how the other men from the study described their experiences. As illustrated, there are large volumes of details and considerations that participants need to take into account when acquiring players and creating a lineup that has a chance to be successful.

It was clear that the men interviewed feel that their experience with the NFL has changed significantly since playing fantasy football with respect to media consumption, NFL knowledge, and connections with the entire league and its athletes. The media consumption among fantasy football players is elevated significantly in comparison to traditional NFL fans and the men I interviewed indicated that the activity of fantasy football is a source of encouragement to buy additional media packages, where the more NFL related media they can get in touch with the better. Subsequently, they are also exposed to a great deal more advertisements by NFL affiliated sponsors as a result. They did not necessarily indicate that they were buying more products as a

result of this elevated advertising exposure; rather they expressed a desire to purchase or gain access to more NFL media. Success in fantasy football leagues is a contributing factor to this, where it drives players to engage in behaviors like elevated media consumption that ultimately contribute to the success of their fantasy football team(s). A franchise owner's reputation in fantasy football is contingent upon their behaviors as a team manager and the successes of the franchise(s) that they put forth. The competition to be the best franchise owner invites competitive dialogue among players in a league. The next chapter looks at the competitive nature of fantasy football in further detail, illustrating the presence of masculinity and emotions within traditional fan groups and fantasy football leagues.

Gender and Emotion

The competitive nature of the NFL and fantasy football creates an environment where there is a significant presence of masculine behaviors. Interview respondents provided repeated instances of traditional fans making comments or gestures that coincide with masculine competitive behaviors when reflecting on their experiences with other fans. A similar phenomenon was reported within all male fantasy football leagues; where masculine laden interactions are prominent that would likely offend outside observers that represent groups outside of heterosexual men. Competition in sports seems to foster such masculine interaction. This creates an environment where there are certain social patterns surrounding the exertion of dominance among competitors and protocols concerning emotive displays. This section covers the presence of masculinity and emotions within traditional NFL fan groups and fantasy football leagues, where similarities and differences are drawn between the two subcultures. First, I review masculine elements found in traditional NFL fan social interactions as well as in all male fantasy

football leagues. I conclude with the emotional experiences fantasy football players experience

as a result of competition in comparison to the emotional experiences of traditional NFL fans.

Masculinity

My respondents see fantasy football as a form of competition without any physical

involvement, where the element of physical prowess within sports is replaced with extensive

NFL knowledge and fantasy football expertise. The masculine interaction and competitive

elements between fantasy football players and traditional fan groups contain both similarities and

differences, with the greatest difference between the two residing in the context in which they are

expressed. Traditional NFL fans do not personally create their team and place it into competition,

where fantasy football players are held individually responsible for the successes and failures of

their franchise(s). Brad describes his perspective concerning the competitive element that fantasy

football provides him.

> It just gives me, not necessarily *accomplishment* because I haven't done anything,
> but it puts a feather in my cap when I, you know, with the league with my friends
> and I can tell them hey I know more than you about football or I am better than
> you. It's a competitive advantage since I am no longer allowed to compete
> athletically anymore. Well, it's not that I'm not allowed to it's just that I'm too
> fat, old, and slow to do it. It makes me think that I still could and that I know
> more than you do. So, it's my way of competing against my friends when we are
> no longer athletically competing against each other

Sports are a realm where authority and power are endorsed (Gee 2009). This is something that

fantasy football leagues and traditional fan groups have in common, where in fantasy football

there is a desire to personally declare dominance over their opponents and traditional fans have a

desire for their team to beat another team. In both cases, the weekly competitions between NFL

teams and among fantasy football owners welcome the possibility of social exchanges in the

name of declaring dominance over one another. Reflecting on his traditional fan role, Douglas

describes the social interaction among his friends that are members of the fan group that supports

the Minnesota Vikings. He makes reference to the rival teams quarterback and assigns attributes

to that individual as a way of mocking his team and their fans.

> It's to the point where, to my friends that are also Vikings fans I, you know, tell
> them for example that Aaron Rodgers is gay, Aaron Rodgers loves penis. Well,
> things like that. Um, does he indeed? Probably not. I'm going to say probably not.
> But you know, with my friends it's like I just really, because of that rivalry in the
> sports

Douglas provides is an example of the masculine commentary among traditional NFL fans,

where fans of rival groups will assign certain attributes or characteristics to aspects of their rival

teams as a way of endorsing weakness in competition. Here, Douglas draws on connotations of

gay masculinity as less valued than other hegemonic forms (Connell 2008) to denigrate his

friend's favorite player. Much like the example Douglas provides concerning interaction among

rival fan groups, there are similar forms of social exchanges seen within fantasy football leagues.

Because fantasy football players are cognizant of the context of their league, the level of

masculine interaction varies greatly between leagues with colleagues and private all male

leagues. In contexts outside of work in leagues that are exclusively composed of men that are

friends, negative masculine commentary and 'smack talking' are commonplace among players.

Frank describes his perspective on the negative commentary that takes place between league

members.

> And a lot more, ah, ego is not the right word I'm looking for. You know, you beat
> your friend in fantasy football and you can talk shit to them, you know. For the
> whole next week, you know what I mean? Or, you win a season and you get to
> talk crap for the next eight months, it's the best feeling ever.

The declaration of dominance in these all male fantasy football leagues involves attacks that

attempt to feminize or lessen one's masculine status through verbal and written attacks on others,

which as Frank describes can carry on for extended periods of time. This is similar to the verbal

attacks reported by interview respondents among rival traditional fan groups that are used to

assign weakness to their opponents. Within the responses reported by study participants, there

were many examples of offensive sexist and homophobic language used between both fans that

support rival teams and among male dominated fantasy football league participants. The verbal

attacks reported among fantasy football players were similar to those among traditional fans, but

more personalized and in the context of each other's fantasy football teams.

Because the men that were being interviewed saw me as an insider, there were a great

deal of instances provided by all interview respondents of this kind of masculine commentary

taking place among fantasy league members. All of the men from this study play in or have

played in leagues that are exclusively composed of men, whether the league members are

friends, family, or even complete strangers. In all cases, male leagues that reside in a leisure

context contain examples of gendered language. Douglas shares an example of gendered

language when he was a newcomer to an all male league he became involved with through

friends.

> Yeah, and they're like hey, he's got a girlfriend named Jenna. So then all,
> everyone in the league changed their name to like, "I do Jenna", "Jenna's got
> herpes", and it's every team name had Jenna's name on there. I was like, well hell
> dude

This is another example of attempts by other league members to lessen another player's status by

assigning degrading labels to his girlfriend. Contrastingly, leagues among work colleagues are

thought to be made up of individuals that would possibly be offended by such social interaction,

where players are more apt to limit the amount of masculine exchanges that are observable by

other league members. The all male fantasy leagues that interview respondents described

involving social exchanges directed at the belittlement of other players can come from any

participant. Despite this, I found that positive team performances and savvy managerial moves within a fantasy football league are a reason why certain players posture these kinds of social attacks on others. This is similar to when traditional NFL fans teams are performing well, where they may be compelled to brag about their team. Both traditional NFL fans and fantasy football players are highly critical of their respective teams, and when their teams perform poorly they are subjected to critical or demeaning comments. In all male fantasy football leagues, these criticisms involve assigning degrading feminine and/or homosexual attributes that are directed at another franchise owner as a way of reminding them that their team did not perform well. Douglas read a mass email message that was being circulated between fantasy league members talking about each other's teams. This is a short excerpt from the message:

> How the fuck do you "almost" have a winning record? At least give yourself a chance of getting some degree of talent on that garbage squad you call tiny boobies. Might as well call it Neil's little sister. Nah, her rack is way nicer than your poor excuse for a starting line-up

Posturing masculine verbal attacks like this are a way that fantasy football players attempt to show that another league member's team is ill equipped for competition or weak. Douglas read me some more messages that were being exchanged between franchise owners over a mass email.

> So he goes, "You know, you got ten dollars for a hamburger? Shit, you gotta be out of your mind." So he goes, "Ah, I think that covers everything, everyone except P.C.", his name is P.C. "I can see you tapping your fat fingers reading this, wobbling your big head and chuckling how good your fantasy line-up is. But you know exactly what I'm saying when you piss another way. You're trying to be the self-proclaimed greatest fantasy football mind and not make the playoffs again. Go fuck each other, Webber. P.S. Welty is gay

When presented with these kinds of attacks, the other men in the league feel compelled to respond to them with their own similar attacks which create an ongoing exchange. The degrading dialogue directed at women and homosexuals are a source of entertainment and humor for these

men, and are largely considered part of the "bonding experience" among the league members. Andrew talks about what he considers the "best" parts of fantasy football. "Because [fantasy football is] fun, you know. The best parts of fantasy football is you talk to your friends, you make fun of them, and of course winning." These kinds of attacks using gendered language expressed by respondents was not reported anywhere near the level seen in fantasy football leagues among rival traditional NFL fan groups, making these types of personal attacks in male fantasy football teams unique.

The majority of men interviewed expressed that they find refuge from their children, wives/girlfriends, and the stresses of everyday life in the NFL and playing in their fantasy football leagues. Managing your team, engaging other league members in football conversations, and consuming NFL media are ways that men involve themselves in their interests in their own terms. Frank describes how fantasy football offers him an outlet that he uses to get away from the normal routines he experiences in daily living.

> It offers me kind of like; I guess an out of normal life in a way. I mean, like going to work and taking those breaks is just good on your brain you know what I mean? It just gets you thinking about other things that are not just like going to work, coming home, just watching TV, you know? Just doing the straight up normal routine for everything. It just gives you something else to put your mind into something else. It's a good release I would say

Women are generally perceived by these men to not like football and to not know anything about it, and are therefore not equipped to play in their fantasy football leagues. This creates the idea that fantasy football is a male activity, where "men can be men" without interruption. In fact, it is the perception of most of the men I interviewed that women require extremely distilled or basic versions of NFL related information in order for them to comprehend it. Brad describes his

perspective on most women and professional football, and how his sister is an exception to

stigmas surrounding women and football.

> For my sister it doesn't surprise me by any means because she's not your typical girl wearing stilettos, like if you think about the typical girl you think about the stilettos, the crazy hair, and dressing up. That's not my sister. She's a tomboy, definite tomboy, and it doesn't surprise me with her [knowledge] by any means. Now if you go back to some of our college colleagues, you'd be like "do you even know what football is? Do you even know what city the Minnesota Vikings play in?" So [playing fantasy football with them] would be like, really hell has frozen over.

Despite the negative commentary directed at women and the apparent stigmatized status they

represent among fantasy football players, the men I interviewed expressed that women becoming

interested in and participating in leagues is a growing trend. This comes with some prejudgments

though as players expressed that women who play fantasy football are thought to check their

teams less often and not know as much about the NFL, where incurring a loss to a women in a

fantasy football league would be troubling. Adrian explains what it is like to play with women in

fantasy football.

> A lot of them are girls that sign up to play, the one in my league she beat me. That's annoying. She hasn't looked at her team in ten weeks! She is going to make the playoffs and hasn't looked at her team in weeks!

Adrian suggests that he is bothered by a woman beating him in fantasy football because she is

not as involved in managing her team as he is in managing his own. Experiencing a loss in

fantasy football can be a difficult thing whether it comes from a man or a woman. This can often

result in negative emotional experiences for players, where winning creates the opposite. The

next section provides information about the emotional elements involved concerning traditional

NFL fans and fantasy football players.

Emotions

It is clear that fantasy football creates social interaction based on events that take place in the NFL and the performance of your fantasy football team(s). Within competitive settings and interactions among competitors, emotions can become a significant factor. Negative emotional experiences are felt by both traditional NFL fans and fantasy football players alike. As a traditional NFL fan, the team that you support most is generally is the team form the local geographic area, and when they perform poorly or experience a negative result in a season it evokes negation emotional reactions from fans. Andrew describes the emotional experiences he has had as a result of being a fan of the Minnesota Vikings.

> In my lifetime, I've seen four NFC championship losses, and the hardest ones to take were the '98 and '09 when we should've won. And that's what the Vikings have done to me my entire life, it's just like you think you know back to 2004 we, we were knocked out of the playoffs because a fourth and twenty-sixth at the five and eleven Arizona Cardinals. You have such a high emotional attachment to that team, and it's just like your high school girlfriend, she just breaks your heart. And then, you know, all you want to do is go home and literally almost cry yourself to sleep

Negative emotions are amplified in high stakes situations like playoff or championship games, where a poor performance by a traditional fan's team can spark a significant negative reaction. The same holds true for individual players from a fan's preferred team, where a poor performance on their behalf also has the potential of creating negative emotions. The men that I interviewed attribute the negative emotions that they experience in these situations to their emotional investment in their teams. Adrian elaborates on the negative emotional experiences that he has had with his favorite team the Minnesota Vikings. He talks about some of the high stakes games that he has observed and places a great deal of blame on the team's coach for the loss.

> Horrible [laughs], it really is. That last drive against New Orleans, that was heart wrenching because you finally have the hope that, finally going to get to see these

> guys in the super bowl in my lifetime. And then Childress fucks up, leaves too many players on the field and that forces him into the stupid call, and having Favre throw the time that it matters when it woulda been a makeable field goal. If he got stuffed, I mean they were in a dome! And we've got Longwell, I mean give him a shot or give A.P., the best running back in the NFL, give him a run. Just watching that was, that and '98, I was at the '98 game and that was worse just because I was so much more heavily vested in that team

Similar emotional experiences were reported by all of the fantasy football players interviewed, where if your team loses it can evoke negative feelings. At the end of Adrian's comment he alludes to a diminished connection that he has to his favorite team, which is credited to negative feelings he has toward his team based on their past performances and his involvement with fantasy football. I now turn to some of the significant differences in the emotional connections and experiences of fantasy football players in comparison to the experiences of traditional fans, illustrating the significance of a fan's fantasy football team over their traditional NFL team.

Fantasy football players experience negative emotions in a number of ways that traditional NFL fans do not. This is credited to the elements of league play that participants engage in and the personal connections that franchise owners have with the players they select for their team(s). Participants have a personal stake in the performances of their fantasy football team(s), where if their players do not perform well it reflects on their ability to identify talented players and manage their line-ups. Frank refers to his fantasy football as "his own team" and describes when his team performs poorly it negatively affects him. "Yeah, you have a team. Your fake little team of guys that you choose at the beginning of the year to represent you. And when they suck, it sucks!" When the players that a franchise owner picks do not perform well, it reflects negatively on the decision making and NFL knowledge of a participant. Further, poor performances invite harsh criticisms and masculine mocking from other players in your league like the ones described earlier in this chapter, which can be taken personally and result in hurt

feelings. Patrick points out that sometimes what other league members say to him about his team's performance upsets him but there isn't much he can do about it. "Oh, ya. It happens all the time. Personally, I mean it hasn't offended me or made me angry. I mean, some people what they say makes me angry but there is nothing that I can do about it." Negative emotions also arise when league members take things too seriously or accuse others of cheating. Brad talks about when he was accused of cheating by way of making trades with another league member as a way of bolstering his line-up and conspiring to split the winnings. He explains how that affected his relationship with the league member that accused him of cheating.

> Yeah, I was accused of doing that. And so, it kind of from that day on with this one person who stirred the pot and got everybody else against me, I don't want to say that it ruined our friendship but we really haven't talked in like, and anytime he's giving me a trade offer regardless of who it was I'm like, I'm not going to do anything to help you out at all

The majority of study participants reported that instances like this certainly have an effect on their relationship with others in the league, but not to the point where they were not willing to play fantasy football with them anymore. Franks describes how he feels about people that cheat in his league.

> Whether through setting up unfair trades as a way of stacking their line-up, you know, there's some people that take it further. Any way to try and win money I guess. It's more of an annoyance because then you have to take time out of your day to deal with somebody else trying to go around the rules. It's just an annoyance

The competitiveness of league members can be a source of strong accusations against other players or negative social interactions that can have adverse effects on their relationships with one another. Losing in fantasy football is equated to losing in a competitive sport, where not only a players pride is on the line but there is also money at stake.

Winning in a paid fantasy football league means that players can earn money from their participation and hold the reputation of a winner in the league(s). Positive emotions are a significant part of the experiences of both traditional NFL fans and fantasy football players. When a traditional fan's team performs well, adds a celebrity player, or has celebrity players that are performing well they act as sources of pride and respect. Bobby's favorite team is the Green Bay Packers and he explains things that evoke positive emotional responses within him. "I would have to say watching, uh, going back to the Packers, watching them at that time. They were one of the best teams in the NFL and, you know, they were good, the games were exciting". For fantasy football players, positive feelings come from similar things like positive player performances, but in a more personal context. Sources of satisfaction for fantasy football players can be from the players they personally draft, the camaraderie created by masculine banter among league members, and identifying socially with other league members through the sharing of in depth information that can be applied to your own franchise. Winning a league championship seems to be the greatest influence on positive feelings for a franchise owner, where there is potential to make a considerable amount of money, and for players in all male leagues, experience the enjoyment of mocking others in your league that did not perform well. Brad describes what it was like to win a fantasy football championship and some of the social interaction that resulted from his victory.

> Oh, I was screaming on top of a mountain. I mean, it was awesome. The only
> negative part of it was it was with work colleagues so there wasn't nearly as much
> gloating. Had it been with my college buddies? I would still be tootin' my horn
> for that one. I would be posting on facebook, I would be sending them a thank
> you card, I would be rubbin' it in like the jackass Packer fans that I know

It is clear that there being a fantasy football player is can be an emotional experience for league participants. The sources of both positive and negative emotions are different when comparing

traditional NFL fans and fantasy football players. Although the emotional experiences of both groups are contingent upon events that take place in the NFL, the individualized context of fantasy sports and the affects that it has on participants is something completely unique from the experiences of traditional fans that collectively experience the successes and failures of their respective teams.

This section went into detail about two important aspects when it comes to the experiences of men that play fantasy football, masculinities and emotions. The written and verbal attacks on other players in their leagues using gendered language are something unique to fantasy football players in comparison to traditional NFL fans. Yes, similar exchanges do take place among traditional NFL fan groups but not at the level or degree of personalization that is seen in fantasy football leagues. This can be a source of negative emotions for players when things get too personal but overall it was expressed as an appealing part of playing in fantasy football leagues because of the bonding and cohesive qualities it provides groups of men. Competition is a significant element within traditional NFL fan groups and fantasy football players, where both groups experience positive and negative emotions based on league related happenings. Because the social interaction among fantasy football players is elevated and relationships are closer among players, it makes sense that the positive and negative emotions stemming from social interaction within leagues is a significant aspect of their playing experiences.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The interest in fantasy football study participants expressed started as traditional NFL fans that were interested in fantasy football. Their interest in NFL football started at a very young age, and growing up they were prompted to emulate the role of a traditional NFL fan by developing a connection to an NFL team. They all experienced a childhood where fantasy football had yet to become a mainstream. Traditional fans place an overwhelming focus on their preferred NFL team and player celebrities from that team, with attention also paid to some of the top stars the NFL as a league has to offer. These men claim that the most important part of being an NFL fan is loyalty to your selected team, which means becoming emotionally connected and showing support. Support is shown through game attendance, wearing team apparel, and watching your team on television. The observable team symbols are how traditional NFL fans distinguish themselves from those that support other teams, and they also serve as a way for fans to identify each other as mutual supporters of the same team. Team affiliations are how traditional NFL fans declare their position as NFL fans, where location seems to be the greatest determinant of what team and ultimately the social experiences traditional NFL fans will have. Some NFL environments are hospitable and welcoming depending on your symbolic affiliation with a team. Rival fans are more apt to dislike your team's cultural attributes based on their own fan position, but despite this the men I interviewed report being a traditional fan as a positive experience.

Fantasy football leagues take the social experience of traditional fans and incorporate the element of fantasy football, creating a unique subculture by adding the opportunity to build teams and compete against others using a league wide focus that changes how fans identify with

and experience the game. Study participants claim that their team loyalty has been altered to some extent as a result, where an emotional connection to their fantasy football team(s) and the player celebrities that compete has assumed a level of priority. The role of a fantasy football franchise owner encourages players to manage their team(s) to be successful, which can be time consuming considering participants competitiveness, their reputations, the possibility of financial reward, and the unique context of social interaction among league members. Fantasy football culture is unique considering the lack of division among participants seen among traditional NFL fans, including its own ritualistic behaviors, jargon, team ownership, management obligations, and desire for statistical prowess. Participants generally exhibit common behaviors and possess common perspectives that help them connect with each other socially and build camaraderie. Communication among franchise owners is paramount in these leagues, where preferred means of communication generally reside away from the league website.

Media consumption in general is a significant aspect of playing fantasy football. Traditional NFL fans are more apt to limit their NFL media consumption while fantasy football players devote more time watching games traditional fans otherwise would not. The men I interviewed reported that they will watch most, if not all NFL games broadcasted, credited to the league wide focus that fantasy football provides. This creates a more intimate NFL experience that encourages participants to become well versed in the finer details concerning professional football. Mediated resources are employed in the pursuit of greater NFL knowledge and NFL and media providers are catering to fantasy football audiences. Building a competitive or superior team is a driving influence for the added media consumption, where knowing more about the NFL equates to being successful in fantasy football. Having advanced knowledge of player celebrities and factors that could influence their statistical performances is accomplished

by immersing yourself in NFL media. The competitive nature of the NFL and fantasy football leagues creates an environment where there is a significant presence of masculine behaviors and emotions as well. Participants desire to exert dominance over opponents, which in all male leagues prompts masculine social exchanges that are offensive to women and homosexuals. Fantasy football is thought to be a refuge from everyday life for these men, where women are especially thought to be ill equipped to compete at a high level. Significant emotional experiences occur because of the high level of emotional attachment a fantasy football player has with their team(s), where the difference resides in the source of emotional experiences between traditional NFL fans and fantasy football players. Participating in fantasy football is a uniquely individual experience, where the successes and failures of your team(s) are your responsibility.

Literature and Findings

Sociology of sport

Sport sociology is a recently developed and less recognized field within sociology (Coakley 1987) despite the large portion of our social experience that sport inhabits (Eckstein and Blanchard 2007; quoted in Eckstein et. al. 2010). Sport sociology is a way that we can derive a greater understanding of present socio-cultural forces (Bryant 1993) considering sports are competition laden games that involve principles surrounding social acts and communication (Nixon 2010). Further, a significant amount of funding and commercialized attention has been dedicated to professional and amateur sport organizations (Eckstein et. al. 2010), contributing to studying the role of the sport spectator as one of the most compelling aspects of sociological understanding within professional sports (Jonassohn et. al. 1981). Avid sports fans are considered a persuasive part of our culture due to more people becoming sports fans (Laverie and Arnett 2000) and their inclination to display their associations with sports teams publicly

(End 2001). Fantasy football players are considered avid NFL fans, where they make the choice to take on a more involved participation in the NFL. The persuasive part of sports fans resides within their visibility in society and their sheer numbers. Because of the strong fan following and large amounts of fans that elect to play fantasy football, it serves as a fruitful area for analysis when analyzing this persuasive part of our culture (Laverie and Arnett 2000).

Sport sociology has consistently allowed researchers that bring new insight into areas of study that look at social issues (Eckstein et. al. 2010), and with the recent development of the internet and the subsequent ability to connect with others around the world socially, analyzing online fantasy football meets the criteria of a progressive social phenomenon. The experiences of sports fans have changed significantly over time due to the influence of mediated technologies and their impact on sports culture (Hutchins et. al. 2009). This is reflected in my data, as study participants report a lack of accessibility and influence of fantasy football when growing up, where they were encouraged to assume the role of a traditional NFL fan with team driven interests (Dwyer 2011) because that was the norm. Although I did not interview traditional NFL fans, the majority of what we know about sports fans resides in the traditional fan context. Online fantasy football is an area where insights that we can gather from those populations can help us build on our understanding of the modern sports fan and what contributes to their experiences beyond what we already know.

Media Consumption

Fantasy football is a unique activity that combines interactive components with traditional sport fandom, enhancing the sport consumers experience with the game (Dwyer and Kin 2011). Fantasy sports are the product of innovations seen within sports media, and Kwak

and McDaniel (2011) posit that it has become so popular that the business of fantasy sports has also extended beyond the internet into other media realms. Media plays a highly influential role within popular culture. Oates (2009) explains that market research conducted by the NFL in 2002 found that the average fantasy sports player watched nearly two more hours a week of football than the average fan, and my data reflect this pattern as well. I found that traditional NFL fans typically limit their televised game consumption to their favorite NFL team and high profile games, as all of the men interviewed claim that since they started playing fantasy football their level of media consumption has increased significantly. I found that their televised media consumption is actually greater than the nearly two hour increase reported by Oates (2009), as study participants reported watching most if not all NFL games broadcasted in a given week of game play and in many cases purchasing additional television packages like the NFL Red-Zone. When watching NFL games, I also found that players will employ multiple technological mediums simultaneously as a way of keeping up to date with league events in real time. This can come in the form of using online technologies like smart-phones and tablets. Interview respondents reported being consistently connected or having ready access to NFL media during the course of their fantasy season.

Internet consumption is also significant within analyses of media consumption among fantasy football players. Kwak and McDaniel (2011) suggest that the average fantasy football player uses the internet an average of five hours per week when it comes to accessing fantasy football related media online. I found Kwak and McDaniel's (2011) claim to be largely in agreement with what was reported by the men that participated in my study, where players weekly internet use related to fantasy football was generally similar to the claim of five hours per week. The players I interviewed expressed that accessing their fantasy football teams online

during the season is a daily thing and something that can be very time consuming. The internet is

the central medium for game play and research for players, with websites like ESPN.com and

Yahoo.com being the most popular fantasy football platforms among the men I interviewed. I

found that websites are the normative means of accessing fantasy football media next to

television, where aside from managing their teams on league websites fantasy football players

will also seek out other sources of online media like columns and opinions posted by sports

writers and league insiders concerning league strategies and player reports. These findings are

significant because they reinforce prior claims surrounding media consumption (Kwak and

McDaniel 2011; Oates 2009) and illustrates how social institutions (media) are transforming

sports and providing new opportunities to become immersed in fantasy football or NFL related

media. Further, my data also provides us with information concerning the sources that they most

frequently seek out and the importance of developing a competitive edge through simply

knowing more about the NFL.

Subculture

By assuming the responsibilities of a franchise owner and creating a superior team, the

connection between NFL fan and the NFL becomes closer. The competitive elements of

vicarious game play and elevated levels of media consumption are something unique in

comparison to traditional NFL fans. Further, the attention to events that take place across the

entire NFL and the in depth knowledge concerning celebrity players is unique as well. I also

found that fantasy football players develop personal connections with the player celebrities on

their team(s) because of their contribution to a franchise owner's personal league success. This

reinforces Dwyer's (2011) finding that the untraditional attributes of fantasy football players in

comparison to NFL fans result in an inquisitiveness concerning the entire league. These unique

elements of NFL fan participation are what help distinguish fantasy football players from traditional NFL fans. Sports fans are commonly referred to as a subculture by sociologists (Crosset and Beal 1997) and fantasy football players possess differentiating characteristics in comparison to traditional NFL fans, whereas I make the argument that fantasy football players represent a subculture that is unique in itself.

Donnelly and Young (1988) explain that the analysis of sport subcultures is grounded in interactionist approaches, arguing that it is common in interactionist research to view the process of socialization into subcultures as part of the process of identity formation. They explain the most significant aspect of socialization is the intention adopting of mannerisms, attitudes, appearances, language, and behaviors that are characteristic of established members. I found this to be among the men I interviewed when it came to their roles as traditional NFL fans and fantasy football players, but when fantasy football players make the transition from a traditional fan role to fantasy football player the process of identity formation and socialization reoccurs. Interview subjects were socialized into the subculture of traditional NFL fans from a very young age, in some cases earlier than pre-school. They expressed that people in their lives advocated for them to become NFL fans and engage in football related activities. The team that an individual connects with is significant to their positioning as a fan and subsequently which fan group within the subculture of NFL fans they represent. Study participants expressed that their earliest experiences as fans started with family members around them encouraging an interest in football and introducing them to a specific NFL team, which resulted in an emotional connection with that team. Reyesen and Branscombe (2010) posit that fans that are personally connected to a team are considered to have fanship toward that team, meaning they identify themselves based on a personal connection to a sports team that they support. I found that fantasy football players

were first socialized into the traditional fanship role, where they were taught to assign importance to a certain team, their symbols, and become loyal fans. This involves placing importance on team related events and glorifying the celebrities that are revered among the local fan base (Alder and Alder 1989). I found that being a loyal fan means always remaining supportive and showing support for your NFL team by watching or attending games, purchasing team related items, and wearing team apparel. Team related clothing serves as an adequate proclamation for fans, where the symbols and colors they wear are representative of their fan position. This invites camaraderie from other team followers, where preference for an NFL something that fans have in common. Sports fans are inclined to display their associations with sports teams publicly (End 2001) and study participants unanimously agreed that being a loyal fan entails wearing apparel and purchasing team related items with the majority of interview respondents expressing that they will intentionally wear such clothing in places where they can be seen.

The process of socialization into the fantasy football subculture also supports Donnelly and Young's (1988) findings regarding fanship socialization, but there are important differences between the identity development within the traditional NFL fan subculture and the fantasy football subculture. Reyesen and Brandscombe (2010) define fanship as the connection someone has to a sports team and identification with that team. Fanship is the best way to describe traditional NFL fans given they claim to simply be a "Vikings fan," where they have a connection with their team and exhibits elements of personal identification within their fanship role. Fandom is defined as the connection fans have with other fans of the same team and identifying with others who share such a connection (Reyesen and Brandscombe 2010). Since membership as an NFL fan is largely informal and open to those that represents themselves in

accordance with a team's culture, the men I interviewed posit that traditional NFL fans typically do not formally affiliate themselves with an organized group like a fan or booster club. The concept of fandom best describes the highly identified fans that seek out official membership to a fan club, where fans satisfy an official membership process that legitimizes their connection to an organized fan entity. None of the men that participated in this study claim to be formal members of a fan group or adhere to a fandom identity within their traditional NFL fan roles.

Fantasy football creates both a fandom and fanship role for NFL fans, where they are compelled to participate in fantasy football because they are fans of the NFL and their team, but they are also a part of an organized group that operates under the title of fantasy football player or fantasy football franchise owner. I found that the incorporation of fantasy football into the lives of those already a part of the fanship subculture of NFL fans adds unique elements that are not present among traditional NFL fans. This subsequently creates a subculture that involves formalized membership and vicarious competition with other NFL fans using the accomplishments of NFL athletes. This helps explain how fantasy football acts as its own common ground among participants, where they will socially interact with others simply because they are a part of the fantasy football subculture. Unlike traditional NFL fans, fantasy football players do not typically represent themselves in an outward symbolic manner. Rather, they still represent themselves as traditional NFL fans but declare that they are fantasy football players through social exchanges among NFL fans. Cultural elements that make them further unique are ritualistic behaviors like the pre-season draft, fantasy football jargon, management obligations, elevated media consumption, and statistical prowess; all of which contribute to the unique fantasy football experience. Part of what brings players together is the competition and the fact that everyone that plays has something at stake or something to lose. This could be a player's

reputation within a league or financial loss incurred because of the financial obligation they have to the activity. These unique social circumstances create a similar experience to the camaraderie among traditional NFL fan groups, where fantasy football participants exhibit the same feelings and sense of belonging that fans of NFL teams of but in a formalized manner and without the division among fans caused by group affiliation.

I found that playing in fantasy football leagues also impacts the way participants view their traditional loyalty to an NFL team. Eight out of the ten men I interviewed told me that their loyalty has shifted from their NFL team that they traditionally support over to their own fantasy football teams and the celebrity athletes they've selected. This is not to say that they have disbanded their identification with their favorite team, but rather their involvement in fantasy football has taken priority over their role as a traditional NFL fan. This is hugely significant considering the deeply embedded emotional connections that traditional NFL fans are socialized into having with their teams, and although it doesn't disappear altogether, it is altered by participation in fantasy football. The experience of fantasy football creates fans of the entire NFL and players from all teams, which provides additional reasons to watch teams and focus on aspects of the league that reside outside of their preferred team. What fantasy football has effectively done is create a subculture of sports fan that experiences professional football differently. This is significant because fantasy football is an activity that is growing rapidly in popularity, with nearly thirty million Americans and Canadians currently playing in some kind of fantasy sport league (Fantasy Sport Trade Association 2011). Fantasy football is also the most popular fantasy sport, accounting for eighty five percent of fantasy sport users (Randle and Nyland 2008) and acting as an effective population for analysis when attempting to derive an understanding of this subculture and those that are a part of it as significant.

Masculinity

Because fantasy football is an active form of competition like athletic team sports, it creates an environment where male athletic masculinities can thrive. It was my intention to see if fantasy football leagues content or support the male athletic masculinities that are present throughout sports. Male athletic masculinities are most easily identified in professional or national sports, with sport acting as an institution that is centered on physical prowess and framed within a gender-oriented basis, given that the creation of modern sports was crafted by and designed for men (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2005). Fantasy sports has created a new role for the sports consumers, and for most people it is the closest they can get to competing in a professional sport without becoming athletically involved (Dwyer and Kin 2011). The competitive nature of the NFL and fantasy football fosters such an environment, where masculine elements from the literature were observed within all male fantasy football leagues. Study participants testimony concerning their competition with other men supports Oates and Durham's (2004) finding that the idealization and glorification of male physical bodies can be thought of in terms of cultural power. Further, all male fantasy football leagues align with Anderson's (2008) suggestion that team sports endorse characteristics that belittle women. Even though fantasy football is an individual sport, the collective league element acts much like the team element does with respect to these ideologies and behaviors surrounding gender within team sports. I found that in fantasy football, masculine elements associated with physical prowess in team sports is replaced by possessing extensive NFL knowledge and managing your fantasy football teams in a savvy manner.

Connell (2008) posits that because masculinities are embedded in our culture and informed by larger institutional and cultural influences, the definitions and present state of

masculinities are subject to change over time. The interviews that I conducted with male fantasy football players help illustrate elements of the present state of masculinities within all male fantasy football leagues. Knoppers and Anthonissen (2005) argue that discourses regarding athletics and masculinity tend to include shared male interests and common values. In the all male fantasy football leagues I examined, interview respondents reported a shared interested in competition among one another and a desire to personally declare dominance over their opponents. There seems to be value in having the ability to declare such dominance over one another because it results in competitive social exchanges among players. Similarly, phenomena were also reported among traditional NFL fans that prompt social exchanges with others in the name of declaring their teams superiority over another team. Masculine commentary among NFL fans will assign certain attributes or characteristics to rivals as a way of endorsing weakness in competition. Similar forms of social exchanges are seen within all male fantasy football leagues, where declarations of dominance between franchise owners involve attacks that attempt to feminize or lessen one's masculine status through verbal and written messages directed at others. These types of social exchanges can carry on for extended periods of time, showing that there is social capital that comes with winning. The difference between this type of masculine social exchange and the ones reported among traditional NFL fans is that they are in a personal context among those familiar with each other through league participation and on the basis of a franchise owners performance.

These attacks on each other were also reported as more personal and offensive than negative social exchanges among traditional NFL fans by the way individuals and their abilities were attacked in comparison to being mocked because of your group affiliation. Despite this, there were many examples shared of offensive sexist and homophobic language used in both

contexts. Male fantasy football leagues that reside in a leisurely our outside of a professional context contain examples of gendered language that is used in an attempt to lessen another player's status. Feminizing and degrading another fantasy football player is a declaration of authority and power, which supports Connell's (2008) description of hegemonic masculinity as the dominant male pattern that promotes behaviors geared towards authority and power. This perspective runs concurrent with the idea that men should be collectively privileged for the long term (Connell 2008). Because I was viewed as an insider to these men, I was granted privileged access to this information and exposed to the depth in which such behaviors take place in all male leagues. Posturing masculine verbal attacks like the ones shared by study participants is a way that league members attempt to show that another league members' team is weak or ill equipped for competition. Another form of masculinity observed was orthodox masculinity, which looks at the way men identify with the acquisition of certain attributes that align with dominant male ideology (Anderson 2008). In fantasy football, the sought after male attributes are extensive knowledge of the NFL and the ability to play fantasy football at a high level, seemingly supplementing the favored athletic or physical masculine attributes in society with professional football knowledge and fantasy football prowess. It seems that in their own way, fantasy football players are ultimately striving for their own version of what Pringle and Hickey (2010) call hyper-masculinity, or an ability to dominate their competitors in an activity and assume a seldom seen extreme masculine status much like the celebrity NFL athletes on their teams exhibit in their role as professional football players.

These forms of masculinity are apparent in all male fantasy football leagues and they promote a privileged status of men that discount those that do not adhere to or fit the criteria of the dominant male ideology within sports. Interestingly, despite the personalized nature of social

attacks on one another and the negativity used within their language, the men I interviewed reported the experiences of these types of social exchanges among league members to be fun and have bonding qualities. Even though the nature of these attacks were elevated and focused, it seems that socializing this way with other men in a competitive context is actually thought to be part of the fun. The use of gendered language and demeaning messages that degrade women and homosexuals is reported as a source of entertainment, where it seems that they feel safe enough within their league groups to share in these interactions without worrying about it offending someone. When asked about leagues that reside outside of a leisurely context or leagues that involve women, players reported that such dialogue and correspondence is greatly reduced in ways so that it is not easily observable by others that play in their leagues who might get offended.

An obvious population that would be offended by such social behavior is women. Boxill (2006) points out that football is considered as an exclusive "men's club" where the interests of men are protected through the exclusion of women. Anderson (2008) posits that men are socialized into sports which encourage characteristics that surround violence, a desire to place others in suffering based on the stratification of male attributes, and discount ideas surrounding acts that involve violence against women. The majority of men interviewed expressed that they find refuge from the women through fantasy football, where managing their teams, engaging other league members in football conversations, and consuming NFL media are thought to be ways that men can be involved in their interest on their own terms. This relates to Boxill's (2008) finding that men desire control and losing control indicates that someone is unmanly or connected with anything involved with being a women. The men I interviewed have complete control when engaged in fantasy football, where they have autonomy over their team(s) and

independently engage in competitions in hopes of controlling the outcomes so they can walk

away victorious. Losing in competition or making poor team management choices can result in

the use of gendered language directed at players, especially within all male leagues. This relates

to how coaches of athletic teams will assign demeaning feminine characteristics to athletes as

motivation to perform. Being labeled as a woman in the competitive, all male context I studied is

perceived as highly negative to these men, where it promotes the message that they are unfit or

out of place. What this type of behavior also does is promote the exclusion of women in fantasy

football, where they are generally perceived to not like football or not know anything about it.

This creates the idea that fantasy football is a male activity, where "men can be men" without

interruption.

Study participants report that they enjoy the exclusivity and privilege that coincides with

all male fantasy football leagues, where Whitehead and Barrett (2001; quoted in Knoppers and

Anthonissen 2005) posit that not all men adhere to such ideology although they still benefit from

masculine privileges that are found throughout American society. All male fantasy football

leagues seem to be a refuge for masculinity and male privilege, where they are free to denigrate

others and experience the male bonding that such exclusivity provides. Despite this, there are

large amounts of women that identify themselves as sports fans and engage in the same sports

consumptive behaviors that men do, making up at least forty percent of National Hockey League,

NFL, and Major League Soccer fans in the United States (Wann et. al.2001). In light of

representing nearly half of the spectator audiences within three major sports markets, study

participants report women as stigmatized due to their perceived lack of knowledge about the

NFL, and are therefore assumed to be less equipped to compete in fantasy football. This

reinforces the notion that men are expected to participate in significantly more fan related

behaviors than women (Dietz-Uhler et. al. 2000) considering sport spectatorship is generally considered a male dominated activity (Wann and Waddill 2003). Fantasy football players are major consumers of sport related media and it can be argued that they would likely be influenced by media more than traditional NFL fans due to their elevated level of media consumption. Gee (2009) explains that media and mediated sport are a way that ideas surrounding gender can be portrayed as normative, where Knoppers and Anthonissen (2005) argue that media has become a major area for reinforcing principles tied to hegemonic masculinity. This translates into benchmarks for male self-appraisal and socialization (Gee 2009), where men are able to use professional sports and fantasy football as a way of determining their own masculine presence.

The literature and the findings from this study align closely, leading me to believe that fantasy football leagues are much like other competitive sports leagues that foster and harbor popular sport informed masculinities. A reason that men participate in fantasy football could be a desire to get in touch with the masculine side of sports and reinvigorate their desire for competition that they experienced athletically in the past. Because study participants were socialized into sports at an early age and encouraged to engage in sports growing up, fantasy football could act as an activity that stems from their socialization into sports and feeds their desire to compete. Unfortunately, what the reports from all male leagues have done is further reinforce the negative elements that go along with sport informed masculinities that are used in the name of competition but at the expense of others.

Emotions

Despite the hyper-masculine and hegemonic ideals observed within the NFL, emotions are a significant part of professional football. Since emotional experiences and behaviors are

products of socialization (Hochschild 1979) it means that the men I interviewed were socialized

into when it is acceptable and unacceptable to display their emotions. Hochschild (1979) posits

that feeling rules dictate how much of an emotion, what type of emotion, and for how long it

should be experienced. Within competitive settings, emotions were reported to be a significant

factor within groups of traditional NFL fans and fantasy football players. Traditional NFL fans

are likely to experience emotional reactions based on things like preferred team and player

performances, where such reactions are amplified in high stakes situations like playoff or

championship games.   Study participants attributed these emotional experiences to the

emotional investment they have in their team, where winning evokes positive emotions and

losing creates negative. Boxill (2006) posits that in football, it is fully acceptable for men to

show their emotions. This conflicts with societal expectations concerning emotions and because

men are informed that it is ok to display emotions during a game but not in society, stemming

from the privilege of emotional expressional afforded to men in competition in comparison to

commonly held perspectives surrounding men (Boxill 2006).

Dimmock and Grove (2006) argue that sports spectators experience emotions that are

almost the same as those felt by athletes. Hillman et al. (2000) posits that people will often

develop intense personal and emotional interest in sports contests, and during the course of

events highly identified fans will typically demonstrate strong emotional and behavioral

responses based on the outcomes of athletic performances and events. I found this to be true,

where the traditional fan role that fantasy football players experience(d) involve identification

with their team that often translates into significant emotional experiences related to team events

and competitive outcomes. While many traditional NFL fans are highly dedicated to their

interest, fantasy football players represent a highly identified NFL fan that assumes an active role

in their sport. Park et. al. (2009) posits that in interactive sports there are both winning and losing teams, which creates positive and negative experiences for both spectators and players depending on the outcomes of games. This is very much what study participants reported, where positive and negative emotions were experienced based on the outcomes of their fantasy football matchups. Positive emotions from winning involve feelings like happiness, where losing endorses emotions like anger and frustration (Bernhardt et al. 1998). Because sports have the power to incite such polarizing emotions that are contingent upon uncertain outcomes, emotions are even further amplified through fantasy sports due to the compounding effects of both the result on the NFL playing field and the results seen within a players franchise. Further, franchise owners have a personal stake in the performance(s) of their fantasy football team(s), where if players do not perform well it reflects on their ability to identify and select talented players as well as manage their line-ups. There is personal ownership of a participant's fantasy team, where it is "his own team." The personal ownership of a player's fantasy football team is something that traditional NFL fans do not experience. Yes, traditional fans have an emotional investment in their team but they are not held personally responsible for the successes and failures of that team. When the players that a fantasy football franchise owner selects do not perform well, it reflects negatively on their decision making and their NFL knowledge. Further, these poor performances incite harsh criticisms and masculine mocking from other players, particularly from players in all male leagues, leading to greater emotional investment.

Fantasy football players, in alignment with others affiliated with sports, engage in impression management (Goffman 1959) when interacting with league members in the fantasy football context. Erving Goffman (1959) suggests social-actors as actively manage their outer impressions but without actively managing their inner feelings. Liu and Li (2009) argue that

actions of group members, like fantasy football league members, affect both themselves and others. Rime (2007) suggests that the emotional happenings that collectively affect the group have an impact on the emotional climate that is experienced. I found that the actions of fantasy football players do affect both themselves and others, where instances of masculine mocking or accusations of cheating can affect relationships among players. In fantasy football, players actively manage their outer impressions by recognizing that the actions of another league member may upset them and that it is in their interest to not do anything about it because it would not be beneficial. Rime (2007) posits that general emotions individuals experience privately are shared socially, where the men I interviewed were quick to share their feelings surrounding certain issues within leagues socially despite my lack of personal involvement. Rime (2007) also points out that more intense emotions are shared more often and with more people for a longer period of time. The emotional experiences study participants shared with me were seemingly the most important ones, like damaged relationships from false accusations or winning a league championship. Interview respondents also shared that the positive emotions from winning in their leagues, masculine banter, and identifying socially with other league members was something that they wanted to share with their competitors as a way of declaring their dominance. Like the masculine banter, the sharing of positive emotions enhances the positive effects that stem from participation, strengthening social bonds with others that can relate.

Social Identity

The literature covered in social identity examines principles and theories that apply to traditional sports fans, where it is my goal to apply relevant principles as they relate to the social identities of fantasy football players. Social identity theory is relevant within these analyses,

which has been used extensively within the realm of social psychology (Dimmock and Grove 2006). Laverie and Arnett (2000) posit that the interactionist perspective suggests being a fan can be a personalized role, aspect of self, and also a way that people can manage their self-conceptions. Further, they explain that people navigate their social world by prompting hierarchically organized identities within various contexts. The men that I interviewed placed a great deal of priority on their identities as NFL fans and fantasy football players; these attributes were assigned special importance and are significant in how they navigate their social environments. The goal of social identity theory is to understand the rationale behind people selecting certain identity related behaviors with respect to all of the other possibilities they could choose, illustrating the concept of identity salience (Lavierie and Arnett 2000). It is fair to say that being an NFL fan is a salient identity among the men that I interviewed, where they place importance on proclaiming such an identity through wearing team related apparel and identifying with others that share their interest. The incorporation of fantasy football into their identity construct seems to assume greater salience over their traditional fan identities, where further priority is allocated to their interests as a fantasy football player over their role as a traditional NFL fan.

Laverie and Arnett (2000) posit that social identity theory has focused on the relationship between salience and behavior, and Armstrong (2007) suggests that once a person decides what aspects of their self-image are salient they will look for ways to express it. This connects with study participants reporting displaying their favoritism to an NFL team through wearing apparel and other identifiable merchandise in places they can be observed, as a way to express loyalty and the importance of their favorite team to others. The salience of NFL fan identities is also shown through the behaviors they exhibit, where fans will make a conscious effort to watch their

team play on television and go to places where other fans of similar position will be present. The way that fantasy football players express their affinity to their preferred team or illustrate their position as a traditional fan is through conversations they have with other fantasy football players and how they construct their profile and/or team names on the fantasy football website. Players incorporate aspects of their traditional fan role into their fantasy football experiences by using the observable symbols and indications of their fan positions within their leagues. This could be through posting a profile picture that relates to their favorite team or create a team name that mocks a league participant that is a fan of a rival team. I think part of the reason that fans continue their traditional fan support of an NFL team connected to Gua and Kim's (2011) finding that their attitudes and perspectives concerning the NFL are still positive and there is still the favorable assessment and emotional feeling present toward that team.

Social identity is a part of an individual's self-conception, which is partially derived from their awareness of membership to social groups along with the significance that group membership represents. Although study participants reported favoritism toward their role as fantasy football players over traditional NFL fans, their informal membership to the fan group they belong to is still a point of importance. People gain a sense of worth and who they are based on their membership in social groups (Dietz-Uhler et. al. 2002) fantasy football players certainly experience such within their traditional NFL fan roles. For traditional fans it could be in the form of social acceptance among group members, and with fantasy football players it could come in the form of acceptance from other league members and the privilege of being formally welcomed into an exclusive community. Fantasy football players share similar collective group attributes that differ from traditional sports fans, equipped with distinct rituals, language, and collective sentiments that place emphasis on the entire league and its players versus a narrow team focus.

Social rituals are especially effective when it comes to the enhancement of participants' feeling of group belonging (Rime 2007). Traditional NFL fan groups do have rituals like cheers and songs, but since the membership to that group is informal I argue that the more formalized rituals within fantasy football leagues like the draft, league wide media consumption, and frequent social interaction do a better job of enhancing a participants feeling of group belonging. Reyesen and Brandscombe (2010) point out that a way people gain a positive self esteem is through making comparisons between in-group members to other out-groups. Traditional NFL fans generally identify themselves as fans of a franchise or selected players, whereas fantasy football players are identified within their social group as the owner of team(s) they have assembled.

The categorization of oneself as part of a group is enough to invoke in-group bias, involving a collective group perception that behaviors of your own group members are typically correct (Dietz-Uhler et. al. 2002). This is an element that is present among traditional NFL fan groups but is missing within fantasy football leagues. In fantasy football you are the only team owner and typically the only fan of your team. It is an individualized effort that makes no room for the fan group rivalries found in the NFL. If there is a good versus bad mentality that exists (Jonassohn et. al. 1981) it is between you and the player that you are playing that week. Beyond that, there is no in-group bias or out-group disfavor. A principle that does apply to fantasy football players within this is Dietz-Uhler et. al.'s (2002) point that if an in-group member does something negative they are likely to be scrutinized in a more extreme manner than someone from an out-group would be. Within this application, the in-group members are the players that compose you fantasy football team. Franchise owners will often be highly critical of the players on their team based on their weekly performances, whereas they are less apt to be critical of another team's player at that level. The bias resides within a participant's team, where the

fantasy football players strive to protect and endorse their identity as a league participant due to being highly identified with the players on their team.

Wann (1997) posits that identifying with a team means there is a psychological connection present, which I found to be true among fantasy football players and their role as traditional NFL fans. The psychological connection an NFL fan has to his team is extremely similar, if not a mirror image of, the psychological connection that develops between a player and their fantasy football team. Sports fans offer themselves as team members and experience team events vicariously (Sloan 1979; quoted in Gau and Kim 2011), where I argue that fantasy football effectively increases the level of vicarious experientialization sports fans feel when engaging in online fantasy football. This is credited to the emulation of ownership and management functions, where franchise owners have a personal responsibility to set their organization up for success. It also stems from hand picking players and the personal stake involved there, where a players performance ultimately acts as a reflection of an owners ability to scout talent. Experiential symbolization occurs when sports fans commitment levels welcome the symbolic cultural influences and self to fuse together (Stone 2007), which are apparent within fantasy football players. Their team becomes a part of players themselves through the same phenomena traditional sports fans experience but with that added element of personalization that goes into their franchise(s).

These principles closely align with interactionist principles that are associated with peoples experiences related to their self identity and centered on social interaction (Armstrong 2007). People typically formulate their behaviors in accordance with extrinsic expectations, where fantasy football players and their experiences as traditional fans met differing sets of expectations and craft their behaviors accordingly. This is at least partly due to the valued

connection that traditional fans and fantasy footballers have to their team(s) (Wann and Schrader 2000), where this form of identification helps harbor social connections and well being (Wann, Keenan, and Page 2009). An interesting point that Wann, Keenan, and Page (2009) also make is that traditional fans that identify with multiple teams are at a social advantage with respect to social capital among other fans in comparison to other fans that limit their team identification. I suggest that fantasy football players may experience this advantage, as they fit the profile of highly identified fans with an active role in the interest. Avid fans are also more likely to discuss aspects of their team frequently with others, and actively seek out social places where others share their interest (Laverie and Arnett 2000). The men I interviewed when reflecting on their traditional NFL fan roles agreed with this point, where the NFL was a frequent topic of discussion due to the strong connections present with their team and the expressed pleasure they experienced when attending places and interacting with fans of their like team. The fantasy football element does largely the same, where it dominates conversations among these men and acts as a reason to interact socially with one another. All of this is in contribution to a fantasy football player's sense of belonging and fusion of the role of franchise owner and self.

It is apparent that the men I interviewed were highly identified NFL fans, which I feel contributed to their desire to become fantasy football players. Highly identified sports fans typically see their favored team as a reflection of themselves (Dietz-Uhler et al. 2002), and the men I interviewed use their traditional fan position as a part of their social identity as fantasy football players. Further, their fantasy franchises are a clear extension or reflection of themselves, contributing to their reputation among other fantasy football players and even their identity in general social life due to its salient status. Fantasy football players have no choice but to stand by their personally created team(s), where if there wasn't a high level of identification,

much like a traditional NFL fans identification with a team, they have the option to downplay their affiliation (Wann and Schrader 2000).

Because the men I interviewed were highly identified fans and possess salient fan identities, it is important to also take into account the influence of the virtual or online realm on fantasy football identies. To play online fantasy football you must have an online identity through the creation of a team name and profile, or a cyberself (Waskul and Douglass 1997). Waskul and Douglass (1997) posit that the communication abilities that online environments provide harbors the creation of meaningful identities, where meaning is created through social interaction with others. Further, they suggest that online environments foster a unique version of social interaction in comparison to what we are traditionally accustomed to in an offline sense, with an ability to create new social situations in a new environment. Study participants made it clear that their offline traditional fan identities helped inform the virtual fantasy football identity that they create, through the use of fan-position related symbols and messages that other league members can observe. What is interesting is how the events that take place online within a fantasy football league, like team construction and competitive outcomes, impact the offline social interaction participants. The way that fantasy football dominates conversation and aids social connections can be attributed to the harboring of competition the fantasy football website provides. Because interview respondents reported that the majority of social interaction takes place away from the league website, the website itself and the events that take place within it act as a foothold or informing element that shapes the behaviors and social interactions of participants through being the focal point of league activity. Further, the fantasy football website impacts the identity of fantasy football players in the sense that they no longer consider themselves traditional fans and engage in an elevated level of involvement that incorporates the

entire league. Mediated technologies, ready access, and the internet allow fantasy football

players to enter a realm that brings them closer to professional football than ever before (Randle

and Nyland 2008).

Games and Gaming Theory

Over the last ten years, online gaming has been one of the fastest growing internet-based

industries (Lee and Tsai 2010), and fantasy football leagues have experienced a significant

growth in popularity since the incorporation of internet based leagues. There are some significant

similarities and differences that can be drawn between fantasy football leagues and another

widely popular form of online gaming, MMORPG's (Massively Multi-Media Online Role

Playing Games). Both forms of internet based gaming provide users with a fantasy experience,

where Waskul and Lust (2004) point out that most fantasy role playing games operate in realms

that are separate from the rest of life in imagined settings, but characters take on characteristics

of those who are playing them. Fantasy football distinguishes apart from fantasy based internet

games through the added context of fantasy football is informed by live NFL events, with these

events acting in contribution to the fantasy experience that participants enter. What online

fantasy football and internet based fantasy role-playing games have in common is that

participants create a persona that they play whole engaging in the game in accordance with the

limitations of the activities, rules, and websites. The personas that are created are make-believe

identities that are ultimately affected by the game's symbolic happenings and influence player's

public personas (Waskul and Lust 2004). Murray (2006) points out that games are interpreted by

those that participate in them in ways that allow for the separation of reality based behaviors and

symbols from the real life context. He explains that the reality based behaviors of athletes are

able to be transferred into the virtual realm where players can experience virtual competition

using such events. Further, fantasy football players also incorporate important symbols and other reality based indications of their position as a traditional NFL fan, serving as another example of how human experiences inform the virtual context and interactions.

The fluidity between fantasy and our ability to shed and adopt new roles within the realm of games (Waskul and Lust 2004) is illustrated by the previously explained principles. The computer and the internet are what allow us to take on new roles and create complex virtual environments for us to navigate (Murray 2006). Like the role of a fantasy football franchise owner, Waskul and Lust (2004) posit that that our understanding of roles starts with what we comprehend in everyday life. Highly identified traditional NFL fans are able to bring their understanding of professional football and translate it into the competition of online fantasy football. It is the understanding of the NFL and its various functions that fantasy football players must comprehend in order to coherently experience fantasy football and do what it takes to be functional in such leagues. This fantasy football role informs the self (Waskul and Lust 2004) which is accomplished by taking the role of the other (Mead 1934).

The rewards of taking on the fantasy football role are a result of goal oriented behaviors that are used to compare competitors (Murray 2006), creating a rationalized sporting experience made available through mediated technologies (Grimes and Feenberg 2009). There are many ways that sports enthusiasts can engage in electronic sporting experiences, where Grimes and Feenberg (2009) explain rationalized games are simulations of game play that contain specific set of standard rules and are distilled into predictable and measurable portions. Many sports games act as an emulation where teams are constructed within the rules and then placed into competition without having an active part in controlling the outcome like first person emulations would. Fantasy football is different because it acts as a front office emulation that obligates

players to assume multiple roles concerning the functionality of a sports team. Within all games,

players are able to observe and critique events that occur during game play and assuming the

goal of improvement for individual and collective performances (Murray 2006). In fantasy

football, after the weekly NFL events have concluded players are then prompted to re-assess

their teams and make improvements so they can remain competitive the following week. Players

are rational and their rationality is contingent upon their ability to identify and select outcomes

(McCown 2010).

Cultural and normative elements associated with game play are significant within the

social interaction in gaming situations. Online fantasy football leagues have established

interactive and cultural norms that craft the incentives, rewards, and strategies of participants

(McCown 2010). This is illustrated through interview respondents elaborating on the subjects

that have been covered in this study. The interactive and cultural norms stem from their sub

cultural identity as fantasy football players that is a result of being a traditional NFL fan first,

where aspects of the traditional NFL culture are present within groups of fantasy football players

but enough distinction is present to deem them unique from one another. There are a number of

incentives or rewards involved with playing fantasy football. These include things like privileged

access into the sub cultural group, increased social interaction with others that share your interest

in fantasy football, the ability to construct a team and place them into competition and the

possibility of winning in leagues with respect to statistical prowess and elite status among league

members. Strategies that players use to accomplish a bolstered status in leagues involve

increased media consumption, NFL research, statistical analysis, and developing the knowledge

to make savvy managerial or team ownership moves. All of these factors are significant within

the social interactions of fantasy football players, acting as a unique recipe for a highly involved fan that is active in their interest and exclusive within their activities and behaviors.

Shortcomings / Limitations

The most obvious limitation this study has is the narrow homogenous sampling group, which was chosen intentionally using a non-probability judgment/snowball sampling technique. The criticism I anticipate of this sampling method is that study participants were all from the local geographic region from which I reside and a part of my immediate and extended social networks. I justify using this sampling technique because it was something that I could accomplish as a graduate student with limited funds who was working independently with the guidance of an advisor. Further, I suggest that the experiences of the fantasy football players I interviewed in the Midwest region are likely not much different than groups of men that play from other regions in the United States. Because league play takes place online and players can access their leagues from any geographic location that has internet access, it provides a common virtual realm where all players meet, interact, and navigate. I feel that there is merit to the assumption that the experience of the fantasy football players I interviewed in the Midwest region would mirror or at least resemble the experiences of players in other regions. Further, the media that participants were immersed in as a result of participation were generally the same because they rely on national media broadcasting and sports journalism for information. This implies that fantasy football players for the most part are universally informed which extends the assumption that the influence of fantasy football on their NFL experience would at least be similar.

Unfortunately, I have no way of proving this is the case considering the limitations of my study sample. It is impossible for me to say that fantasy football players from other regions in the United States would feel that same way and deal with the influence of fantasy football the same way that fans of the Minnesota Vikings or Green Bay Packers do. For all I know, fans from other regions may identify more strongly with their teams and fantasy football may not be the priority or the influence that the men I interviewed reported. The information from this study is best applied in a local or regional sense, where it is fair to assume that fantasy football exerts a strong influence on those that play around the world but the extend and telling power of the instances provided in this study are most accepted with consideration to the geographic limitations of my sample group. For future studies, I would recommend extending the sampling group to a nationwide level and incorporating quantitative methods and probability sampling techniques as a way of creating greater validity and contesting or supporting the claims I make in this study. Further, it would bolster our knowledge of fantasy football and potentially extend what we know about their culture that is depicted through the comparison I constructed using populations of traditional NFL fans. Then, I think we would be in a better position to determine where our analytical focus is best used and construct better informed qualitative methods concerning the gathering of in-depth information.

A scholar that co-contributed to some important literature points in this study published an article that illustrates some important principles that I feature within my findings. Brendan Dwyer's (2011) article "Divided Loyalty? An Analysis of Fantasy Football Involvement and Fan Loyalty to individual National Football League (NFL) Teams" was brought to my attention when drafting this concluding section of my thesis. His article stems from a previous publication he co-authored (Dwyer and Kin 2011) but places further focus on how fantasy football impacts NFL

fan loyalty to their preferred team. Dwyer (2011) found that highly-involved fantasy football participant's loyalty to their preferred NFL team was at a reduced level, but their commitment to professional football was increased. This is exactly what I found within my findings and analysis. Further, he makes the argument that this could welcome further insight into the distinct perspectives and behaviors of fantasy football players, aligning well with my argument for their recognition as a distinct subculture. It is important to mention Dwyer's (2011) analysis because not only does it closely align with my own but I feel that it strengthens the credibility and telling power of the claims I am making within my own study.

Overall, I feel that the validity of this study is strong and that the overall effort was a great success. The importance of this research resides within the significance of sports in American society. Sports fans compose a large portion of the population and are informed through the influence of mediated technologies and their ability to reach a mass audience. Professional football is a widely consumed sport and many fans desire a more intimate and interactive experience with their interest. Fantasy football represents a progressive form of NFL fan, where players are encouraged to immerse themselves in the game of football to the extent that it becomes a part of their daily life. Anything that mass amounts of people are willing to engage in and consider a normative part of their lives should be something of interest to social and behavioral scholars.

This study will contribute to our understanding of professional football fans while also helping create a better knowledge base concerning online fantasy football players through using information already known about sports fans and the data collected. Viewing fantasy football as a subculture that is unique in comparison to traditional NFL fans is a way that we can gain a better understanding of these uniquely active sports fans. This can be accomplished by

uncovering information concerning their social identities, the presence of masculinities, and emotional protocols with respect to how this information contributes to a growing rendition of NFL fans. Fantasy football players are a subculture that is quickly gaining popularity and information from this study can be used as a conceptual foothold, where further studies can be designed in ways that build upon what we are discovering about this type of sports fan. Overall, this study provides foundational knowledge that is useful to sport sociology and sports fans. The spectator landscape in sports is changing and, like any complex social phenomena, there is a lot more that we can learn.

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Appendix A – Informed Consent

Informed Consent

I freely and voluntarily give my consent to be a participant entitled, "The Active Fan: Perspectives of Online Fantasy Football Players". The research is being conducted by Dr. Emily Boyd and Christopher Patera at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I understand that the purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of what factors are at work influencing online fantasy football players. I understand that interviews are expected to take one to three hours, with the possibility of greater amounts of time if the interview respondent has a great deal of experiences playing online fantasy football or if it is determined that additional time is needed.

I understand that I will be interviewed about my experiences by Christopher Patera, who will keep my responses confidential. I understand that nothing I say will be associated with my name or used in any ways that will identify me, my position, or my employer. I understand that my decision to participate in this research will not affect my relationship with Minnesota State, University, Mankato. I understand that I may be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview and/or participant observation. I understand that I may refuse to do either or both. I understand that any recording of my comments will be transcribed for research purposes only and destroyed within one year of the date they are recorded.

I understand that I may withdraw from participation in the research at any time by saying I wish to stop, withdraw, or refuse to answer a particular question.

I understand the risks associated with my participation in this study surround being asked to elaborate on negative emotional experiences through participating in fantasy football and that I may experience negative emotions when discussing my experiences. I understand that positive benefits include being asked to elaborate on information about successes, connections made, group affiliations, positive emotions, online identity, and group identity.

If I have questions, I understand that I can contact the secondary investigator Christopher Patera by phone at (612-387-9320) or by email at paterac@gmail.com. I can also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Emily Boyd, by phone (507-387-1375) or by email at emily.boyd@mnsu.edu. Christopher Patera guarantees the foregoing conditions to me in exchange for my agreement to participate in the research. I acknowledge that I may refuse to sign this form if I prefer to give verbal but not written consent to participate in the research.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the treatment of human subjects, contact: Dean Barry Ries, IRB Administrator, Minnesota State University, Mankato, Institutional Review Board, 115 Alumni Foundation, 56001, (507) 389-2321.

In checking the following categories, I indicate my willingness to participate in Dr. Emily Boyd and Christopher Patera's study.

____   I agree to be interviewed one-on-one

____   I agree to participate in participant observation

____   I agree for my interview(s) to be audio-recorded

Interviewee signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

☐   Check here if participant received copy of consent form

Appendix B – Interview Guide

Initial Questions

- Can you tell me about your earliest memories or experiences that involved NFL football?

- Can you describe any significant events that lead you to becoming an NFL fan?

- Thinking back to when you first became a fan, can you describe to me your perspective on NFL football? How, if at all, has that perspective changed?

- From your earliest memories, what did it mean to be an NFL fan back then? How did you represent yourself as a fan? Were there others who shared this with you? Who, if anyone, influenced your fan representation? What kinds of experiences did you have related to being an NFL fan?

Intermediate Questions

- What is the most important part of being an NFL fan?

- When did you start playing fantasy football? Why did you start playing? Had you ever done anything similar to fantasy football before joining? Why, if at all, is fantasy football important to you?

- How does being an NFL fan and fantasy football participant affect your daily life?

- What does being a fantasy football participant offer you? How does it affect your relationship with the NFL?

- How would you describe your experiences interacting with other fans of the NFL or other fantasy participants?

- What kinds of social relationships with others have you developed since becoming a fan? What kind of social relationships with others have you developed since becoming a

fantasy football player? What is significant about those relationships? Have you ever made a new friend through football?

- During any kind of NFL event, can you describe to me your experiences when it comes to interacting with other NFL fans? Does being a fantasy football player in any way influence your interactions with others when engaged in an NFL related event?

- Does being a fantasy football player affect the way you see or feel about the game?

- Do you feel that the NFL influences your emotions in any way? Can you describe to me any emotional experiences you've had related to NFL football? Have you ever experienced any emotions, positive or negative, related to something that's happened in fantasy football? Why were these experiences significant?

- How many fantasy football leagues do you participate in? Who is in your leagues? How do you guys go about organizing these leagues? How does participating in fantasy football affect your relationships with others in your leagues?

- How would you describe your interaction with other fantasy football players outside of your leagues or in real life? What is important, if anything, about those interactions?

- Does being a fantasy football player open up any opportunities for further involvement with the NFL for you as a fan?

- Can you describe your fantasy football profile? Why did you set it up in that way? Is your profiles appearance significant to other league members? Why or why not?

- How do you communicate with others in your league? What is that communication like? Do you feel there is significance in your communication with other league members?

- Can you describe to me any negative personal experiences you've had when interacting with other NFL either online or offline?

- How often do you check your fantasy football? Are you more involved with NFL football because you play fantasy football?

- Does being a fantasy football player place you at any advantage in comparison to other fans of the NFL? Why or why not?

- Why do you play fantasy football? Why do you think others play? If you knew someone interested in playing, what would you say to them?

- Have you ever developed a closer relationship to a team or player because you play fantasy football? Can you describe to me those experiences?

- What kinds of NFL merchandise do you own? What kinds of resources do you devote to your fantasy football leagues?

- How does being an NFL fan affect you at work? Do you share with your co workers that you play fantasy football? Why or why not?

- Is being a fan of the NFL significant to your family? Do you share with them that you play fantasy football?

- Do you see yourself as an NFL fan in the future? Do you see yourself playing fantasy football in the future? Why or why not?

- Can you describe to me how organizations affiliated with the NFL (like sponsors, news media, etc.) affect you as an NFL fan? As a fantasy player? What, if any, were those affects?

Ending Questions

- How has your perspective of the NFL changed since becoming a fantasy football player?

- How, if at all, has being a fantasy football player affected you personally as an individual? Tell me about any changes good or bad that you may have experienced or discovered through being a participant?

- How do you think others perceive you because you are an NFL fan? How do you think others perceive you because you play fantasy football? Has being a fan or a fantasy player affected your self-perception?

- After reflecting you your experiences as an NFL fan, is there any advice you would offer someone who is new to football?

- Is there anything that you may have not thought about before this interview that has occurred to you during this interview?

- Is there anything else you would like me to know about your NFL experience? Anything else you would like me to know about your experience as a fantasy football player?

- Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C - Interview Respondent Demographic Information

1. **FRANK**: Thirty year old, single, Caucasian male from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had full-time employment as a technical recruiter at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his personal residence located in Saint Louis Park, MN.

2. **JACK**: Twenty-six year old, married, Caucasian male from Edina, Minnesota.

He is college educated and was in the process of completing his last year of school for a law degree. Further, he also had part-time employment at a nearby county attorney's office. The interview took place at a Starbucks coffee location in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

3. **DOUGLAS:** Twenty-eight year old, single, Caucasian male from Coon Rapids, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had a full time job as a national account manager for a technology company at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his residence in Plymouth, Minnesota.

4. **BOBBY**: Thirty-one year old, married, Caucasian male from Hammond, Wisconsin.

He is college educated and had a full time job as a quality manager for a manufacturing company at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his residence in Hammond, Wisconsin.

5. **PATRICK**: Twenty-eight year old, single, Caucasian male from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had a full time job as an information technology manager for a software company at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his residence in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

6 .**BRAD**: Thirty-four year old, single, Hispanic male from Owatonna, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had a full time job as a national sales manager for a legal publication company at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his residence in Plymouth, Minnesota.

7. **ANDREW**: Twenty-eight year old, single, Greek male from Edina, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had a full time job as a restaurant manager for a fine dining organization at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his residence in Fridley, Minnesota.

8. **ADRIAN**: Twenty-nine year old, single, Jewish male from Armstrong, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had a full time job as a paraprofessional at an elementary school at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his residence in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

9. **CHAD**: Twenty-eight year old, married, Caucasian male from Edina, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had a full time job as an advertising professional at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at my residence in Saint Louis Park, Minnesota.

10. **DARREN**: Twenty-seven year old, single, Caucasian male from Minnetonka, Minnesota.

He is college educated and had a full time job as an information technology administrator at a data systems company at the time he was interviewed. The interview took place at his residence in Plymouth, Minnesota.