Is Fantasy Football's Popularity Decreasing Fan Attendance? : A Social Identity Perspective

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ABSTRACT

When most people think of football they think of specific teams and the fans associated with the team. Fans close identification with their team has made the National Football League (NFL), the most popular sports league in the United States. However, the NFL faces an interesting dilemma as fans are becoming more involved with league oriented activities, such as fantasy football, versus team specific activities which causes a dichotomy in league growth. Growth is increasingly being driven by league level activities, such as television and fantasy sports, while the core component of team revenues, game attendance, decreased from 2007 to 2010.

This paper takes a social identity perspective to examine the changing nature of the NFL fan. The social identity perspective states that people define and evaluate themselves in terms of the group to which they belong. Individuals can have as many social identities as groups they belong to, and in the NFL example fans can identify themselves with a specific team or in terms of another social group, fantasy football participant. In this scenario, the individual teams serve as distinct subgroup identities and the fantasy football player as a superordinate identity since it includes participation from all 32 NFL teams. Superordinate groups occur when multiple subgroups recategorize themselves into a single identity which improves intergroup relations.

This research examines the question of whether fans are increasingly developing a superordinate identity, exemplified by fantasy football, which is decreasing their identification with the local team, the subgroup identity? In order to examine this phenomenon, we explore the changing use of NFL fan message boards.

While we expected to find that fans are increasingly adopting their league wide identity, which results in a decrease in identification with the local team, what may actually be happening is that fans are forming a dual identity with the league and the team. This dual identity has a potentially negative impact for local teams as fans adopt the low cost superordinate identity, watching at home, versus the high cost subordinate identity, watching in the stadium.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stefan Sleep is a third year doctoral student in the Marketing department at the University of Georgia, Terry College of Business. He graduated with dual bachelor’s degrees in Finance and History from the University of Pennsylvania. He also holds an MBA in Marketing from the New York University, Stern School of Business. Prior to enter the doctoral program, Stefan spent several years in administrative roles at Emory University’s Goizueta Business School and the Yale School of Management. Prior to that, he held consulting roles with IBM and Mercer Human Resources Consulting.