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The Fantasy Focus: A content analysis of sports magazines examining the rise in popularity of fantasy games

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The Fantasy Focus: A content analysis of sports magazines examining the rise in popularity of fantasy games

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Perley Isaac Reed School of Journalism at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Journalism

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Abstract

Fantasy sports (FS) have become a mass phenomenon; it has been estimated that close to thirty million people play some form of fantasy sports, creating a multi-billion dollar market whose popularity and visibility have grown exponentially since its inception. This research examined the rise in popularity of FS with the Diffusion of Innovations theory used as a framework. A content analysis was conducted to gain insight on FS and various topics linked with the games, including social dynamics, gambling associations, and gender issues. Two coders examined fantasy content taken from issues of ESPN magazine, Sports Illustrated, and Sporting News from all of 1999, 2000, 2001, as well as March (start of baseball season), August (start of football season), and October (start of basketball season/only month when all three leagues are active) of 2007, 2008, and 2009. The study found a major increase in FS content in all three magazines examined, both in quantity and length of articles. There was also an increase in the number of players mentioned per article, with additional findings, discussions, limitations, and suggestions for future research included.

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"I'd like to apologize to all the fantasy football players out there. Sorry for taking the knee."
-- Jacksonville running back Maurice Jones-Drew, on taking a knee at the 1-yard line in the final minute of the Jags' win, so Jacksonville could run down the clock and kick a field goal to win without giving New York another possession (King, 2009).

Introduction

It has been estimated that close to thirty million people play some form of fantasy sports, creating a multi-billion dollar market whose popularity and visibility have grown exponentially since its inception in the late 1970s (Bills, 2008). Fantasy sports have become a mass phenomenon, no longer considered an activity for outcasts and the socially challenged. Fans have always found ways to connect to the sports they love; fantasy sports are another way to do so. They also provide an opportunity to keep in touch with friends and family, as well as connect people with similar interests. They allow participants to connect with professional athletes, and the people who manage them. A variety of games are available to play on the Internet, including Fantasy Bass-Fishing, Fantasy NASCAR, Fantasy Congress, and fantasy games based on the outcomes of reality television shows. There is even a Fantasy Celebrity League, where points are awarded every time a celebrity is mentioned in the media (Bahney, 2006). Fantasy sports have grown to become the most popular online game genre in the world (Evans, 2007), and in many ways have come to rival in popularity the professional sports they reference and emulate.

There has been a large growth in fantasy sport coverage since this increase in popularity. For years, fantasy games were considered a small cottage industry that mainstream media rarely acknowledged. That changed when millions started to play, and fantasy sports content became one of the best ways to connect with sports fans (Umstead, 2003). Today there are entire shows, segments, and articles that are dedicated solely to fantasy sports. Often when a trade in the NBA

or MLB is made, one of the first things analyzed is the fantasy impact. Sports media also began

focusing on statistics-oriented reporting, weather broadcasts, and injury news to help fantasy

owners prepare their lineups. A study researching fantasy sports in the mass media found that

fantasy sports content is best suited for Internet, where text and video without restriction can be

combined. Fantasy content is not often used in radio because it does not translate well in an

audio-only medium. Fantasy games do well on cable television, but not at a local level

(Woodward, 2005). Few conclusions have been made about fantasy content in print media,

however. This could be because most academic studies on fantasy sports thus far revolve around

the Internet.

Despite the dearth of research, it is evident that sports magazines that cover the sports

world have taken notice of the fantasy phenomenon. Sporting magazines such as Sports

Illustrated and ESPN magazine dedicate regularly appearing space and special sections at the

beginning of each professional sport's season to fantasy. The Sporting News turned to fantasy

sports after research showed so many of their readers were involved (Woodward, 2005). David

Young of TalentedMrRoto.com recalls looking for fantasy advice from Sports Illustrated in the

mid-1990s: "It was less conspicuous and less frequent [than now]. Right now they're running a

column a day, whereas before … it was maybe two or three pieces of information a week"

(Woodward, 2005, p. 40). Ladd Biro, whose fantasy football column is syndicated across the

country, observed that magazines are including fantasy sports as content, or including references

to fantasy sports in sports news, like never before (Woodward, 2005).

What this indicates is a change in subject matter covered in sports magazines after the

rise in fantasy sports popularity. The purpose of this study is to examine that change in sports

magazines content. This research will fill a niche in past literature by examining how fantasy

sports have evolved in print media. This study will offer an over-time analysis of how the

world's most popular online game has affected the world's most traditional media.

Literature Review

Fantasy Sports and the Media

Fantasy sports integrated into the mainstream media in 1998 or 1999, when media companies premiered their own fantasy games on the Internet. Mass media decision-makers were slow to become interested in fantasy sports because they perceived fantasy-players as undesirable. Media focused on the fantasy audience only after they began to see it as large enough to generate advertising revenues (Woodward, 2005). This information will provide a foundation for insight into when fantasy content began to arrive.

Mass media managers were slow to become interested in fantasy sports because they felt the games catered to a select few. The Sporting News, for example, became interested in fantasy only after its Internet rivals, ESPN.com and SportsLine.com, began coverage in the late 1990s. They also conducted audience surveys to evaluate the popularity of its content (Woodward, 2005). This information suggests that the magazines did not offer fantasy content all at once, and that there is an order to when sports magazines started to use FS content. Another discovery is the fact that larger media companies with greater assets are more likely to use fantasy sports in their content. ESPN News reaches seventy million households and has heavy fantasy content, while WFAA-TV in Dallas reaches two million and generally ignores fantasy. Another example is that FOX, CBS, and ESPN, who have the largest sports-viewing audience, use fantasy regularly, while ABC and NBC do not. From this, it can be determined that magazines with larger circulations will need to be examined.

Woodward also found that print media is not as dedicated to fantasy sports as other media. Fantasy use is more prevalent on television and the Internet (2005). This is confirmed by

another study, which found that fantasy football players use Internet, television, and radio media more than fans that do not play. Fantasy players do not read more newspapers or magazines, however (Comeau, 2007). This could be because information is needed quickly to be effective in fantasy sports, and print media lags in delivering news as timely as Internet and television. What this indicates is that information in print will be more general than content found online and television. Perhaps also, fantasy content found in magazines will direct readers to their websites, where information can be updated more regularly.

Effect on Users

Fantasy sports and gambling have always been associated together, despite the court's ruling that the payment of an entry fee to participate in a fantasy sports league is not wagering, betting, or staking money (Moorman, 2008). A study analyzed the similarities between fantasy baseball and gambling by using qualitative analyses of Internet postings to find criteria similar to pathological gambling. The values, norms, and language of the game were investigated, and positive and negative consequences were drawn. The study found that FS players are developing analytical and problem solving skills, as well as using the game as an outlet for their competitive drives. The most commonly cited benefit found, however, was social in nature. The game provides a connection for those who participate. Negative consequences include a perversion of rooting interests. In other words, users stop caring about who wins, and instead focus on individual statistics. Traditional virtues such as teamwork and sacrifice are eradicated. The researchers also observed that five of the 10 criteria for pathological gambling were present. This criteria included excessive thinking about the game, inability to stop or cut back, playing to get away from problems, needing more where less used to do the trick, and problems in one's personal life due to playing (Bernhard & Eade, 2005). Since FS and gambling are closely

connected, this could point to gambling terms being used in fantasy sport media. Phrases like "bet big on this player" and "expect him to bust" are terminology that may confirm this relationship. It is also possible that FS content has gotten more in-depth over the years, as the magazines match demand for a game where needing more where less used to do the trick and an inability to stop or cut back is present.

Along with parallels to gambling, it has also been found that fantasy sport league participation reinforces masculine privilege and hegemonic ideologies in the spectatorship of sports. Masculinity can be defined as placing emphasis on strength, aggression, competition, control, bonding, and gender differences (Davis & Duncan, 2006). Women rarely play fantasy sports, perhaps because of the high level of competition, and the fact that men's sports are used more than women's. Researchers suggest that fantasy sports are another way men symbolically bolster their superiority over women in the sports domain. Masculine characteristics present in FS participation include control, competition, bonding, and the necessity and importance of sports knowledge. The study suggests that "in many respects, fantasy sport leagues act as an 'Old Boy's Club' that allows men to communally meet, bond, and redefine what it is to be masculine" (Davis & Duncan, 2006, p. 261). This idea is supported by the profile of the average participant: well-educated professionals with enough disposable income for computers, the Internet, and cable television (Davis & Duncan, 2006). There have been new developments since these findings, however. Female participation in FS has increased substantially. In 2007, roughly 15% of the fantasy-sports-playing population was female. This rise could be because men do not have a physical advantage over women in fantasy sports, as they may in certain real-life athletics (Lorge, 2007). The presence of women could change the dynamic, perhaps

rendering this study askew. What this indicates is a possible change in tone of FS content now that more females are playing fantasy sports.

Another study provides in-depth information about the different types of fantasy players, and how they differ in personalities and motivations. Participants answered questions about fantasy sports and arousal, control, escape, social interaction, and entertainment. The research discovered five types of fantasy sports users: casual players, skilled players, isolationist thrill-seekers, trash-talkers, and formatives. The article summarized every group and the differences in characteristics and motivations, supplying facts about each. Surprisingly, social interaction was ranked low as a motivation to play (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007). This contradicts previous findings, which ranked interaction as a primary reason to play. This could be because after becoming increasingly invested with fantasy sports, control and competition became more important than social interaction.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

In this study, Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory will be used as a framework. Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) examines the process in which an innovation is communicated and spread through a social system. It will be used because fantasy sports are an innovation. Diffusion of Innovation helps examine the question, "why did this idea catch on and become popular?" For this study, it will help explain the increase in fantasy sports content within sporting magazines. Rogers (2003) describes DOI as a social process where new ideas are communicated through channels, over time, among members of a social system (p. 36). An innovation is any idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual. The perception of newness is subjective -- whether an idea is actually "new" matters little. The

majority considers fantasy sports a "new" innovation, despite the fact that it was created decades ago.

Many believe that innovations with obvious benefits will sell themselves, and diffuse rapidly, assuming that the advantages of using the innovation will be widely realized. Most innovations, however, diffuse at an incredibly slow rate, despite obvious advantages. For example, FS became popular in the late 1990s, despite being developed thirty years prior (Kelly, 2008). The game became popular in large part due to increased use of the Internet. It allowed participants to track more statistics and build a deeper knowledge of how the game works. Participants no longer had to spend hours using published box scores to calculate statistics by hand. Complicated computations were done instantaneously and accurately, and more overall sports knowledge was accessible (Davis & Duncan, 2006). Although fantasy sports have been around for decades, the Internet helped facilitate their diffusion.

There are perceived attributes of innovations that help to explain their different rates of adoption. The greater the perceived relative advantage of an innovation, the more rapid its rate of adoption will be. Compatibility is also essential; it must remain consistent with existing values and experiences. New ideas that are simpler to understand are adopted more rapidly than those that require individuals to learn new skills (Rogers, 2003). For example, the Internet made fantasy sport calculations easier; individuals no longer had to hunt through newspaper box scores to find statistics, and led to an ease of use (and more than likely an increase in popularity). Finally, the easier it is for individuals to see results from using the innovation, the higher the chance it will be adopted. As previously mentioned, people can benefit from playing FS via factors of control, escape, social interaction, and entertainment (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007).

A communication channel is how messages get from one person to another. Diffusion is a particular type of communication because the message content exchanged involves a new idea. When broken down, the process involves an innovation, a unit (such as an individual) that has knowledge of, or has experienced using, the innovation, another unit that does not yet have knowledge of, or experience with, this innovation, and a communication channel connecting the two. Mass media channels are the most rapid and efficient means of informing an audience of potential adopters (Rogers, 2003). For example, there are surely people who discovered FS by reading about them in sporting magazines. Interpersonal channels, however, are much more effective in persuading an individual to accept a new idea. While exposure to fantasy sports via mass media occurs, it is common to become involved through a friend or colleague (interpersonal channel), who initiates participation by invitation.

The time dimension is examined at different points, including the process an individual undergoes from first knowledge of an innovation through its adoption or rejection, the relative earliness/lateness with which an innovation is adopted compared to other members of a system, and the innovations rate of adoption in a system. The innovation-decision process is an information-seeking activity. The length of time it takes to complete this information-seeking depends on the individual's threshold for innovation. These classifications include innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2003).

Innovators actively seek information about new ideas, have a high degree of mass media exposure, and they tend to have a large network. Usually they have large financial resources, the ability to understand complex technological knowledge, and a tolerance for high levels of uncertainty (Rogers, 2003). ESPN and CBS, for example, were the innovators of the media world, as they were among the first to adopt fantasy sports (Woodward, 2005). The members of

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the early majority are the most numerous category (making up one third of society), and rarely

hold positions of leadership in a system. The Sporting News would be considered a part of the

early majority, as they adopted FS only after they realized many of their readers were involved.

Sports Illustrated and FOX are among the late majority (Woodward, 2005). Most of the

uncertainty of an innovation must be removed for the late majority to adopt. They adopt just

after the average member of a system, usually with economic necessity and peer pressure playing

a part of the decision-making process. Laggards are the last to adopt; they are suspicious of, and

resist, innovation. They do not want anything to do with fantasy sports, as they make their

decisions based on what has been done in the past (Rogers, 2003).

Hypotheses

Although fantasy sports have been adopted in popular culture and mass media, there have been few academic studies that examine how fantasy sports have evolved in mass media. Other studies have focused primarily on fantasy sports content on the Internet and in broadcast media. The present study will center on print media, and explore how the cultural phenomenon of fantasy sports has evolved in sports magazines. Based on preview literature, the following hypotheses will be tested:

According to previous studies, FS began to integrate into the mainstream media in 1999 when media began to think FS was large enough to generate revenues (Woodward, 2005). Currently, FS are the most popular online game genre in the world (Evans, 2007), and in many ways have come to rival in popularity the professional sports they reference and emulate.

H1: Sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 will have more fantasy sport-related content than those from 1999 - 2001.

Research that links FS to gambling has found that players excessively think about the game, need more where less used to do the trick, and are unable to stop or cut back (Bernhard & Eade, 2005). This, along with evidence that magazines change content to match reader demand (Johnson & Prijatel, 2007), suggests that FS users require information about more players than they did before.

H2: Sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 will mention more players in fantasy sport-related content than from 1999 - 2001.

Fantasy sports were once found to reinforce masculine privilege (Davis & Duncan, 2006).

Female participation rose, however, when the early majority adapted fantasy sports (Lorge, 2007). Based on this, exploring if FS became more gender-neutral is testable.

H3: Sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 will contain less FS content with a masculine tone than those from 1999 - 2001.

Fantasy sports are no longer played for social interaction, as motivation for playing has shifted to competition and control. There is less emphasis on behavior that involves creating and maintaining relationships (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007). Despite the fact that FS is now a widespread phenomenon, there is reason to believe that the game has become less social. Perhaps then references that involve interaction between FS players will be fewer. A social interaction can be defined as any act, actions, or practices between two or more FS users (Rummel, 1976).

H4: Sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 will contain fewer references to social interactions between FS users than those from 1999 - 2001.

Method

For this study, a content analysis of articles found within sporting magazines was conducted. The techniques used were well-established in the methodological literature and have been performed in previous studies that involve magazine content. Two coders examined fantasy content taken from issues of ESPN magazine, Sports Illustrated, and Sporting News from all of 1999, 2000, 2001, as well as March (start of baseball season), August (start of football season), and October (start of basketball season/only month when all three leagues are active) of 2007, 2008, and 2009. These magazines were identified as appropriate data for this study for several reasons, including DOI classifications. It has been established that ESPN be classified as a FS innovator, The Sporting News an early adopter, and Sports Illustrated a part of the late majority (Woodward, 2005). They are also periodically released -- ESPN magazine and The Sporting News publish two issues a month, and Sports Illustrated releases publications every week (not counting special editions). Additionally, these magazines reach a large amount of people. In 2005, Sports Illustrated had an average circulation of 3.23 million, ESPN magazine had a circulation of 1.89 million, and The Sporting News trailed with a circulation of 715,767 (Bosman, 2006).

This study's timeline is a result of the hypotheses, which determined the nature of the data required to test (Marsh & White, 2006). The first three years examined (1999 - 2001) are when FS began to integrate into the mainstream media, and also when all three magazines were in publication (ESPN magazine's first full year was 1999). The later years (2007 - 2009) were the most current available. As the study developed, it became apparent that examining only March, August, and October of 1999 to 2001 would be insufficient, as only ESPN magazine featured fantasy content on a semi-regular basis. More articles became available when the

search broadened and the entire year's worth of magazines was examined, allowing a more appropriate amount of data for comparison to be found. When conducting a content analysis of hard-to-find messages, the population may be defined by the availability of materials, as the researcher has no notion ahead of time as to how many messages might be in the population. Further, in the case of a small population, all units in the population may be included in the study. This is preferred over drawing a smaller representative sample of the population (Neuendorf, 2002).

This study focused only on articles that contained content on fantasy sports. Although FS content could be considered ubiquitous within the pages of sports magazines, some of this content is embedded with implicit direction. Fantasy content typically appears in a regularly appearing space or in a special section (Woodward, 2005). The author pulled only content from those spaces. A general baseball article in Sports Illustrated that contained statistics that could be considered relevant to fantasy sports was not included in this study, for example. Nor would an article where the main focus was on a particular sport or player, and a casual reference to FS was made.

This content analysis was conducted on all editorial content, including, but not limited to, articles, advice columns, editorials, and bulletins that dealt with fantasy sports in that space. Even articles that simply referenced that there was FS content available on the magazine's website were counted. On many occasions (especially in the later years) articles would appear under a labeled FS section of the magazine, often authored by the same FS expert. These regularly appearing columns were entitled "The Gamer" and "Fantasy Source," and allowed for easy identification. Since FS content is often grouped together within these magazines, it should be noted that articles were counted separate from each other when they had different titles and/or

authors. This includes position preview articles (found in "Draft Guide" issues), where an author gives extensive advice at each specific position. Each position was counted as a separate article, because the article titles and information were different from each other. Additionally, a numbered list of player rankings, content that often had no listed author, was counted as a separate article.

In total, 266 articles (n=266) were found in these magazines and coded for this study. There were 75 FS articles (n=75) identified from 1999, 2000, and 2001, and 191 FS articles (n=191) from March, August, and October of 2007, 2008, and 2009. The breakdown of articles per magazine was as follows: Sports Illustrated, n=62; The Sporting News, n=65; ESPN magazine, n=139. All issues were found via West Virginia University and Ohio State University libraries, as well as on the respective magazines' websites. It should be noted that two issues of The Sporting News could not be located (Volume 232, Issues 39 and 41). Also, the July 30, 2007 and July 28, 2008 issues of ESPN magazine were examined, as these issues are considered August editions, and were released on the Monday of a week that rolled into August.

The primary coder was the author, a graduate student and creator of the coding system. For the purpose of reliability, a second reviewer was trained and independently coded 52% of the articles. The second reviewer coded articles from both time periods, as well as content from all three magazines examined. There was a .9137 percent agreement between the two, and a Cohen's kappa coefficient of .783 (calculated using SPSS) was achieved. Both coders analyzed each article for the following:

Article Length

Coders analyzed the magazine articles by counting how many paragraphs the article contained. The coder marked the article short if it was fewer than four paragraphs, medium if between four and six paragraphs, and a major article if more than six paragraphs. Many articles contained a lead-in, followed by a short paragraph. The lead-in was considered a part of the first paragraph, and not a paragraph on its own. Articles often seamlessly divided into separate sections with subheads, usually pertaining to the different actions one should take with players (ex. "Who to Drop" and "Who to Add"). These subheads were counted as separate paragraphs. Often a player's name appeared separate from the majority of the article, with a small amount of information about him included. This short blurb was only counted as a paragraph if it was two or more sentences in length. If the article contained only player rankings, then the coder marked it short if one to ten players were ranked, medium for 11 to 50, and large if 50+ were mentioned.

Players Mentioned

Coders counted the number of players mentioned in the article. Players mentioned more than once in the same article were only counted once. A player referred to by his nickname was counted (ex. Shaquille O'Neal is often referred to as 'Shaq'). Players that are not in the league anymore were also counted (ex. "Kobe Bryant is capable of putting up similar numbers to Michael Jordan"). Team executives and coaches were not counted, even if they were former players. Nor were players that have awards named after him (ex. "He could win the Cy Young this year"). Football team defenses were not counted as a "player", unless included in a ranking format.

Social Interaction

Coders counted references that involved the FS user and interaction with others in their league. For this study, a social interaction was defined as any act, actions, or practices between two or more FS users. That is, any behavior that tries to affect or take account of each other's subjective experiences or intentions. Since this study investigates print content, only manifest social interactions were counted; latent interactions were not (Rummel, 1976). Examples include suggestions that the reader add a player before someone else in the league does, references to which manager in the league the reader should target for a trade, and draft stories that involve multiple people. References to fantasy owners as a general group were not counted (ex. "Fantasy owners should pick up this player"). References about an individual interacting with a group were counted (ex. "Either way you will be competing with owners from across the world" or "Take some money from your league friends"). Several articles included two FS experts debating over a player, which often led to an exchange between the two that was coded as an interaction (ex. "Brandon doesn't like Warrick Dunn. Well, I do.") These were counted as social interactions because in these articles the authors assume the role of FS players, debating the value of a particular player. There were a few occasions where the author of an article would write pretend interactions between FS users, which were counted (ex. "Owner A waives a player knowing Owner B has the top waiver spot"). Pretend interactions between the author and a ballplayer were not counted, however (ex. "If only Vince Carter knew how much I hated him for getting injured after I drafted him so high").

Tone

Based on the article content, coders determined whether the article had a masculine tone, feminine tone, or was gender neutral. Borrowing from Davis and Duncan (2006), masculine tone can be defined as placing emphasis on strength, aggression, competition, control, bonding, and gender differences. Further, mass media scholars have noted that the most desired masculine practice reinforces and requires demonstrations of heterosexuality, aggression, and assertiveness among men (Connell, 2005). In order to fully exhaust the category of tone, articles that included an emphasis on community and achieving understanding more so than changing others via persuasion were coded as feminine (Foss, 2008). Borrowing from Lemish (2008), a feminine representation in language also includes an emphasis on emotions, sensitivity to surroundings, romance, and family. An article was marked neutral if there was an absence of the gender-specific themes mentioned above (Nelson, 2000). Masculine terms relevant to the actual sport, such as "passing attack" or "blitz" in football and "man-to-man defense" or "power forward" in basketball, were not used as factors to determine if an article should be coded as masculine, as those phrases relate to the sports themselves, and not fantasy games.

Results

Hypothesis one contended that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would have more fantasy sport-related content than those from 1999 - 2001. This hypothesis was supported by frequency data, both in quantity and length of articles. There were a total of 75 fantasy sport articles found in the three magazines examined for all of 1999, 2000, and 2001. Only three months from 2007, 2008, and 2009 were analyzed, yet there were 191 articles about fantasy sports found. There was a major increase in FS content in all three magazines examined. ESPN magazine (N=139) had an 89.58% increase (48 early / 91 late), The Sporting News (N=65) had a 206.25% increase (16 early / 49 late), and Sports Illustrated (N=62) had a 363.64% increase (11 early / 51 late).

Additionally, 19.37% (37 out of 191) of all articles from 2007 - 2009 were coded as short in length with fewer than four paragraphs, a decrease from 24% (18 out of 75) in articles found from 1999 - 2001. There were also more major articles coded from 2007 - 2009. 24.61% (47 out of 191) of articles were coded as having more than six paragraphs, an increase from 18.67% (14 out of 75) in 1999 - 2001. Articles coded as medium, four to six paragraphs in length, remained constant; 57.34% (43 out of 75) of articles from 1999 - 2001 were coded as such, as were 56.02% (107 out of 191) of articles found from 2007 - 2009.

Hypothesis two contended that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would mention more players in fantasy sport-related content than from 1999 - 2001. This hypothesis was supported. A total of 1290 players were referenced in the 75 articles coded from 1999 - 2001, producing an average of 17.2 players mentioned per article. There were 5507 players referenced in the 191

articles coded from 2007 - 2009, producing an average of 28.8 players mentioned per article. That is an increase of 10.6 players mentioned per article.

Further, it is worth noting that two Sports Illustrated articles from 1999 - 2001 ranked 264 and 265 baseball players, respectively. These articles were entitled "Player Value Rankings," and were counted as FS articles despite not being labeled as such. The author made the decision to code them as FS articles because the projections were based on statistics that coordinate with fantasy baseball and did not include any non-fantasy criteria (such as fielding, leadership ability, salary, etc.) Without those two articles, the players mentioned per article during 1999 - 2001 were significantly lower, going from 17.2 to 10.4.

Hypothesis three contended that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would have less masculine fantasy sport-related content than those from 1999 - 2001. This hypothesis was supported. No articles in this study were found to have a feminine tone. In total, 37.33% (28 out of 75) articles from 1999 - 2001 were found to have a masculine tone, with the remainder found to be gender neutral in tone. This decreased to 12.04% (23 out of 191) in the magazine articles coded from 2007 - 2009.

A breakdown of the numbers separating the three magazines reveals more information, however. Between 1999 - 2001, there were 11 FS articles found in Sports Illustrated and 16 found in The Sporting News, none of which were found to be masculine in tone. During that same period, 58.3% of articles (28 out of the 48) found in ESPN magazine were found to be masculine in tone. During 2007 - 2009, masculinity in tone actually increased within Sports Illustrated and The Sporting News; 9.8% (5 out of 51) of Sports Illustrated articles were coded masculine, as were 4.1% (2 out of 49) of Sporting News articles. Evidence of masculinity in

ESPN magazine decreased, however, with 17.6% (16 out of 91) articles being masculine in tone. This means that articles from Sports Illustrated and The Sporting News from 2007 - 2009 were more masculine than those from 1999 - 2001. ESPN magazine had such a significant drop in the number of articles that were masculinity in tone, however, that the hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis four contended that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would contain fewer references to social interactions between FS users than those from 1999 - 2001. This hypothesis was supported. There were 28 references to social interactions between FS users in the 75 articles coded from 1999 - 2001. Those 28 references came from 28 articles; no article from 1999 - 2001 contained more than one reference to social interaction between FS users. There were 50 references to social interactions between FS users in the 191 articles coded from 2007 - 2009. Those 50 references came from 26 articles. Only 13.6% (26 out of 191) of articles from 2007 - 2009 referenced social interactions between FS users, a decrease from 37.3% (28 out of 75) of articles from 1999 - 2001. When these references are counted separately from articles and are examined purely by total, the hypothesis is also supported. There were 50 references to social interactions between FS users in the 191 articles coded from 2007 - 2009, producing an average of .26 mentions per article (50 in 191). That is a decrease from 1999 - 2001, when there were an average of .37 mentions per article (28 in 75).

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to offer an over-time analysis of how the popularity of fantasy sports has affected sports magazines. The results supported the first hypothesis that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would have more fantasy sport-related content than those from 1999 - 2001. There was a major increase in FS content in all three magazines examined, both in quantity and length of articles. In terms of content, ESPN magazine had an 89.58% increase in FS content between the two time frames. The Sporting News had a 206.25% increase, and Sports Illustrated had a 363.64% increase. Additionally, the more recent magazines had a 5.94% increase of articles over six paragraphs length, and a 4.63% decrease of articles fewer than four paragraphs.

Hypothesis two contended that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would mention more players in fantasy sport-related content than from 1999 - 2001. This hypothesis was supported, with an increase of 10.6 players mentioned per article during the two time frames. A total of 17.2 players were mentioned per article from 1999 - 2001. There was an average of 28.8 players mentioned per article from 2007 - 2009. Further, it is worth noting that two Sports Illustrated articles from 1999 - 2001 ranked 264 and 265 baseball players, respectively. These articles were entitled "Player Value Rankings", and were counted as FS articles despite not being labeled as such. The author made the decision to code them as FS articles because the projections were based on statistics that coordinate with fantasy baseball, and did not include any non-fantasy criteria (such as fielding, leadership ability, salary, etc.) Without those two articles, the players mentioned per article during 1999 - 2001 were significantly lower, going from 17.2 to 10.4.

Hypothesis three, which stated that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would have less masculine fantasy sport-related content than those from 1999 - 2001, was supported. In total, 37.33% articles from 1999 - 2001 were found to have a masculine tone. This decreased to 12.04% in the articles coded from 2007 - 2009. A breakdown of the numbers separating the three magazines, however, reveals that masculinity in tone actually increased within Sports Illustrated and The Sporting News. Masculinity in tone within ESPN magazine, on the other hand, decreased from 58.3% to 17.6% during the two time frames. This means that articles from Sports Illustrated and The Sporting News from 2007 - 2009 were more masculine than those from 1999 - 2001. However, ESPN magazine had such a significant drop in the number of articles that were masculine in tone that the hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis four contended that sports magazines from 2007 - 2009 would contain fewer references to social interactions between FS users than those from 1999 - 2001. This hypothesis was supported. Only 13.6% of articles from 2007 - 2009 referenced social interactions between FS users, a decrease from 37.3% of articles from 1999 - 2001. Additionally, there was an average of .26 mentions per article from 2007 - 2009. That is a decrease from 1999 - 2001, when there was an average of .37 mentions per article.

All four hypotheses were supported, providing an over-time analysis of how the popularity of fantasy sports has affected sports magazines. The following discussion topics are observations that emerged during the study:

Changes in Content

This research found that there was a large increase of FS content in all three magazines. More frequent, longer articles were written by multiple authors in the later years observed. In many ways, FS have indeed come to rival in popularity the professional sports they reference and emulate. Sports Illustrated has a section entitled "Inside the Week in Sports" that runs towards the beginning of the magazine, highlighting the top five topics of the week. In one issue during the football season, "Fantasy Football: Pick up the kicker from one of the league's best offenses" was described as a topic for the week (2008). When the selection of a fantasy kicker is considered important within the week of sports, it seems that the relevance of fantasy sports has indeed approached that of professional sports.

Another interesting change noticed was the combining of fantasy content with non-fantasy information. Sports Illustrated and ESPN magazine had several articles in more recent years that did this. An example is a 2009 draft preview article that highlights which starting pitchers one should draft for the upcoming year. The article was labeled as a FS article and included player rankings and advice, but primarily focused on the story of Tim Lincecum, the top-ranked fantasy pitcher of the year. Details of Lincecum's childhood, family life, and collegiate career were discussed; it was as if the story was trying to please both the fantasy population and the non-fantasy crowd who were only interested in Lincecum. It will be interesting to see if this emerges as a new trend, and the lines between reporting on FS and traditional sports are further blurred.

Players Mentioned/Gambling

There was a noticeable difference between the two time periods in the type of information available. The majority of the early articles suggested the reader go online for more content, gave advice as to which players to start or bench, and had tips on which player the reader should add to his or her team. This changed in the articles from the later years, which included much more detailed information. Examples include articles dedicated to which coaches are most likely to allow their players to steal bases, how a change in pitching coaches during the offseason could affect certain pitchers, what players are in their contract year and have extra motivation to play well, how off-field legal issues could affect players, detailed injury trends, etc. This supports research that links FS to gambling where it was found that players excessively think about the game, need more where less used to do the trick, and are unable to stop or cut back (Bernhard & Eade, 2005). This additionally ties in with the increase of 10.6 players mentioned per article between the two time frames, supporting the suggestion that FS users require information about more players than they did before. It is clear that components of FS play are similar to gambling culture. Like in gambling, a combination of luck and strategic decisions are used in FS to determine outcomes. FS content has become more in-depth over the years, as the magazines match FS users' demand for more detailed information that helps them become better equipped to make strategic decisions and win their leagues.

Social Interaction

Despite the fact that FS is now a widespread phenomenon, it seems to be that the game has become less social. DOI suggests that interpersonal channels help an innovation adapt (Rogers, 2003). However, now that FS have completely diffused it appears that the social dynamics of the game are no longer in the forefront. FS articles now primarily revolve around information-gathering and statistics rather than creating and maintaining relationships. Even the entertainment benefits of playing FS are rarely acknowledged; very few articles indicated that participating in the game should lead to some type of enjoyment for the user. A 2007 ESPN article displays that there has indeed been a change in the social dynamics of FS games. The article details the life of fantasy judges, who are paid professionals that are contracted to resolve disputes that arise in FS leagues (Kix, 2007). It seems that FS are no longer entertaining games that one plays with family and friends. After becoming increasingly invested in FS, there is more of a focus on the game's outcome than the entertainment it provides. The themes that arose from the articles in this study illustrate that most FS users take the games very seriously, and are motivated primarily by competition and control. This supports previous research on the topic (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007).

Tone

There was a noticeable difference in the tone of the articles between the two time periods examined. Early articles tended to paint fantasy players in an unfavorable line; there was a lot of criticism and self-deprecation found within the articles. Quite a few demonstrations of heterosexuality, aggression, and assertiveness stemmed from this, creating masculine rhetoric. Later articles generally held FS in a much more positive tone; articles constantly referenced professional athletes and celebrities playing FS, and even occasionally highlighted everyday fantasy players and their achievements. It seems that FS became more socially acceptable between the two time periods and the articles tones became more gender neutral as a result. While articles with masculine tones were found during both time periods, it is interesting that several articles from 2007 - 2009 were co-authored by females. There will always be masculinity associated with FS because the sports on which the games are based are played by men, but it appears that the emergence of females playing has reduced FS as a means to reinforcing masculine privilege. Additionally, FS articles from 2007 - 2009 seemed much more segmented, containing short blurbs of statistics and more player rankings in place of the early FS articles that gave general advice. There appeared to be less opportunity for tone as content became more statistical in nature.

Theoretical Connection

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory was used as a framework for this study to help examine the process in which an innovation (fantasy sports) is communicated and spread through a social system (sports magazines). This research confirms that ESPN magazine was an innovator of the media world, as it was among the first to adopt fantasy sports. The magazine had a regularly appearing article about fantasy sports in 1999, before Sports Illustrated and The Sporting News. The Sporting News did not begin to provide any fantasy content until 2001, when it began a regularly appearing article that gave weekly advice about fantasy football. The Sporting News would be considered a part of the early majority, as they adopted FS only after they realized many of their readers were involved. Sports Illustrated was among the late majority in the sports magazine world. Although it mentioned there was content available on its website, there was no regularly appearing space dedicated to FS during 1999 - 2001.

It is worth noting that The Sporting News had a significant drop in FS content after 2007. There were a total of 43 articles found in the months coded from 2007, and only six combined found in same months in 2008 and 2009. This could be labeled as a discontinuance, which is when there is a decision to reject an innovation after it has already been adopted (Rogers, 2003). Possible reasons for this discontinuance include a change of management and/or philosophy, or a decision to place all FS content online.

The year 2007 appears to be a pivotal year for the rate of adoption of FS as an innovation. According to Rogers, "…when the number of individuals adopting a new idea is plotted on a cumulative frequency basis over time, the resulting distribution is an S-shaped curve. At first, only a few individuals adopt the innovation in each time period (a year or a month, for

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example)…Soon the diffusion curve begins to climb, as more and more individuals adopt in each succeeding time period. Eventually, the trajectory of the rate of adoption begins to level off... Finally, the S-shaped curve reaches its asymptote, and the diffusion process is finished" (Rogers, 2003, p.23). 2007 appears to be when FS content within sports magazines reached its peak; all three magazines analyzed had a drop in the number of articles found, both from 2007 to 2008, and from 2008 to 2009.

Limitations

 While this research provides some insight into the increase of FS popularity and its effect on sporting magazines, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, this study achieved a Cohen's kappa coefficient of .783. While this indicates that there was a "substantial" strength of agreement between coders, ideally the Kappa statistic would have fallen between .81 and 1.00, which is considered an "almost perfect" agreement strength (Landis & Koch, 1977). Secondly, an unforeseen limitation of this investigation was presented by the number of articles found and coded. The entire population of FS articles from 1999 - 2001 were coded, while only three months of each year were coded from 2007 - 2009. This became a necessity when the study was underway but was not ideal and possibly affected the results. The magazines examined from 2007 - 2009 were published in the beginning of each sports season and frequently contained draft guide content, which often consists of more in-depth articles than the rest of the year. The later editions have coverage throughout the year, but editorial parameters were set to manage the research size of the study. Ideally the entire population of FS articles from 2007- 2009 would have also been coded, creating more exhaustive results. Additionally, the breakdown of articles per magazine for this study was as follows: Sports Illustrated, n=62; The Sporting News, n=65; ESPN magazine, n=139. There was more than double the amount of articles from ESPN magazine examined, meaning this study's results were heavily affected by ESPN content. Third, defining and determining article tone was difficult; designating each article a gender tone was tough to test, despite a detailed coding system. Sports are heavily embedded with masculine themes, and separating them from FS articles was a complex demand.

Implications

This research might serve as a useful tool for sports communicators and media entities interested in fantasy sports. Although fantasy sports have been adopted in popular culture and mass media, this is one of only a few academic studies that examine how fantasy sports have evolved in the mass media. The four hypotheses were supported, providing an over-time analysis of how the popularity of fantasy sports has affected sports magazines. The results found specifics about the increase in FS content within Sports Illustrated, The Sporting News, and ESPN magazine. Differences emerged when current magazines were compared with those from a decade ago, when FS first began to integrate into the mainstream media. Insight regarding changes with FS and its associations with gambling, social interaction, and gender issues were found and analyzed. This research will provide insight into the most popular online game genre in the world. Due to the uniqueness of this topic and these results, more research should be conducted concerning FS and its evolution within sports media. Alternative theories and methods should be explored.

Future Research

There are many opportunities for future investigators in this emerging field, as fantasy sports continue to grow and evolve. The present study could serve as a background, as one might attempt a similar study with content found online. In such a study, the same coding system could be implemented and the results could be compared to different hypotheses. There would likely be fewer limitations, with more content available online from the past decade than that found in magazines. It would be easier to achieve a balance between sources, and a more exhaustive study could be the result. This study would be particularly relevant because FS are based online, and therefore most users search for their FS content online (Almasy, 2007).

Another future study could further determine if FS still reinforces masculine privilege, even after a rise in female participation (Davis & Duncan, 2006). It may be beneficial to take a qualitative look to investigate how the ever-growing female FS population has affected leagues that previously consisted of all male players. Future investigators in this area might attempt a comparison between all male and mixed gender leagues; the communication dynamic could change with the presence of women in FS leagues, and an examination of message posts and/or interviews with league members would provide insight in this area.

It would also be interesting to determine if FS has changed non-fantasy content in sports media. Statistics have always played an important role in summarizing performance in sports. Traditionally, statistics such as batting average (the number of hits divided by the number of at bats) and earned run average (approximately the number of runs allowed by a pitcher per nine innings) have commanded attention in the world of baseball. With the emergence of fantasy baseball, however, terms like WHIP (walks and hits per innings pitched) and OPS (on-base plus

slugging average) are much more common (Albert & Bennett, 2001). Perhaps then a current,

general baseball article in Sports Illustrated would contain more fantasy-relevant statistics like

WHIP and OPS than an article written before the emergence of FS. Additionally, it is possible

that statistics not relevant to FS have seen a decrease of usage within sports media over the years.

An example is the quarterback rating, a statistic used by the NFL to determine passing efficiency

but that is not commonly found in fantasy football.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to explore fantasy sports and its evolution within sporting magazines and to provide insight into the most popular online game genre in the world. The topic is one of importance and should be studied more. It is estimated that 30 million players spend $4.5 billion a year to participate in fantasy leagues (Bills, 2008). Anyone who plays FS, follows sports on a regular basis, or watches sports with a group of people can see that FS are a phenomenon here to stay. There are services that provide fantasy insurance, dispute resolution, and ornate fantasy trophies. People are spending massive amounts of time, money, and thought on the game. Fantasy football alone drains $9 billion out of workplace productivity (Gregory, 2009). The fantasy craze is not going anywhere, and more academic research on the topic is needed. Hopefully this study can serve as a framework that will aid in the development of fantasy sport research.

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Fantasy Sport Content Analysis - Coding Sheet

Coder: _____   Date: _____   Article #: _____

_____

Magazine: ESPN_____   Day: _____

             Sports Illustrated_____   Month: _____

             Sporting News_____   Year: _____

_____

1. Article Length: Short (fewer than four paragraphs)?_____

                        Medium (between four and six paragraphs)?_____

                        Major article (more than six paragraphs)?_____

2. Were any players mentioned in article? _____

                        If yes, how many? _____

3. How many times does the article reference the FS user and interaction with others in their league? _____

4. Tone of the article: Masculine _____

                                Gender Neutral_____

                                Feminine_____