I'm no casual: exploring the consumer behaviour of Fantasy Premier League hardcore international managers

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Abstract

The internet has caused a worldwide exponential increase in the number of fantasy sports consumers in general, and Fantasy Premier League (FPL) in particular. This paper investigates the overall experiences of hardcore 'managers'. Using interviews and applying Grounded Theory, this study offers a description regarding managers' 1) perceptions of what makes a hardcore manager as against a casual one; 2) motivations to participate in FPL at hardcore levels; 3) media usage; 4) the impact FPL has on their consumption of the sport and its products; and 5) the marketability of specific players. Subsequently, we develop an understanding of international FPL hardcore managers' consumption behaviour. This understanding helps teams, marketers, and sponsors both directly and indirectly to establish a more effective reach to this growing psychographic group. Moreover, it contributes to the body of knowledge of cultural consumer research.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, cultural consumer research, fantasy sports, hardcore players, media consumption.

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0. Introduction

Fantasy sports is a multi-billion dollar industry. As of 19th October 2022, 10,708,650 Fantasy Premier League (FPL) teams from around the world are registered on the official free-to-play FPL website. The official Twitter account has over 4.5 million followers, preceded by just over 2 million in the previous season. 'Manager' is the name given to each person playing the game as they manage their FPL team. The general concept of the game is similar to any other fantasy sports game where managers receive points from the combination of football players that they select within a given virtual budget. Points are scored in line with players' real-life performances in the Premier League (PL). The PL is the highest level of the men's English football (soccer) league system consisting of 20 clubs from England and Wales with a promotion and relegation system. It is the most-watched sports league in the world (Ebner, 2013). Within FPL, each game-week, managers can transfer in and out players from their teams with budgetary and transfer restrictions. Entry to the game is free and the website offers weekly, monthly, and seasonal rewards. Managers can join public and private leagues where they compete with friends, supporters from the same teams, managers from the same country, etc.

Academic research with regard to participants' behaviour in fantasy sports is underdeveloped. The most visible works tend to concentrate on participants within the nation where the sport is performed, especially in North America, with a focus on sports like American Football (Comeau, 2007; Drayer *et al.*, 2010; Dwyer, 2011; Dwyer & Drayer, 2010; Lee *et al.*, 2013; Nesbit and King 2010), basketball (Evans *et al.*, 2018; Smith, Sharma & Hooper, 2006) and baseball (Bernhard & Eade, 2005; Halverson & Halverson, 2008; Shapiro, Drayer & Dwyer, 2014). The most popular sport in the world, football (soccer) has not received the same academic attention. Moreover, visible works that use FPL as a case-study have concentrated on the skills and the predictive aspects of the game (Bhatt *et al.*, 2019; O'Brien, Gleeson & O'Sullivan, 2021; Gibbons, 2014) or on internet addiction in general (Columb, Griffiths & O'Gara, 2020).

On a methodological level, the bulk of the literature that addresses issues such as gambling and addiction (Bernhard & Eade, 2005; Maham III *et al.*, 2012; Nower *et al.*, 2018) uses surveys and quantitative methodologies (Billings & Ruihley, 2013; Dhurup & Dlodlo, 2013), whereas qualitative research is peripheral (e.g. Drayer *et al.*, 2010). This paper uses a qualitative methodology to unearth further consumption drivers of fantasy sports.

This paper contributes to the body of literature on the consumption behaviour of fantasy sports consumers, especially the hardcore ones. Understanding this behaviour helps marketers directly and indirectly to reach this exponentially growing group. This study offers insights into the motivations for participating at a hardcore level. It allows interviewees to identify the dimensions that differentiates them from casuals. Moreover, it describes how they utilize media and even

create content that contributes to other participants' knowledge. Consequently, it demonstrates interactions within the community as a two-way media usage. Additionally, this research reveals how likely playing FPL at a hardcore level is to lead to the consumption of the sport's products, and the rationale behind those decisions. Last but not least, it explains how FPL may increase the marketability of specific players.

1. Literature review

Previous research has not clearly defined hardcore fantasy managers, despite the attempts of some works by Bosser and Nakatsu (2006) and Poels *et al.* (2012) who concentrate on gamers rather than fantasy players. Fantasy managers are automatically seen as being hardcore fans of the sport (Lee *et al.*, 2013, p. 223). However, there is no differentiation between a hardcore fantasy manager and a casual one. Drayer *et al.* (2010) argue that previous sport consumption definitions have failed to acknowledge the fast growth in online and internet tools to engage with sports products and consequently define it as the "amount of time and/or money spent participating, spectating, following, or interacting with sport" (Drayer *et al.*, 2010, p. 131). This study establishes criteria in order to distinguish the hardcore fans segment from the casuals. More importantly, our study allows the target group to define what makes a hardcore as opposed to a casual fantasy manager.

As regards fantasy sports consumers' motivations, Farquhar and Meeds (2007) found that the main drivers are arousal and surveillance. Dwyer and Kim (2011) utilize Churchill's (1979) five-step method to examine the motivational dimensions from a Uses and Gratifications perspective. The authors validate three motivational dimensions, namely entertainment/escape, competition, and social interaction. Billings and Ruihley (2013) state that fantasy consumers have higher levels of entertainment, enjoyment, social interaction, passing time, and surveillance compared to non-fantasy sport consumers. Through surveys and entertainment theory, Zillmann and Bryant (1994) found that traditional fans score higher only on the escapism motivation, while there is no significant difference in arousal. Dhurup and Dlodlo (2013) use factor analysis and identify enjoyment, ease of use, aesthetics, achievement/reward, and eustress as the primary motivational dimensions towards participating in Fantasy Football (FF). This paper builds on those works by researching the theme of motivations with a different sampling configuration and in relation to FPL.

Drayer *et al.* (2010) confirm that FF participants use various media at a much higher level due to their participation. Bhatt *et al.* (2019) analyze Twitter posts by type of participants and propose the SmartCrowd framework that leverages inferred diversity-enhanced crowd wisdom to predict

FPL captainship. Using regression analysis, Comeau (2007) finds that FF participation has a significant impact on the amount of electronic media usage. Similarly, in this paper, the author investigates media usage of hardcore FPL managers. It aims to describe which media are specifically being used and to showcase two-way media consumption as consumers can be producers as well.

Regarding viewership, Dwyer (2011) concludes that there is positive correlation between FF participation and NFL games viewership on television. Karg and McDonald (2011) report similar results as they state that fantasy sport complements traditional sport consumption. Moreover, fantasy participants are more attractive to bars, restaurants, websites, and internet providers (Dwyer & Drayer 2010). Despite the fact that Drayer *et al.* (2010) suggest that participation in FF does not directly lead to purchases of NFL-related products, additional confirmatory research is required (Dwyer & Drayer 2010). Nesbit and King (2010) show that FF participants attend more NFL games than non-participants.

Drayer *et al.* (2010) state that despite FF participants having developed virtual communities, involving real-time statistical information, they still rely on various offline sources such as newspapers, magazines, and television programs. We will understand if that is still the case over a decade later in this paper. This is a significant target group profiling for interested parties such as the PL, teams, partners, advertisers, sponsors, and merchandisers.

It may be surmised that supporting a team or a specific athlete positively influence future consumption behaviour (Madrigal, 1995; Matsuoka, Chelladurai & Harada, 2003). Moreover, there is a correlation between positive attitude and repeat consumption behaviour (Dick & Bosu, 1994). Interestingly, Mahony and Howard (1998) mention that even negative attitudes towards teams such as rivals can still lead to positive viewership consumption. Therefore, PL teams would want to increase levels of viewership, support, attachment, and loyalty. Elements that influence fan loyalty include media, peers, hometown connection, fatherly influence at a young age, players and coaches, experiencing games, and being part of groups that support the team (James, 2001).

A crucial gap in the literature concerns whether fantasy involvement impacts specific players' marketability. Moreover, on the grounds of an international interviewees' sampling profile, experiencing games through attending the matches and the lack of hometown attachment should yield different experiences.

This research explores thematic gaps in the literature with regard to behavioural differences between hardcore and casual managers, specific media usage, and specific player(s) marketability by applying a different psychographic sampling approach that rests with motivations and the consumption of the sport and its products.

2. Methodology

The above identified gaps in the literature are addressed by utilizing a qualitative methodology to offer a description of the experiences of hardcore international managers. Semi-structured interviews with managers were conducted. Following the transcription of the recorded interviews, coding was implemented to allow categories to emerge.

2.1. Research questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What differentiates hardcore from casual managers?

2. What are managers' motivations to participate at a hardcore level?

3. Media usage due to FPL participation.

4. How likely would their FPL participation lead to an increase in their consumption of the sport and its products?

5. How FPL impacts their perception towards specific players?

2.2. Methodological framework

Due to the exploratory nature of this study that aims to describe the experiences of hardcore FPL managers, a grounded theoretical approach was employed. Transcription and coding allowed themes to emerge and evolve up until the phenomenon under study was grounded sufficiently in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser and Strauss (2017) coined Grounded Theory which involves analysing data through methodically coding interviews with terms that briefly, clearly, and conceptually summarize each line, phrase, or even word. In this paper, we allowed the data to guide findings as themes emerged.

After transcribing the interviews, the author highlighted one key word in each line and titled each paragraph. As themes emerged across interviews, the author highlighted the most often recurring themes. Moreover, the author noted the differences across those themes.

2.3. Participants

Few studies have been concerned with categorizing hardcore and casual gamers (e.g. Poel, 2012). In this paper, the criteria for selecting interviewees were: 1) played FPL for three years or more, 2) self-identification, and 3) spend an average of at least one hour per day researching their FPL team during each season and interacting within the FPL community. The interviewees were selected from different countries to describe the experiences of various international players.

We aimed for at least one interviewee from each continent with the exception of Europe. This aim does not concern geographical representation, but rather the need for obtaining as diverse and rich data as possible. Europe was not included because of its geographical proximity to where the Premier League is held. The proximity offers easier access for Europeans to attend the matches and to the products compared to other international managers. This study focused on investigating international managers' experiences especially in terms of consuming the sport and its products following their FPL involvement. The study participants were at least 18 years old for ethical reasons and are given pseudonyms (Table 1). Interviews were conducted until saturation was attained in line with Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 2017). All interviewees were recruited via Twitter.

Table 1: Participants' profiles

Pseudonym	Mohammed	Adam	Ana	Richard	Ahmed	James	Oliver
Sex	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	27	19	49	28	40	31	22
Location	Pakistan	Malaysia	Brazil	Ghana	Egypt	U.S.A.	Australia
Years Played	7	5	8	5	16	5	8

2.4. Methods of data collection

The author tweeted out the search for interviewees for this study using the hashtags #FPL and #FPLCommunity. Moreover, the author messaged managers who have been tweeting about FPL. The few potential interviewees who got in touch were vetted according to the stated criteria in section 2.3. Following that, the snowballing technique was used to recruit further interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the corresponding author, transcribed, and coded. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom due to the international nature of the study. Additionally, COVID-19 pandemic restricted face-to-face interaction. The interviews were voice recorded following the permission of the interviewees to facilitate transcribing. The longest interview lasted for 1 hour and 22 minutes, whereas the shortest 47 minutes and 49 seconds. The average interview length was 59 minutes and 21 seconds. Transcribing was performed through MS Word's transcribe function and then reviewed by the author. Notes were taken during the interviews to help the author reflect on them. The process lasted for about a year due to time restrictions, access to and recruitment of the interviewees. The interviews were based on the discussion guide in Appendix A.

2.5. Methods of data analysis

The coding of transcripts was completed manually in the same order as that of the interviews. To enable the detection of saturation, the author applied the constant comparison method throughout the process of data analysis. There are three phases of coding: open, selective, and theoretical (Urquhart, 2012). Charmaz (2006) argues that theoretical coding starts when categories emerge. Birks and Mills (2015) contend that it can start even during open coding due to the fact that preliminary data can reveal concepts that signal possible explanations of the phenomenon or theories. In this study, iteration was noticed from an early stage. By the sixth interview, the author found little new information to be gathered by conducting further interviews, however, one more was conducted to ensure saturation.

3. Analysis of findings

3.1. Hardcore vs. casual: awareness & commitment

The criteria for classifying interviewees as hardcore managers consist of self-identification and time spent consuming relevant content. Since all interviewees self-identify as hardcore managers as opposed to casual, they were asked to differentiate between the two. One common theme that emerged was awareness of statistics, latest news, and fixtures. For example, Mohammed says:

"A more hardcore manager would be aware of things such as chances created, shots inside the box, or even the opposition that the goals have been scored against […] I define the casual as someone who goes on the reputation. For example, if someone like Kanté scores this week, he's going to get a price rise even though that does not reflect the fact that he's going to continue, or reflect continuation of that form in the coming weeks […] I would put it down to the decision-making process."

Ana shares similar thoughts when asked what makes a hardcore player:

"I think one of the things is to follow the games consistently […] and to follow the stories. What has happened with the players as well outside the game and what impacts on the performance. Statistics is something to follow, Twitter for instance and see what people are saying. Study the teams also."

Another element that repeatedly appears is the concept of commitment. It ranges from continuously consuming relevant content, playing during the entire season, even buying a new phone simply because of playing FPL, as Richard stresses:

"I bought a new phone because of FPL. The old phone, it was messing up. So, logging in to my FPL was a problem. I would try to login in into it and it would mess me up. I try to login into FPL and it was logging me out. I was like no, I need to get a new phone. I cannot play FPL with this phone. So I bought a new phone because of FPL; because when it comes to calling and chatting, it was ok."

Similarly, James alludes to his transition from a casual to a hardcore manager through commitment and persistence, especially when his ranking in the game was not what he hoped for. He says:

"For me, when I think of a casual, ok, I had two bad gameweeks, I'll try again next year I am not like that. Now, if I am somehow by gameweek ten and I am back at three million, alright! So, number one isn't going to be it this year, let's try to break the top million or the top 500 thousand. Let's get into there. That's where I get more serious about getting my information and data."

Other elements concern watching games, being involved in the community, producing and consuming relevant content. However, the themes of awareness and commitment emerged in all interviews.

3.2. Motivations to play hardcore FPL

The main themes that emerged when interviewees were asked what motivates them to play FPL at a hardcore level are entertainment, social interaction, and competition. Interestingly, those three themes are identical to those found by Dwyer and Kim (2011).

3.2.1 Entertainment

Playing FPL complements watching the matches as there are more things at stake besides simply cheering a team. Especially when the fan is neutral, it makes watching the match more interesting when the manager has invested in one of the players.

Ahmed, the 40 years old veteran at both FPL and football consumption says:

"Before finding FPL, I am a huge football fan. I started following international football since 1990. I was 9 years old. Italy 90 world cup. I fell in love with Germany, AC Milan. So since then, I never miss, I follow as much as possible from international or European games. Mainly, Serie A and Premier League. I started watching the Premier League since 2001 or 02 I believe and I started playing Fantasy Champions League before Premier League […] When I found FPL, I was hooked. It is a main hobby, watching football and playing fantasy are main hobbies."

In the same vein, James explains:

"I will watch some games if they are good games that I do not have players in, but for the most part […] Burnley, Brighton versus Wolve, Leicester, I am probably going with Wolves Leicester because I will probably have, you know, a Leicester defender, or like, my gameweek one I had Barnes in so I was watching him and over like Burnley Brighton, I have Veltman, ok he's not playing anyways, I don't care about that game, whatever, you guys do your thing over there."

The above demonstrate that when FPL managers have players in their FPL team, it increases match viewership.

3.2.2. Social interaction

All interviewees were recruited through Twitter, on the condition that they tweeted about FPL or interacted with someone who had. Therefore, they have been engaging within the FPL community, and they believe that social interaction is one of the main motivations for playing the game at a hardcore level.

As Adam puts it:

"I think it would be the social aspect because I feel like I definitely have couple of friends in mini-leagues that are enthusiastic about FPL. But, they are definitely more casual as we mentioned earlier. So being in a community like the FPL Twitter community where everyone is kind off on the same page, they understand why you are so enthusiastic and passionate. It is very nice to express thoughts like that and have that engagement back heading your way."

Ana has more of a unique social experience with FPL as she is involved in what she refers to as a "girls group":

"So we have a lot of conversations. We talk a lot during the day, during the week about FPL […] It is very nice the social part. For instance, I am in the Rebel Girls, which is another league and it is very nice to see the comments, and people manifesting and me writing. You meet lots of different people."

Rebel Girls is a private mini-league where women join to compete and are continuously interacting on social media.

3.2.3. Competition

One of the interviewees' favourite aspects of FPL is competition. Although some aim for a higher overall ranking, many are competing with friends, family, workmates, and acquaintances. Some do so for money, prizes, and privileges. Let it be noted that the terms and conditions of FPL do not allow managers to charge for entry to the mini-leagues which they have created.

Richard talks about playing with something at stake:

"Bragging rights […] I have this group with our mates. We call it So You Think You Know Football Championship. We play for an X amount of money and when you get the money, you can give it to any charity of your choice. […] It comes back to the bragging rights. The motivation of winning something for a good cause. There's another league too, Wonder Wings. They will give you chicken. Chicken wings. […] It is a restaurant."

On the other hand, despite being competitive, Mohammed, who is a Muslim, has a different view about money mini-leagues:

"I am very competitive but it is more a main hobby […] No, never! I didn't get many chances to join cash leagues. Once I got an invitation for a certain league; and then I researched and asked. I feel it might be equal to sort of gambling and I said no it is not worth it".

When asked if it was for religious reasons, Mohammed says:

"Yes! […] you can join for example Facebook or Twitter accounts' leagues, for prizes; but it is not a cash league"

James stresses about the competition that he has with his friends:

"Definitely bragging rights! Like I mentioned, I got a friend that got me into FPL. […] Me and him have a WhatsApp chat and we just go back and forth.

This connects with the social interaction motivation as most competition revolves around beating other managers with whom the interviewees are acquainted.

3.3 Media usage due to FPL participation

Previous research findings suggest a significant increase in media usage due to fantasy sports participation (e.g. Comeau, 2007; Drayer *et al.*, 2010). All participants in this research confirm those findings. Here, an additional focus is laid on identifying whether this usage is concentrated among interviewees in relation to FPL, when, and how.

Mohammed describes his research that goes into FPL:

"It is hard for me to define a timeline because after every Sunday, on a Monday morning, first thing I do is I check the stats tables. I notice trends. I notice outliers. You know, players who are standing out in their stats. […] For me, this happens every single day. From Monday to Friday, I am constantly working on data […] discussing FPL […] whether on WhatsApp, whether on YouTube, Whether on Twitter interacting with other FPL accounts. So for me to estimate the amount of time I put into FPL is very hard."

Mohammed utilizes statistics heavily in his decision-making and his go-to sources are fantasyfootballscout.co.uk (FFScout) which has an estimated net worth of £638,443 (Company Check, 2021a) and fantasyfootballhub.co.uk (The Hub) with an estimated net worth of £18,210 (Company Check, 2021b). Those estimates seem somewhat reserved, considering that the latter has more than 65,000 active users and has recently completed a £406,000 funding round (PR Newswire, 2022).

All participants believe that their media usage has significantly increased due to being hardcore FPL players. Moreover, all of the media that they use are digital and most of it comprises FPL-tailored content. Oliver, a 22 years-old Australian, further elucidates the matter:

"If I was on my Wildcard, I'd be looking at price change websites most days. Price changes happen in a nice time, that's one of few things for us Aussies. [Laughs][…] I will be looking at press conferences, news, Thursday and Friday, and then Saturday for us. […]"

"I listen to Bakar's podcast, driving, The Wire, every week on my car journeys"

Twitter is continuously mentioned during the interviews as a source of information which is expected considering that all interviewees were recruited through this platform. Participants mainly follow the official teams, FPL-related, and football news accounts. FPL articles and stats-based websites such as the previously mentioned FFScout & The Hub plus YouTube content are heavily consumed as well.

Due to his time zone, Adam who lives in Malaysia utilizes YouTube to catch up on missed live matches:

"The most important thing is, depending on the matches, they might be scheduled at bad times for Malaysia, so I definitely have to look through the highlights on YouTube. […] Being on the Twitter community helps because you are immediately up-to-date with a lot of updates […] Every game week there's always the big threads that come out from big accounts […] I try not to make transfers until I have read everything."

Similarly, Richard spends hours every week researching online for his FPL team:

"On Fridays, and midweek on Mondays, almost the whole day. Before the transfer deadline, I have to be able to get anybody I want in my team. […] So, I am always on my phone on Fridays. […] I listen to those podcasts, and the main FPL site I also research from there. Sometimes, I do my own research. I've become addicted to press conferences […] I research for the travelling squad […] I find it from the clubs' official website. […] I like comparing players in league above me […] I listen to talkSPORT a lot […] and I listen to BBC 5 live too."

Digital media is the main source of information for our interviewees, while traditional media seem to be lagging behind despite recent attempts to produce FPL-related content such as Sky Sports channel and its website. Despite that Sky Sports have a competing fantasy game which is Sky Sports Fantasy Football, it still hasn't resonated with this psychographic group.

3.4. Does FPL participation lead to an increase in the consumption of the sport and its products?

Drayer *et al.* (2010) found that participation in FF does not lead directly to purchases of NFL-related products. This paper attempts to unearth additional dimensions given the psychographic differences in the sampling frame.

Unanimously, the participants in this study believe that the time they spend watching matches has increased due to their FPL involvement. According to The Athletic, the United Kingdom broadcast rights will hit £5 billion, while the international rights will be worth £5.05 billion between 2022 and 2025 (The Athletic Staff, 2022).

3.4.1. Attending matches

When it comes to physically attending matches, all interviewees – except for one, Ana - have not attended live matches due to numerous reasons. The main two reasons are financial and lack of free time. COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned a couple of times by the interviewees. As James from the U.S.A puts it:

"Pretty much financial. […] Time and work are two big things. I can't really just call off work tomorrow and be like I'll be back on Wednesday. See you. I mean, given the circumstances now, obviously the pandemic. That's a little bit of a big one."

Other reasons are also mentioned for not having attended a Premier League match yet. Oliver summarizes those reasons:

"I've never been to the UK. I've only been outside the country once […] I'd really would like to do yea! […] Probably a combination of a lot of things. A combination of time and money. And then also someone to go with. I don't really want to travel by myself especially that far away. It is almost a 24 hours flight from Australia to the UK. So, it is something that I definitely want to do with like a best mate and go for a few months kind of thing rather than something you can go for a few days"

In the case of Ana, who has travelled from Brazil to attend, she believes that FPL did play a role -albeit small- in motivating her to attend those matches.

"I went twice to see live Man City. […] I said to him [her husband], it would be very nice to have a whole year free to follow the season. All the football, just every weekend somewhere.

Yeah, that will be really nice and I might do it as my retirement plan. […] FPL makes it much more interesting watching a game because you are involved in each layer, because we have players there."

She does not believe that FPL is the reason for attending the matches. However, she believes that it made them more interesting.

3.4.2. The purchase of Premier League related products

Overall, the same reasons for not attending the matches in the stadiums are given by the interviewees, such as financial reasons and other more important commitments like family when asked if they buy any Premier League related merchandise. They also believe that official merchandise prices are too high or overpriced, and shipping costs make purchases unworthy. Having said that, all interviewees have bought a PL product at some point. Purchased merchandise ranges from kits, footballs with teams' logos, magnets, to onesies for babies. Only one of the interviewees made a purchase every single season though. The others did so sporadically.

Interestingly, many use the words "I am not a hard consumer", "I do not like buying things just to have them", or a phrase that represents a negative association with consumerism.

Ahmed, a 40-years old Egyptian, touches on the cultural and social aspects of buying Premier League merchandise, especially kits.

"Not for myself, but for my elder son. T-shirt, the whole kit, Liverpool t-shirt and short and socks. Of Mohamed Salah […] I have a lot of football t-shirts but they are all old, maybe I bought them while I was younger. 10 years ago, maybe more. As you grow older, I am currently 40 years old, I don't have a lot of occasion where I can wear football t-shirts. But, if I get the chance to go to U.K. soon and attend a match, I will buy Mohammed Salah t-shirt."

He mentions that he had a relative travelling to the U.K and requested of that relative to buy the kit for him, so that he gives it to his son as a gift. Also, he states that his acquaintances do not wear football kits casually "like they do in the UK".

Mohamed has purchased the most kits among the interviewees. He believes FPL did play a role in the choice of kits due to his feeling that he's not strongly attached to one specific team in the PL. He refers to himself as a fan of the League and FPL.

"It is a hobby of mine actually; to collect jerseys. A significant amount of the jerseys that I buy are all Premier League. I have all jerseys. I have a Spurs jersey, I have a Man Untied jersey, I have an Everton jersey. Leeds jersey. I mean you name it. Every other jersey I just get it. […] I buy on approximate 7-8 jerseys every year. I get them at the start of every season. I order them

online. There is this guy in Pakistan who imports them from abroad […] Approximately, it is almost £150 per jersey."

He states that he only buys jerseys and is not interested in other merchandise.

3.5. How does FPL impact perceptions towards specific players?

Interestingly, we found that many interviewees developed a certain level of affinity towards certain players who are not playing for the teams that they support sheerly due to their FPL involvement. That makes them more likely to follow players on social media, the team they play for, and even buy merchandise related to those players. This finding is punctuated by the fact that most of these interviewees do not identify strongly with the team that they support in the PL, since many consider their local team within their country as their preferred team. For example, Ahmed feels that he's a bigger supporter of his local Egyptian team Zamalek than his PL team Liverpool. Moreover, the fact that the interviewees are hardcore FPL players entails that they rank their FPL team higher than the other team(s) they support.

Mohamed continues:

"With FPL, it is something I put so much time into it. Obviously, when you invest so much time and effort into something, you want rewards. […] I spend a ridiculous time into FPL. If I don't get good a score, I usually end up with an egg on my face and I don't want that to happen."

That is not to say that some interviewees who relate strongly to the team they support, neither find it difficult to prioritize, nor do they always prioritize the Premier league team.

Going back to the point that hardcore-level FPL involvement may lead to a specific player's attachment, and hence, to the player's marketability, all the interviewees admit that, throughout the years, there are some players whom they started liking purely due to having those players in their FPL team.

Ana who lives in Brazil says:

"I like Wilson a lot. Watkins I like as well, he was in my team for a long time."

She even mentions Luke Shaw who plays for Manchester United. Manchester United are fierce rivals to the team that she passionately supports. When asked if she had become a fan of those players, her answer was affirmative.

Richard explains how specific players outside his favourite team led to an increase in his media consumption and the likelihood of him buying merchandise related to those players:

"Up there would be Martínez […] Yes, I've become a fan of Martínez. Because of Martínez, I watched the Copa América, and he made me proud, in the final. Yeah, I am a fan. I started

following Martínez. I started watching their [Aston Villa] matches because of Martínez. […] If I can get a Martínez jersey, yeah, I'd wall it."

For interviewees who mention that they would not buy merchandise related to the players they came to esteem, they admit that it leads them to follow the players and the team(s) they play for.

4. Discussion of findings

Some findings are counter-intuitive and possibly controversial among the sport's fans since many of the interviewees prioritize their FPL team over the team that they support in the league. This and other findings have both theoretical and practical implications.

4.1. Theoretical implications

Poels *et al.* (2012) differentiate between hardcore and casual gamers in general, with a focus on gender-based differences. The authors acknowledge that it is not as straightforward as often assumed and more research needs to be conducted. They set parameters such as time, budget, opinion, and self-identification with typical images. In our investigation, we allow interviewees to describe their own perception of what makes them and other FPL managers hardcore, which contributes to this body of research. We found two main dimensions in this respect: awareness and commitment. Awareness of the game and its surrounding environment such as statistics, and commitment towards the game by playing it to its full potential.

This paper found identical themes to Dwyer and Kim (2011) who utilized the Uses and Gratifications perspective to identify the three principal motivations for fantasy NFL participation. The main motivations for being hardcore FPL players are entertainment, social interaction, and competition.

Previous research (e.g. Comeu, 2007; Drayer *et al.*, 2010) confirms that fantasy sports participation increases media consumption. This research found that all media utilized are digital, in contrast to Dwyer and Drayer (2010), and much of it is either social media, or FPL dedicated content.

Nesbit and King (2009) employed a quantitative methodology to determine whether playing fantasy NFL increases the likelihood of attending matches. Being in close proximity to where matches are held is definitely a factor. In this paper, we selected interviewees who are based outside of the EU to ensure geographical spread. This is an important factor given the time and monetary resources involved in attending those matches in stadiums. Our interviewees would love to do so, and some believe FPL has slightly contributed towards this desire.

League interest increases and more matches are being watched due to high-level involvement in FPL. Drayer *et al.* (2009) report that team and player outcomes alter perceptions towards favourite

team or fantasy. We found that overall interest in the league increases with attachment towards fantasy. Interestingly, within-league perceptions are constantly shifting as well, as FPL managers start 'loving' or 'hating' players outside of their favourite team purely due to their performance in their respective FPL team.

Drayer *et al.* (2010) report no noticeable impact on purchases of tangible NFL-related products. According to our findings, hardcore-level fantasy involvement slightly increases the possibility of buying league-related products. However, it does not guarantee it for international managers. Money availability, coupled with the perceived high prices of official products are the main determinants. Many consider that buying them is a sign of consumerism, a term that they associate with negative connotations. Some touch upon the cultural and societal aspects of wearing a football kit.

4.2. Practical implications

One of the main findings of this research is the increase of the league's marketability and specific players within it due to FPL. Yost (2006) and Drayer *et al.* (2010) state that the brand of the NFL league and the players who perform well in fantasy are increasing significantly despite the argument that it is relatively a niche market. The potential for players' branding is evident. Players who would otherwise be less known can be brands, endorsers, and ambassadors. This can be extended to the level of teams that they play for and the whole league. An exponential rise in sponsorship deals related to FPL may also be expected. Moreover, famous people such as World Chess Champion Magnus Carlsen and league players such as Patrick Bamford, James Maddison, and Harvey Barnes are known within the FPL community to be hardcore players.

Regarding sponsorship deals, we are constantly seeing an increase in free-to-enter private leagues set up by businesses such as cafés, restaurants, electronics stores, and even broadcasting networks that offer weekly, monthly, and yearly prizes ranging from coupons to monetary rewards. Usually, the business requires of entrants to do something that would afford it greater exposure such as retweets on Twitter.

Furthermore, this paper found that all hardcore managers utilize digital media in their research. As more managers register, they start consuming more digital FPL-related content, thus offering an opportunity for people to provide content professionally. They make their living through monetizing their content and sponsorship deals. The most notable current professional FPL content creator is Andy - Let's Talk FPL on YouTube who has over 327,000 subscribers, and his most watched video has gathered 375,000 views as of October 19th 2022. Many FPL-specialized websites charge for subscription, in exchange for access to a range of benefits and packages. The prices range between £2.49 and £10.50 for a monthly subscription.

The increase in digital media usage also yields indirect exposure benefits. All hardcore managers follow the league's teams and players on social media. This builds brand awareness, and an opportunity to promote tangible products and related services to followers. The same holds for broadcasting channels, as more people tune into matches that they wouldn't if they were not as involved in FPL.

Despite their desire to physically attend matches, all interviewees but one have not done so mainly due to living far from the U.K. where matches are held. This presents an opportunity for airlines, hotels, and hospitality services to collaborate with the PL to create tailored packages for attending matches. Some agencies currently offer such packages, for example dreamsetgo.co from India who sponsor one of FPL-specialized podcasts. However, we found that market demand is growing especially after relaxing COVID-19 restrictions and people are now looking for leisure travelling opportunities.

The interviewees are reluctant to buy official merchandise mainly for financial reasons, due to perceived high prices and shipping costs. This should be taken into consideration by the league and its clubs to access remote markets. There are cases where the same online official stores charge different prices for different regions. Charging different prices in different countries could help access those markets where consumers are reluctant to buy due to different standards of living and cultural issues associated with wearing football kits.

5. Conclusions

It was found that the selected psychographic group consider themselves as hardcore FPL managers mainly due to their awareness and commitment. These two dimensions differentiate hardcore from casual fantasy players. Moreover, the three main motivations for playing FPL at this level are entertainment, social interaction, and competition.

Hardcore FPL managers exhibit a significant increase in media usage as part of their research into their FPL team. Moreover, the media consumed are predominantly digital. They range from social media, podcasts, to FPL-specific websites and forums.

The level of FPL involvement increases the sport's watching time. However, it does not significantly increase the likelihood of directly purchasing PL-related products or attending matches physically for international managers. The principal reasons are financial constraints and free time required to make the trips. These are further aggravated by perceptions of official merchandise being overpriced, as well as negative consumerist associations.

Hardcore managers tend to develop a real-life affinity towards players who perform satisfactorily in their FPL teams, even towards players from PL teams that they do not support. This increases the likelihood of media consumption surrounding those players and the team that they play for. Consequently, some managers are more inclined to buy merchandise related to those players.

Appendix A - Semi-structured interviews guide

1. Age, occupation, and gender.

2. How long have you been playing FPL?

3. Do you consider yourself a hardcore FPL manager (the other extreme being "casual")?

    - How do you differentiate between the two?

4. Do you support or have a favourite PL team?

    - Describe how passionately you support this team.

    - Do you buy any merchandise of this team? How often? How much on average do you spend?

5. What's more important for you? The success of your favourite team or FPL team? Why?

6. Describe what motivates you to be involved in FPL and rank those motivations.

7. Describe the usual rituals you go through on a daily/weekly basis to set up your FPL team.

    - On average, how many hours do you spend researching and interacting for your FPL team (per day/week)?
    - Where and how do you conduct this research?
    - What are the main media you use for your research? And why?
    - What information are you looking for?

8. Describe you experiences during match-days.

    - How has FPL impacted those experiences?

    - Do you view FPL and PL differently since you started playing FPL?

9. Describe how your FPL involvement influences your decisions to purchase PL-related products and services.

    - Have you attended/watched more matches due to your participation?

    - Have you bought any PL merchandise due to your FPL participation?

- Are you involved in PL services (e.g. subscribed to paid websites)?

10. Who are your best and favourite FPL players from the last few seasons?

- Have you become a fan of those players?

- Have you started "following" those players? How?

- Have you started "following" those players' teams? How?

- Have you bought anything related to those players?

11. Would you like to add any comments regarding FPL?

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