Do EPL fans have a division of loyalty between their supported team and their FPL team?

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Background & Introduction

What are Fantasy Sports?

Fantasy sports are online games where a participant acts as a manager of a virtual team. A fantasy sport team is based on a traditional sport team, where the participant selects a certain number of real-life players in their virtual team within a budget. Each week the participant chooses their strongest line-up, typically based on current form, and each player selected in their team will earn points based on real-life performance. The phenomenon of fantasy sport is heavily dominated by literature from the US, with very little research in the UK.

What is FPL?

Fantasy Premier League (FPL) is the largest UK fantasy sport game, based on the English Premier League (EPL). It has developed rapidly since its launch in 2003 with over six million current players compared to the original '75,000 who played the first version of the game' (Bradshaw, 2018). Since its launch it has grown into a domestic phenomenon in the world of British football.

Overview of previous Fantasy Sport Research

Tacon and Vainker (2017, p.584) identified four key research propositions that emerge from their systematic review of the fantasy sport field in academic research, point (ii) states - we need to build on current research strengths around the consumer behaviour of fantasy sport participants, by further testing and refining existing models in different countries and on representative populations. There is great existing literature on US fantasy sport and this point alone justifies the rationale to base this study on FPL in the UK, as there is little to no research for the game.

The review & limitations of previous Fantasy Sport literature

➡ Dwyer et al. (2010) developed the first framework for understanding the relationship between attitudes and behaviour for this phenomenon (Tacon and Vainker, 2017, p.562).

➡ Dwyer (2011, p.446), extensively researched the extent that the level of fantasy football involvement is related to a participant's loyalty to their supported NFL team, and found that highly involved participants expose lower levels of behavioural loyalty towards their support team. The fan loyalty paradigm has constantly been updated since 2011, and is different in the UK.

➡ Smith and Synowka (2010, pp.105, 107) found that the vast majority of participants felt similar levels of loyalty towards both their fantasy team and supported team – their study is ten years outdated however.
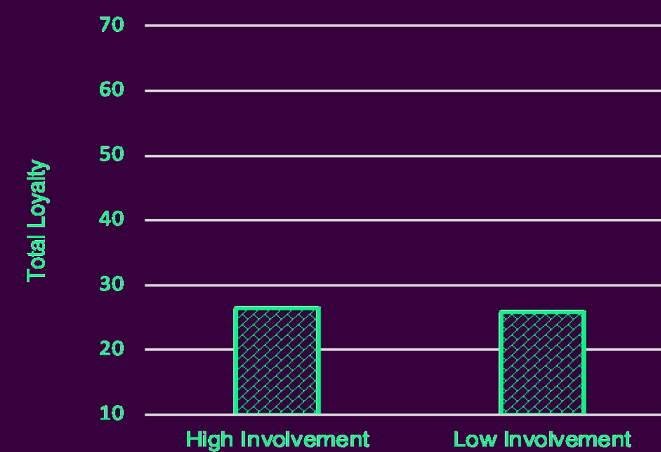
➡ Lee et al. (2013, pp. 216, 218), indicate that participants with higher participation levels share higher team identification scores than low levelled participants. These highly involved participants also possess stronger team loyalty; however, they did not consider one's motives for playing.

➡ Dwyer and Kim (2011, p.79) measured fantasy sport participation motives under three factors – social interaction, competition, entertainment/escape. It was later revealed that 'the entertainment/escape motive did not impact the interactivity and passiveness to ones supported teams' players' (Dwyer et al., 2018, p.827). Neither Lee et al. (2013) or Dwyer and Kim (2011) considered fan loyalties in their studies.
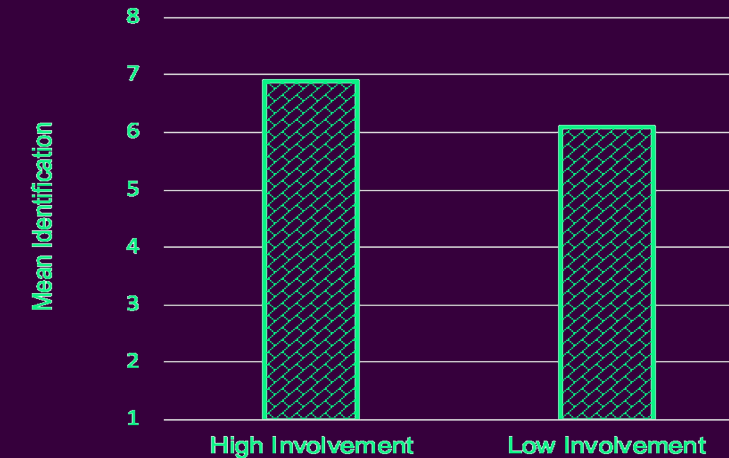
Research Aims & Objectives with Results

The main aim of this research was to define the relationship that EPL football fans have between FPL involvement and traditional football team loyalty. As it was mainly based on Dwyer's study in 2011, five key questions were developed which have been influenced by his measures:

RQ1: What is the correlation between a player's involvement in their FPL team, and their loyalty to supported EPL club?
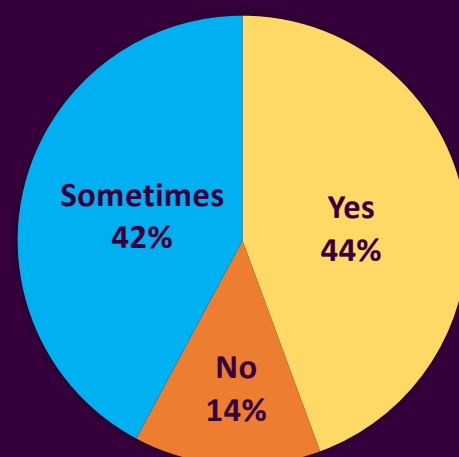

A two-tailed independent samples t-test revealed that there was no significant difference in loyalty between high and low involved participants

RQ2: What is the correlation between a player's involvement in their FPL team, and their identification towards supported EPL club?
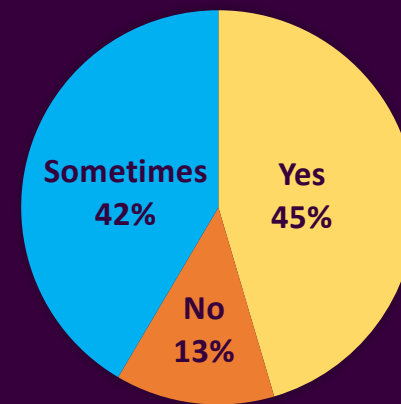

A two-tailed independent samples t-test indicated that highly involved FPL participants exhibited significantly higher levels of team identification than lowly involved participants

RQ3: To what extent does a fan's level of loyalty to a supported EPL club have on the players selected in their FPL team?

Sometimes 42% / Yes 44% / No 14%

The effect of selecting a rival team player on total loyalty scores was confirmed as significant, the difference was found between 'Yes' and 'No' only

RQ4: To what extent does a fan's level of FPL involvement have on the players selected in their FPL team?

Sometimes 42% / Yes 45% / No 13%

The effect of selecting a supported team player on total involvement scores was confirmed as being significant, the difference here being between 'Yes' and 'No' and 'Sometimes' and 'No'

RQ5: Is there a relationship between a fan's attitudinal loyalty towards their supported EPL club and any motives for playing FPL?

A significant, strong negative correlation was found between total loyalty and the mean entertainment/escape motive – one out of the three correlations were significant

Method

Research Design
Correlational Design with elements of between subject's design

Data Analysis
All response data was primarily imported from Google Forms to Excel, and then to SPSS in order to perform several tests:
Calculation of descriptive statistics – means and standard deviations
Tests of statistical significance, which involved; several one-way ANOVA's, independent samples t-tests, and several bivariate correlation tests

Participants
766 FPL players who support an EPL club took part in the survey during a two-week period
Age range between 18-58
94.6% were male

Materials
56-item author/self-developed online questionnaire, administered through Google Forms. Comprised seven sub-sections, four of which were author-developed and adapted from previous fantasy sport studies:
Attitudinal loyalty scale (Dwyer, 2011, cited in Heere and Dickson, 2008, p.234)
Involvement scale (Zaichowsky, 1994, p.70)
Team identification scale (Wann and Branscombe, 1993, p.4)
Motivation scale (Dwyer and Kim, 2011, p.79-80)

Procedure
Participants were recruited via two online social media sites; Reddit and Twitter. A short post explaining the research was sent out with a link to the questionnaire
A volunteer self-selection sampling strategy was adopted

Discussion

Findings of the current research contrast those of Dwyer's (2011), the main reason behind involvement and loyalty findings, is the sample used in the current research was more skewed towards high involved participants. When the total involvement scores were split into high and low variables, the highest (25%) total involvement score in the low group was 51 but in Dwyer's study it was only 40 (Dwyer, 2011, p.451).

Interestingly, and completely contrasting Lee et al. (2013), current results show that only 6.5% of FPL participants would mainly watch their best FPL players EPL team over their supported EPL team. While, Lee et al. (2013, p.222) suggest that a much greater 41.1% of fantasy football players would prefer a win by their fantasy team instead of their favourite team.

The present findings of the research contain practical significant. Divided loyalty findings can be used to create a new variable for each real-life footballer's player profile on FPL, this variable could be useful to see how many fans from their supported team have selected a player.

Another practical implication, and a recommendation for FPL would be to provide more ways of satisfying the entertainment/escape motive, by adding greater incentives for loyal fans.

Conclusions

The present study has significantly extended the prior knowledge on the heavily dominated US phenomenon of fantasy sport, and it has built a foundation for FPL fandom in the UK.

Clear evidence to suggest that participants possess high loyalty towards their supported club due to their FPL motives and identification.

Findings also reveal some division of loyalty based on participants willingness to include players from a rival team in their FPL team. Thus, FPL can be enhanced to accommodate players who possess higher loyalty towards their club.

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