ONLINE SPORTS CULTURE: FINDING THE SACRED IN NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

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Amy Louise Wittenbach, B.A.

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Amy Louise Wittenbach, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Frederick A. Volk

ABSTRACT

Recent trends in the development of online sports websites have signaled professional sports leagues’ awareness of the growing interest fans have in the online medium and the technologies it provides. But, because of the nature of the Internet, online sports sites do not exist solely as information exchange gateways; they also take on a commercial function. As visitors to these sites are bombarded with images, technology, and information they become consumers in the online marketplace. This transition calls into question the ability of certain sports site features to help these fans-cum-consumers access sacred elements and thus the transcendent experiences often associated with sports culture and hedonic consumption responses. These ideas lead the reader to question whether or not fans-cum-consumers continue to visit these sites because they offer access to the sacred. This study seeks to answer the following: first, if sports-related websites benefit commercially from a consumer’s ability to find sacred in these environments and second, if the increasing popularity of these sites signals the ability of consumers to find sacred elements online. By conducting interviews with sports league executives and participating in roundtable discussions, this study sought to answer these questions. Interview and discussion results indicate that the websites provide the means, such as community-building features, which can help the fans-cum-consumers access the sacred. The sports league executives, however, do not identify
specific site elements as helping them do so. Ultimately, the study revealed that because the sites rely heavily on user feedback as a way to determine their site design and content, they will continue to be successful in helping fans access the sacred, even if they do so unconsciously.
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Introduction

Traditional media outlets and bricks-and-mortar locales are no longer the only means by which sports fans access and participate in the consumption of their favorite past-times. American sports culture has embraced the fervor of its fans and expanded its reach beyond traditional game-day events to create larger, team- and league-oriented brands. These brands encourage the growing delocalization of sports, in a way, by deemphasizing the attachment to a specific place and time, while at the same time playing off of a consumer’s desire to identify with a team as it strives to win (Mason, 1999). The advent of the Internet and consumers’ increasing accessibility to it has facilitated the ability of sports websites (specific to teams and leagues) to provide their fans with the very aspects of the sport that make them loyal consumers and thus influence their consumer behavior. By allowing fans access to images, products, and information, these sports sites facilitate a consumer experience that transcends functional consumption as a way to meet everyday needs.

Internet Use Today

Access to the Internet for the average American has been on the rise since the mid-90s; a growing number of individuals go online from a home, work, or school computer to use the Internet and access the World Wide Web (Percentage of U.S. Adults Online). Today, 70% of adults use the Internet (Percentage of U.S. Adults Online). Studies show, however, that increased access to and use of the Internet relates to an individual’s household income. A December 2006 poll indicates that in households with yearly incomes of less than $30,000, 49% of individual’s between the ages of 18-65+ have
access to the Internet (Demographics of Internet Users). Use of the Internet rose as household income increased (Demographics of Internet Users). Internet use jumps to 75% when the household income increases to between $30,000 and $50,000 per year (http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_1.11.07.htm. Update January 11, 2007.). Individuals residing in a household with an average yearly income of over $75,000 had an Internet use of over 90% (Demographics of Internet Users). At the same time, a 2006 sports fan demographic survey indicates that the majority of major league sports fans earn over $35,000 per year (Sports Business Resource Guide & Fact Book, p. B-334, B-344). These studies combined reveal that the target audience for professional sports is the individuals most likely to be online.

From 2002 to 2005 online sports traffic increased from three billion visits to sports websites to over five billion visits (Sports Business Resource Guide & Fact Book, p. D-64). The parallel between major league sports’ online presence and the growing Internet use of individuals indicates that professional sports are not oblivious to the possibilities online environments provide. As professional sports’ target audience continues to grow and come online, marketers are beginning to take an increased interest in the online environment. In 2005, approximately $8.5 billion was spent in online advertisements, a growth of 30% from 2004 (Sports Business Resource Guide & Fact Book, p. D-64). Beginning in 2001 Major League Baseball (MLB) turned its focus to establishing a web presence and in 2004 the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football Association (NFL) followed suit. Each site underwent major
renovations in order to compete with online advertisers for the fan-cum-consumer attention and resources.

The Sacred in Consumption

Consumer behavior occurs on a variety of levels and is imbued with multiple meanings. For many individuals, consumption of certain commodities falls outside the traditional means by which individuals meet their everyday needs and becomes “a vehicle of transcendent experience” (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989, p. 2). Research suggests that what individuals identify as sacred and what they regard as profane and ordinary is a fundamental distinction structuring social life (Belk et al., 1989). Although what each consumer reveres, fears, and regards with the utmost respect, and thus deems sacred, differs from one individual to another, a common thread exists in the idea that each element or commodity holds sacred qualities for the consumer and evokes self-transcending experiences and feelings (Belk et al., 1989). Consumer behavior, as a transcendent experience, manifests the distinctions shaping social life when consumption becomes sacred. Sports, sporting events, and elements of the sports culture evoke these emotions of reverence and regard in many fans. When these fans become consumers of sports-related commodities, they often construct unconventional meanings for the commodities and thus mark them as sacred.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) regard consumption as a “primarily subjective state of consciousness” (p. 132). In this subjective state of consciousness one finds the fantasy life of an individual; it is this life that dictates and influences, through hedonic responses, consumer behavior. Researchers believe that fantasy life is found just below
the threshold of consciousness. It is retrievable, however, when certain objects and their imbued subjective meanings provide a sensory experience for the consumer and thus allow them to overcome sensitivity barriers and access fantasy life (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). If, as Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) suggest, the consequences of consumption behavior can be found in the fun and feelings a consumer derives from a product rife with meaning, then these products begin to take on aspects of the sacred (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). For the consumer who possesses them, autographed jerseys and home run baseballs retrieved by fans in the stands all carry a meaning beyond that of a functional uniform or piece of sporting equipment. The emotional arousal prompted by aspects of the sacred an individual finds in products such as these thus transforms a traditional act of consumption into a hedonic response to the evocation of these feelings (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). When consumers begin to imbue products with subjective meanings, then, the consumption of these products becomes a transcendent experience and a channel through which to access fantasy life. Research proposes a process for this illustrated in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Hedonic Response process that enables consumers to access fantasy life.
Sports consumers especially have been known to instill related products, experiences, or individuals with subjective meanings. When these infused meanings merge with the beliefs the consumer holds about a particular object or group, he or she begins to form ideas about the team that shift the focus away from individuals to collectives (Ferrand, 1999). A Red Sox fan’s commemorative 2004 World Series t-shirt autographed by Curt Schilling might not only signify the winning tradition of that season’s team and that player’s memorable role, but also it may bring to mind the superstitions surrounding the “Curse of the Bambino.”

Researchers suggest that the complex consumption of sports goods spans from rational to emotional acts. As the image of a sporting organization becomes rife with “high emotional content” influenced by the affective and symbolical components, the organization transforms from a profane to a sacred entity (Ferrand, p. 400). Consumer behavior towards the organization and its components becomes a hedonic response to the sacred.

**Imagery and Its Affects on Consumption**

Today, participation in sports culture extends beyond a single type of interaction. Fans can do everything from participate in online chats about their favorite teams to enroll for access to special cable channels that cover one specific sport 24 hours a day. Because sporting events and sports teams now seem to have outgrown the traditional

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1 In 1918, the Red Sox beat the Chicago Cubs in six games to win the World Series with the help of left-handed pitcher Babe Ruth. In 1920 the Red Sox traded Ruth to the New York Yankees for $100,000. Folklore holds that Harry Frazee, the owner who sold Ruth, did so to invest the money in a musical, *No, No Nanette*, on which he “subsequently made a killing” (Shaughnessy, p. 11). It would be 86 years before the Red Sox won another World Series as they seemed doomed to suffer “decade after decade of second-place finishes and October collapses,” (Shaughnessy, p. 7). The “Red Sox Nation” came to attribute the trade of Ruth to the Yankees’ “Evil Empire” and their ensuing series of near misses and outright collapses in the final games of October to the “Curse of the Bambino,” (Shaughnessy, 2005).
bricks-and-mortar locations, sports organizations have leveraged multiple media platforms by which to convey their image to consumers. Embedded in these images are a set of values and beliefs that members of the sports subculture have projected onto the organization and that the organization has accepted and adopted (Green, 2001). Advertising content often encourages consumers to continue the supplementation of concrete attributes of a product or organization for subjective meanings (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Even though the easily accessible “subcultural elements transmitted via the media…[are primarily] image-related,” they can still transcend from the profane (i.e., common) to the sacred (Green, p. 4). As Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) propose, hedonic responses are often triggered by visual images. When consumers view sports-related images such as game highlights, team logos, or athlete endorsements on TV, in a print ad, or online, they can recall an event that actually did occur—such as past attendance at a baseball game (historic imagery) or they can construct one from relevant experiences (fantasy imagery) (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). The images, then, are the means by which consumers’ sensitivity barriers are surmounted. When consumers access the fantasy life through imagery they access and evoke emotions related to these objects and organizations that qualifies and thus identifies them as sacred elements and experiences.

Jansson (2001) suggests that it is no longer possible to make a distinction between consumer culture and media culture. Consuming “goods and media texts” has become the same thing (Jansson, p. 7). In the present-day image culture, the “continuous cross-references through which meanings of signs and texts are fixed and renegotiated” have
shaped marketplace commodities into the very content of their media image (Jansson, 2001). Differences between thing and concept have eroded. More importantly, Jansson (2001) recognizes the value of defining the cultural in consumer culture as the practices and relationships of everyday life. In doing so, he emphasizes that culture arises from individuals’ praxis; the meaningfulness found in everyday consumption, practices, or relationships, then, describes culture. In a society where things are displayed, promoted, or learned about through media, a good’s meaning and its marketing representation are often indiscernible. The dissonance has evolved out of a thing’s meaning and its media image in the cyclical nature of a hybrid consumer and media culture.

*Experience versus Possession Value in Consumption*

Individuals experience a sense of community through the sharing of cultural tastes. As people turn to online, deterritorialized communities, the media not only nourish these communities, but also help them develop. In addition to fostering a sense of belonging through traditional denominators such as values and interests, image-centric media also shape these groups into expressive communities (Jansson, 2001). Various sports websites offer photo galleries of recent games, seating maps and aerial views of stadiums, and player profiles complete with headshots. Individuals begin to relate over images that, because of the convergence of a good’s meaning and its marketing representation in the media, carry other values. When it is the media that predominantly displays these images, and it is the media through which individuals consume these images and goods, consumer culture and media culture fuse. For a Red Sox fan post-2004, the team logo on a hat or shirt may stand for more than the players on the team’s
roster. It could also now convey the attitudes and emotions behind Schilling’s bloody sock—an image widely publicized during the Red Sox’ run to the World Series. A media image can become more than a possession to an individual or a community; it can help foster a sense of unity or evoke feelings of the sacred because of the subjective meaning associated with the spectacle.

It is perhaps for this reason that studies have shown consumers often value experiences above possessions (Hopkinson, 1999). Identification of a sacred experience is often marked by a “centering of attention, a loss of self…and an autotelic aspect such that the activity is its own reward,” (Belk et al., p. 8). This state of being is referred to as “flow.” By participating in the sacred, such as viewing an image or experiencing an emotion or feeling that is evoked by an outside factor—most likely a subjective meaning associated with an object—consumers reach flow. Through flow, an individual can achieve transcendence from the profane (i.e., everyday) to the sacred; the ability of a consumer to experience flow during an act of consumption is what helps distinguish a sacred consumption experience from a profane one (Hopkinson, 1999). Achieving flow

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2 After assuring the “Red Sox Nation” that the ankle problem plaguing Schilling for the previous few outings was “no big deal” he pitched Game 1 of the 2004 American League Championship Series (ALCS) against the Yankees only to be “routed for six runs in three innings of a 10-7 loss,” (Shaughnessy, p. 189). Schilling pitched with a torn tendon sheath in his ankle which led Red Sox General Manager Theo Epstein to compare watching Schilling’s pitching stance that game to watching a horse with a broken leg. When the game was over, Schilling said he would not pitch again unless his ankle felt better. After the Red Sox medical director performed an experimental surgery on Schilling’s ankle, Schilling came back to pitch Game 6 of the series. Going into the game, the Yankees led the series three games to two and were one game away from clinching the AL title. During Schilling’s warm-up, however, some of his stitches tore and blood seeped through his sock (Shaughnessy, p. 202-204). Fox TV broadcast a close-up of his ankle throughout the game. Schilling left the game after the seventh inning, with the Red Sox leading 4-1. As Shaughnessy said, “Schilling gave a whole new meaning to red sock that night,” (Shaughnessy, p. 204). The Red Sox went on to win the game, tie the series, and force a Game 7. The Red Sox won Game 7 of the ALCS and went on to represent the AL in the 2004 World Series.
during a consumption experience removes the consumer from the everyday world, thus further separating the profane from the sacred. 

Participation in the sacred also creates “a sense of community that transcends social norms,” and allows sense of camaraderie to occur when individuals “share a common bond of experience…that all participants consider…sacred.” (Hopkinson, p. 274). This “communitas” reinforces the sacred aspects found in traditionally profane objects and experiences by connecting individuals with others who attach similar subjective meanings to these elements. Sports cultures provide ideal environments within which to experience flow and find the sacred. Belk’s studies illustrates that “sacralization of experiences and of persons, places, and times” occurs profusely in spectator sports (Belk et al., p. 12). Fans of spectator sports participate in pre- and post-game rituals, revere athletes, regard stadiums as temples and sites of pilgrimage, and consider artifacts (i.e., souvenirs) as sacred relics (Belk et al., 1989). Myths such as “The Curse of the Bambino” help further sacralize sports. It is through any combination of these aspects and participation in these experiences that fans, as consumers, achieve a sense of communitas. A cyclical relationship exists in the organization’s (or team’s) image and the sacredness that the individuals find in it and the set of beliefs and desires (e.g., for a team’s success) that the fans share with each other. 

Images and New Consumption Environments

The image-heavy aspects of the new consumption environments found in non-traditional elements of sports cultures only further facilitate the experience of the sacred. Because these images evoke fantasy imagery and prompt hedonic responses, the “New
Means of Consumption,” such as online environments, have transformational aspects that induce flow (Sherry, 2001). Online offerings such as aerial and real-time views of stadiums, catcher’s view of a pitch, and post-game locker room interviews can transport a fan from a computer desk to a more fantastic setting and evoke fantasy imagery. The web, as a New Means of Consumption, offers a gateway through which sports consumers access image-laden environments and consequently become immersed in a spectator experience (Miah, 2002). This self-controlled access to sacred elements of the organization—images, information, and objects—allows for an intense relation to the sacred and often results in flow. Some individuals argue that with the advent of tools such as third-eye camera technology, sports risk reduction to something like a Panopticon (Miah, 2002). For a consumer looking for the sacred, however, a Panoptical experience that takes a person “outside of self, matter, and mortality” and supplants him or her to a superior observation position may only further help him or her achieve flow (Belk et al., p. 8).

Gottdiener (1997) describes themed environments as socially constructed places organized around overarching symbols that serve as containers for human interaction. The advent of themed environments that embrace image spectacle and media culture motifs and also provide sensual experiences has only expanded the possible sacred experiences in the New Means of Consumption. Only when sports websites transition from a utilitarian information exchange to a more interactive experience (online, real-time chats with athletes and coaches, virtual stadium and arena views, on-field game time web cams, etc.) do the convergence of a themed environment and its use of image help
individuals access the sacred. Because consumption involves the way “individuals or groups use or interpret the constructed space by imputing some meaning” to it, themed environments have the power to alter human behavior and elicit responses (Gottdiener, p. 5). Online sites specifically, as New Means of Consumption, promote their themes through image spectacle. In some instances, these images can evoke ideas of the sacred. When specifically designed as a sign itself, themed environments can connote something other than their principal function (i.e., commercialism)—they can promise the realization of, or access to, desire and fantasy (Gottdiener, 1997). Consumers who have imbued meaning onto the signs and symbols that the themed environment promotes thus see this as a promise of the sacred. Visitors to such spaces, therefore, adjust their behavior according to the stimuli received from the signals and symbols embedded in the environment (Gottdiener, 1997). Because many themed milieus rely on imagery to interact with the dreams and fantasies of their consumers, the behavior and responses to the stimuli can be identified as hedonic as the individuals use the environment and its theme to access the sacred. Successful New Means of Consumption, then, can help an individual access the sacred through meaningful imagery. A symbiotic relationship exists between consumers’ projected meanings for things and environments’ ability to evolve these meanings (Jansson, 2001). Themed environments prompt consumers to interpret the space as meaningful and enjoyable through hedonic imagery, while simultaneously developing the space into a gateway to the sacred.

Today, sports especially are a major part of consumer society where fans learn the art of consumption of spectacle (Kellner, 2003). Kellner asserts that the very dazzling
and seductive power of information, and the media presentation and advertisement
strategies used to attract audiences and fuel the “mighty money machines” all compose
and characterize spectacle (Kellner, p. vii). The interconnection between new
technologies as consumption environments and the expansion of the culture of spectacle
has lead to an emerging “infotainment society” (Kellner, p. 11). As the new technologies
become modes of information and entertainment, they permeate multiple areas of life—
work, education, culture, and play. The Internet facilitates the culture of
“technospectacle” as computers bring “escalating information and multimedia
extravaganzas into the home and workplace,” (Kellner, p. 14). As sports fans more easily
insert themselves into fandom through the use of new technologies such as interactive
stadium cameras and post-game locker room interviews available on sports sites, the
more traditional passive consumption of sports becomes interactive. Sports fans using
“technospectacle,” must navigate the images in order to achieve the level of interaction
that they desire. Here, as opposed to more traditional sports-going experiences in which
consumers use learned, familiar behaviors to access fantasy and fun, the fans must take
on a level of responsibility to achieve the same transcendence. Sports consumers must
choose which game highlights to see replayed online or from which virtual stadium seat
to watch the kick-off. New technologies that provide fans with the ability to navigate
spectacles allow the consumer to feel a sense of participation and thus community. One
sees this, for example, when online community members share with each other Internet
video clips of potential draftees for their teams. This also, however, means that fans must
overcome the spectacles’ dazzling and seductive natures in order to find the sacred within
the mass of information and entertainment they face each day. When they are successful, spectacles guide the sports consumers by providing images with which fans have instilled meaning and significance. As the fans consume the images, they transcend from the banality of everyday life (Kellner, 2003). In this way, the sports spectacle interaction allows fans to become part of something greater than themselves and access their sacred.

Agency and Consumption

A debate exists, however, between whether an overwhelmed consumer’s actions are unconscious responses to these new forms of media-facilitated interaction or if a consumer retains agency in his or her response to this emotional stimuli. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue that consumers are often overpowered by intense and hyper-real media depictions. As this occurs, consumers lose the ability to control their own fantasy and thus become subject to a predetermined experience. Given the image-heavy characteristic of media environments such as sports websites, the reader can understand this idea. However, Kozinets (2004) argues that consumers create their own play and devise their own fantasies based on the recall of relevant experiences. All of this occurs despite an immersion in a spectacular environment. On some level, then, consumers retain a sense of agency during hedonic responses to the sacred elements found in hyper-real media depictions—without purposeful past experiences the consumers would have no relevant information from which to begin constructing their fantasies or by which to identify their sacred.

A larger picture presents the ability of brand-specific new consumption environments, not simply spectacles (i.e., images), to produce emotional and behavior
effects, when marketed successfully. Because brand image and brand reputation are formed both cognitively and emotionally, assimilating brand elements in one central location strengthens the brandscape’s ability to create and convey organization values and images (Ponsonby-McCabe, 2006). The centrality of many potentially sacred aspects allows for a greater possibility that a consumer will experience a transcendent experience. The key, however, lies in the idea that consumers may come to associate this place, such as an Internet website, as one where they can experience the sacred. Online fans can access and feel communitas through website features that allow them to do things such as purchase sacred team relics and view images of revered athletes. It is sports sites elements such as these that allow consumers to participate in the sacred and experience flow. If one does experience flow while visiting the site, then the brandscape has successfully delivered the values consumers have come to associate with the organization (Ponsonby-McCabe, 2006). By reinforcing the consumers’ subjective beliefs about the organization, brandscapes then successfully capture and retain their consumers.

The question remains, however, as to whether or not brandscapes’ and organizations’ use of the knowledge surrounding the consumer behavior in new consumption environments has allowed them greater influence over individuals in search of the sacred. Sports sites in particular draw in consumers with promises of accessible fantasy and thus the sacred. More importantly, perhaps, these environments fulfill the demand for “leisure, community, and escapist relaxation,” (Sherry, p. 468). Through the use of image, especially, organizations can, and may, exploit a consumer’s desire for the sacred by offering transcendence through experience-, communitas-, or image-induced
flow. Without knowing it, perhaps, consumers turn to sports sites to fulfill a desire for the sacred not easily obtainable in a time-crunched and harried lifestyle. If a fan cannot consume his or her favorite pastime in the bricks-and-mortar venue, these sites often offer participation in the sacred and the chance to achieve flow in an environment specifically established for that consumption experience.

Research Question

Two questions arise when exploring the ideas behind the sacred and its relation to consumer behavior in more modern consumption environments. First, are sports-related websites established and marketed in such a way that they benefit commercially from a consumer’s desire for the sacred, and second, does the increasing popularity of these sites signal the ability of consumers to find the traditionally sacred elements of a sport in a virtual environment?
Study Methodology

Previous discussions of hedonic and sacred consumption have attempted to explain the reasons behind certain consumer actions. This study, however, involves the interaction of sports fan consumers with technology. Thus, the following ideas build on the earlier theories by describing the attitudes and intentions of individuals in relation to the innovative technologies. Using the following theories from Venkatesh’s (2003) study to explain why individuals use and accept new technologies, the interviews will attempt to identify why and how sports websites are established and what influences their evolution. The ideas that Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) explore regarding hedonic consumption will also influence the questioning. By building on the idea that psychological (i.e., hedonic) experiences accompany product usage, the study will examine the ideas behind hedonic responses to the sacred as a factor that influences the adoption of new technologies. By constructing the questioning around these two bodies of ideas, the study will establish and explore the ideas behind the formation and landscape of sports websites. This, in turn, will allow us to attempt to explain how fans and fan communities influence the design and presence of certain features that may allow many fans-cum-consumers access to the sacred. Figure 2 helps illustrate this overall process.
Figure 2. Factors that influence sports fan consumer behavior and lead to different behavioral outcomes.
For Hirschman and Holbrook, products are viewed “not as objective entities but rather as subjective symbols” from the hedonic consumption perspective (Hirschman & Holbrook, p. 93). When studying consumption from a hedonic perspective, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) stress the importance of studying the psychological experiences that accompany product use. Because many hedonic products, such as athletic events or online video highlights, are consumed and experienced over a period of time, the emotions experienced by a consumer are in a continuous state of flux throughout a product usage period (Hirschman & Holbrook, p. 97-98). Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) suggest that the notion of “emotional effort allocation” during product usage can extend “the traditional marketing focus on money expenditures,” (p. 97). If consumers, such as those in search of the sacred, know in advance that a certain level of participation via emotional expenditure will be required of them during the use of a product that evokes hedonic responses, then he or she may choose to use (or avoid) such a product. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) discuss the idea that both the desire for sensation and the desire for absorbing experiences drive individuals to specific forms of consumption. One must wonder if marketing the technology in such a way that it allows consumers to recognize the possibility of experiencing the sacred during a products usage because the usage experience itself requires hedonic participation, aids in the adoption of new technology. This study seeks to combine ideas of hedonic consumption as it relates to product usage, with Venkatesh’s (2003) ideas on user acceptance of new technologies as a way to explain and understand online sports consumers’ adoption and use of certain technologies found on sports websites.
Venkatesh (2003) attempts to explain user acceptance of new technologies. This study uses his findings to explore the ideas and constructs behind the establishment of sport-centered web pages and the advent of sports web cultures. By constructing this exploration around Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the study can begin to conjecture on sports fans’ acceptance of the features found on sports web sites and how this acceptance and use has influenced the growing popularity of these online communities (Venkatesh, 2003). Venkatesh identifies four constructs that play a significant role in determining the user acceptance and usage behavior. This study focuses on these four constructs from a marketing perspective in order to establish how sports web pages capture sports fans in an online environment and provide them with aspects of the sacred that prompt them to return. The line of inquiry focuses heavily on two of the four constructs identified by Venkatesh: social influence and effort expectancy.

The first construct Venkatesh identifies is social influence. He determines this construct as “the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system,” (Venkatesh, p. 451). The study will explore how a visitor’s use of new technology, or a site in particular, allows him or her to be a more integrated part of a community. In sports web site cases in particular, this may center on the idea that a fan’s use of online features such as third-eye technology, real-time scoreboards, and web videos allow an individual to more closely relate to others using this technology. Questions will aim to explore the idea that sports fans use online technologies such as these as the result of a desire to achieve communitas. Do members
of a particular online sports fan community encourage use of these technologies as a way to relate to each other on a higher level? Does an Internet user encountering these technologies perceive that using and accepting these technologies is deemed important by members of the sports community with which they identify? It is, perhaps, the influence of the online sports community members that prompts users to adopt the new technologies found online, and thus encourages sports site designers to continue to provide them, based on their popularity.

Secondly, Venkatesh determines that effort expectancy plays a significant role in user acceptance and behavior. He identifies this construct as “the degree of ease associated with the use of the system,” (Venkatesh, p. 450). Building on the social influence construct, the line of inquiry will examine how sports fans are influenced to explore new technologies by a desire to build communitas, but accept and adopt these technologies based on the ease with which they can navigate and use the different online features. Questions in the interviews will focus on the expected Internet technology familiarity and experience of the target audience and how this played a part in the site design. Were the features of the sports sites in question designed for the basic user? Or were the features designed to engage a first-time user but intrigue them enough that, perhaps combined with social influences, they are easily learned, navigated, and accepted? Attempting to explain the effort expectancy intentions behind sports sites features may help us understand whether or not sports fans adopt these features as a way to access the sacred.
The third construct Venkatesh identifies is performance expectancy. He describes this as “the degree to which an individual believes that using the system will help him or her to attain gains in job performance,” (Venkatesh, p. 447). Venkatesh’s study found that the performance expectancy construct was the strongest predictor of intention (Venkatesh, p. 447). For this study’s purpose, this construct will help us to understand how a fan’s ability to successfully use the technology may aid in a deeper, more complete sense of communitas with fans already skilled in its use. Questions based on this construct will explore how a sports fan’s intention on using, understanding, and adopting the technology is driven by the desire to become a member of the online sports community. The social influence of other sports fans may indicate that a new user’s success in understanding and accepting the technology makes him or her a “better” fan. A desire to achieve further communitas, then, may drive new online sports fans’ intentions and thus the eventual use and acceptance of sport sites’ features.

Venkatesh describes his fourth construct, facilitating conditions, as “the degree to which an individual believes that an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support use of the system” (Venkatesh, p. 453). For this study’s context, the line of inquiry will explore whether or not sports fans believe the community to which they wish to achieve a sense of membership encourages or accepts the new sports site features. Are the online communities encouraging other, new users to explore technologies such as virtual stadium tours or online highlight reels? Or, do the sports communities to which newer fans wish to belong and to which they want to gain acceptance oppose these new technologies? A way to understand these ideas lies in exploring the receptiveness of
sport site designers to the communities’ acceptance or rejection of specific online technologies and whether or not trends show that use and adoption of these technologies follows the recommendation of the online community.

Venkatesh’s work “sheds light on when social influence is likely to play an important role in driving behavior and when it is less likely to do so,” (Venkatesh, p. 469). His findings, combined with the results of this study and the questions put forth to individuals with knowledge of the sports web sites in question, will go far in helping us to understand how certain aspects of the sacred, such as a desire to achieve communitas, influence online sports fans into using and adopting new technologies. These technologies, then, may provide a twofold means with which to access the sacred (i.e., specific aspects of the technologies such as images and panoptical experiences, combined with acceptance to a community). Thus, understanding the constructs that prompt the acceptance of these technologies can only result in aiding sport site designers to facilitate fans’ access to the sacred and helping the sport organizations acquire fans.
Method

This paper presents data collected from interviews conducted with individuals who possess specific knowledge of professional sports leagues and the leagues’ online presence and fan interaction; data was also collected from a review of sports business publications with a specific focus on the recent developments in professional sports leagues’ Internet developments. The study uses these two sets of data, first, to provide a case study of a professional sports league’s (MLB) advent into the Internet and what this means for sports fans on and offline, and second, to apply the ideas present in the case study to other professional sports leagues’ recent online developments as revealed through research and the roundtable discussion.

Participants

Three participants were used in the study and took part in one-on-one interviews with the investigator. Each participant was chosen from a group of sports business professionals because of their specific knowledge about a given subject area. None of the participants were offered compensation for their involvement in the project. Given the proposed research instrument, the participants were not at risk during the study.

The first participant was Dinn Mann, Executive Vice President of Content at Major League Baseball Advanced Media (MLBAM). Mann was recruited because of his background managing major journalism publications’ online products. Before joining MLBAM at its inception in 2001, Mann spent 12 years in major market sports journalism. Questions presented to Mann focused on mlb.com’s history and background, as well as site demographics, site design process and requirements gathering, MLBAM’s
performance expectancy for the site, related social influence, and emotional responses by site users. Mann’s participation was important because, as editor-in-chief of the site content, he possesses first-hand knowledge of the reasons behind certain features and information found on the site and in what ways these are relevant to users. The interview with Mann took place on Wednesday, March 7th, 2007. The questions used in the interview with Mann were valuable in that they provided data and information as to why certain features are present on mlb.com, how fans respond to these features, and the procedure and reason behind the design of new features and site content.

The second participant was Susan Goodenow, Vice President of Business Public Relations at MLB. Goodenow was recruited because of her background in sports marketing and public relations. Before joining MLB in 2006 Goodenow worked for 12 years in sports public relations. In her position at MLB, Goodenow manages the relationships between baseball marketers and sponsors and the sports organization, helping communicate what each party hopes to gain from a relationship based on the league’s multiplatform media presence. The interview with Goodenow took place on Tuesday, March 6th, 2007. It focused on the changing relationship of sponsors and MLB and a growth in sponsor interest in using the Internet as a way to reach baseball fans. Goodenow’s interview provided important information related to the growing sponsor interest in using site features to engage fans, in addition to their interest in developing an online media presence to reach traditional and non-traditional markets and forms of media.
The third participant was Scott Reifert, Vice President of Communications at the Chicago White Sox (MLB). Reifert was recruited because of his experience with advanced media technology, specifically his experiences maintaining an official team weblog (blog) and the franchise-to-fan interaction that has evolved from this new form of communication. Reifert joined the White Sox in 1991 as assistant director of public relations. Currently, Reifert oversees the club’s strategic communications efforts, public relations activities, community relations activities, and the team’s website, in addition to writing the official team blog, “Inside the White Sox.” The interview with Reifert took place on Thursday, March 8th, 2007. This interview was valuable to the overall study because it provided information related to the ways in which sports franchises use technology to engage and retain fan interest, promote fan-to-fan and fan-to-franchise interaction, and provide a type of online community to which fans can turn to in place of a traditional sports-going experience.

The researcher also participated in a conference call conducted by BrandWeek magazine on Tuesday, February 27th, 2007. BrandWeek hosted a new media roundtable designed to explore the changing media landscape and its affects on major league sports. Participants of the roundtable included Dan Courtemanche, Senior Vice President, Marketing and Communications, Major League Soccer; Dick Glover, Vice President, New Media and Broadcasting, NASCAR; Steve Hellmuth, Senior Vice President, Operations and Technology, NBA Entertainment; and Mann.
**Apparatus**

Each study participant was asked a series of questions related to their business subject area. Interviews were modified according to the business area in which each sports executive works; the questions posed to each individual focused on understanding that particular area of online sports business and how it affects online sports fans as sacred consumers. The interviews began by collecting a background of each individual’s industry experience, professional history, and qualifications for his or her current positions and then moved into subject areas specific to each individual. Each interview closed by asking about the future of the industry and the changes each individual saw for MLB in the area of new media.

The Mann interview began with questions that focused on the history and motivation behind the establishment of sports websites, the general demographics of the sites, and how the leagues see fans using the sites. Example questions from this section include, “Who was behind the push for integrating into the Internet?” and “What are the majority of visitors looking for when they visit your site?” The second section asked questions aimed at understanding the effort and performance expectancy for visitors to the sites. Questions such as, “How easily do you find that new users are able to navigate the site and use its features?” “What is the biggest user criticism about site features?” and “Given the set of goals that consumers have, how does the site help them to meet these goals?” were asked. The third section featured questions such as, “What sorts of communities do you see formed online or offline as a result of the site?” and “In what sense do fans feel that using the site and its features makes them part of a larger fan
community?” in order to understand the way that social influence affects the sites and the site users. The fourth section of the Mann interview focused on hedonic responses elicited by site use and site features, by asking questions such as, “How do you design the site so that visitors can access the traditional in the virtual world?” and “Fans often place or imbue special meanings onto sports places and objects; do you find that they are doing the same to online places, images, and information?”

The Goodenow interview began by asking for a brief professional history, and then explored the changes seen in the league and its interaction and adaptation of new media (specifically the Internet) in the past five years. Questions in the second section focused on understanding why and how changes in marketing tools took place. In the third section, questions such as “Do businesses/partners identify any goals they have regarding the online consumer audience?” and “In what ways are businesses/partners concerned about marketing in such a way to appeal to certain fan emotions?” were asked in order to understand the reason for new marketing tools and the increasing marketing interest in the Internet.

The Reifert interview also began by collecting a brief professional history, but then directed the questions in an attempt to understand the community-building aspects behind an interactive online feature, such as a team blog. Reifert was first asked questions about the history and reason behind the establishment and launch of his blog. Then, questions were asked that focused on understanding the demographic of the blog readers and the process behind site design, redesign, and collecting user criticism. Next, Reifert was asked questions such as, “What sorts of communities do you see formed
online or offline as a result of the site?” and “How do established members or frequent
users of the site encourage others to visit the site and use the technologies?” in order to
understand the social influences that result from an interactive feature such as a blog and
the way these social influences affect users in terms of this feature and other, related
sports site features.

The media roundtable consisted of questions focused on gathering information for
three main subject areas. BrandWeek representatives Hilary Cassidy and Barry Janoff
mediated the discussion. The roundtable opened with a discussion of the short history of
the new media landscape and how the participants had seen it change the sports world in
the past few years. The first section of questions focused on understanding what was
driving the push for new technology among the sports leagues and the demographics of
the sports sites today. The second topic participants discussed was the impact the new
medium has had on sponsors and athletes. Participants discussed the willingness of
sponsors to advertise and become involved in aspects of the online sports communities as
a way to further their business goals and the ways in which athletes have begun to
interact with the online sports fan community. The third section of the roundtable
focused on site content and how leagues have handled unsanctioned content posted on
non-league sites. The roundtable ended with a discussion of the future of new media,
especially online technologies, and predictions for the future of the Internet landscape
and the sports community.

See Appendices A, B, and C.
Procedure

Interviews were conducted person-to-person over the phone, or by conference call. The participants were given a brief background of the study and then given a chance to ask any questions they might have related to the purpose or subject matter of the study. Each participant was instructed to answer the questions to the best of their ability but told that they could defer a question if they did not know the answer. All participants were given permission to review the interview notes or a draft of the findings and analysis to ensure that the interpretations presented are consistent with what each individual was attempting to convey about a certain subject. After obtaining a brief professional background of each of the participants, the interview proceeded with the questions found in Appendices A, B, and C. Each interview lasted approximately one hour; the roundtable discussion was one and a half hours long. Given that some participants were under time restraints during the interviews, follow up questions were asked via email.
Results and Analysis

Introduction

Results of the study indicate that while sports leagues continue to grow and evolve their online presence, one of the main catalysts behind this evolution is the fan base itself. In actions and business deals such as site redesign, feature presentations, and sponsorship promotions, the fan constituency influences various aspects of the ways in which the major league sports present themselves online. MLB indicated that the online initiatives were driven from the top down; other leagues echoed this idea. Individuals in the front office were of the same socioeconomic status as the fans who were embracing the Internet as a sports destination. These same individuals, then, were more likely to communicate and use online entertainment resources; it was this familiarity with the Internet that led them to realize the value and possibilities of the new medium. Thus, it was the position of individuals within the organizations, combined with feedback from fans directing more of their attention to online technologies that helped prompt the first moves onto the Web. Now, as fan culture adapts to and integrates technology into its everyday life, the push for these same cultural facets into the world of fun and recreation continues to grow. Leagues respond to the changing technological adeptness of fan-cum-consumer culture by not only listening to the fans and the directions in which they are moving in regards to technology, but also by working to integrate their brand names and their business goals into the online features so clearly desired by the fans. Although the study shows that determining whether or not it is the sacred, specifically, that continues to drive fans towards these sites proves difficult, it does help the reader understand what
these sites provide that makes them relatively successful—commercially—and how these same successes appeal to the consumer in search of the sacred.

The results were analyzed by first organizing the interview answers and information into four major themes: the influence of fan feedback, the influence of sponsorship on commercial interests, the provision of site features that help fans access the sacred, and the importance of providing community-building features for the fans (see Table 1). The themes were influenced by the theoretical background, the research questions, and the study methodology. By looking at the results and the emerging themes, it was possible to determine whether or not the research questions had been answered and if the theories on which the questions were based provided a foundation for analyzing the results.

Results

The Sacred in Consumption

The fan demand for innovation of sports site features, along with the feedback regarding them, indicate that fans consume and interact with sports-related commodities at these online destinations.

The organizations responsible for these sites continue to respond to constituency voices by providing the innovations and technology that fans request. They do not, however, identify these features as possible ways through which fans can access the sacred.
Fan feedback and criticism (through email, online message boards, etc.) regarding site features was one of the most prominent themes in the interview results. Individuals discussed their ability to pinpoint the site features most important to fans based on the level of feedback they received from their users. Site features such as streaming video, e-commerce functions, and constantly updated statistics were some of the facets that received the most fan feedback. Individuals with the sports organizations identified the above site components’ importance to their fans and discussed them as means to cater to fans’ passion and “appetite for sensation.” Although no individual in the interviews identified these features as those most likely to help a fan access the sacred, theory and study results provide a background on which to base the idea that fan interest and involvement with these features is tied to the sacred in consumption. It is, however, difficult to definitely label them as being sacred to the sports consumers without conducting personal interviews with groups of fans. The level of feedback these features garner, combined with the frequency with which they are used, point to a fan-site feature interaction that transcends the traditional consumption of a technology. Although it is difficult to tell to what degree fans imbib a subjective meaning onto these features, and thus begin to label them as sacred, without speaking to the fans, the reader must believe that this occurs on some level if they continue to demand these features and improvements for them. This would indicate, then, that the subjective meanings reposition the features from traditional commodities to more sacred objects.

As these sacred aspects are provided and accessed, this offers fans a chance use these sacred objects to overcome the sensitivity barriers and thus access their fantasy life.
As the use of these features becomes a vehicle for a transcendent experience during site visits they serve to only further influence the fan to view them as sacred. Because of this, the features continue to concentrate user attention and generate increasing amounts of feedback and criticism, indicating their standing as more than traditional consumption commodities.

Imagery

The images found in New Consumption Environments are the most accessed features and draw the most criticism from fans visiting sports-related Internet sites.

Fans are the most innovative with image technology. The leagues have thus begun to respond to fan demand for innovation on their sites by focusing their attention on related features.

Mann and other league executives drew a connection between the changing relationship of fans with new media forms, and the integration of sports and aspects of interactive media with which they see fans growing more comfortable. In the interviews, individuals identified specifically the rapid innovation of image technology online and the degrees to which fans have embraced these changes. Fans are behaving in ways such that interactive media is a part of their every-day lives, said Mann. One genre of site features in particular where they see this to be true, they said, and that they see generate the most comments from users of their sites, was imagery. Everything from highlight reels and live-action stadium footage to coach and player interview video draws users and
user feedback. In many cases, individuals said in the interview, the fans are ahead of the sites with regards to the technological aspects of online images (including streaming video) that they are comfortable linking to and viewing. For this reason, the leagues and their sites have taken to following consumer demand as a way to determine the innovative direction their sites and features should take. “We all want to be innovators,” said Courtemanche. But, when it comes to online imagery and online video, the leagues see themselves following widely popular sites like YouTube and its image technology, as a way to refocus fan attention back to their web pages.

NBA.com, for example, recently debuted their “NBA Highlight Mixer” that allows fans to create their own video highlight reels online. This was done, in part, said Hellmuth, because in the YouTube world, online consumers do not want to simply watch, they want to produce and control content as well. NBA.com’s newest feature presents a way for the league to cater to consumer demand, embrace consumer-sanctioned and demanded technologies, and control content, all while retaining the site visitor. The popularity of image-focused features, the amount of feedback that they draw, and the dedication of the leagues to responding to the criticism, then, leads one to question whether there is a more subjective interest behind both parties’ response to image technology.

*The focus on and proliferation of images on these sites has helped form them into themed New Consumption Environments that entices fans based on the site’s ability to offer access to the sacred.*
The leagues’ eagerness to feature and improve the image technology found on their sites, combined with the concentration of image-focused features in a single location has succeeded in transforming the sports sites into themed environments. Themed environments further facilitate the experience of the sacred through their image-heavy atmospheres. As Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) discuss, visual images can trigger fantasy imagery and hedonic responses—an integral part of sacred consumption and a transcendent experience. The idea that fans most often share their reactions to the image-related technology versus any other online feature indicates that these technologies are held to a different standard, and perhaps subject to a higher value and meaningfulness, than the other features. The leagues’ vigilant response to fan demand for innovation in online imagery has created an environment that they see fans respond to and value, which increases user interest for, and helps entice fans to return to, the site. Fans, in turn, revere the sites for the meaningful images they find there and the gateways these images provide.

Although individuals in the interviews did not identify their focus on image-related technology as a way to create and promote the themed environments that studies have shown are capable of exerting a sensorial influence over consumers, the reader cannot help but wonder at the affect the image-heavy sites have on the fans. Gottdiener (1997) describes the way in which the convergence of image technology and themed environments can help individuals access the sacred. Because the images available through the sites’ innovative technologies seems to carry subjective meaning for sports fans, and thus elicit emotional responses, the online themed environments offer these fans
a chance to access the sacred. While it seems that sites proffer their images and image-related technology in an attempt to influence and capture the fans-cum-users through visual sensorial experiences, this analysis may not present the entire picture. In the end, it may be a combination of fan demand for site technology and league response to feedback regarding the site features that has worked to create the themed environment. Regardless, the evolution of sports sites to image-laden themed environments has provided a venue that fans most likely value because they do offer many vehicles with which to access the sacred.

Experiencing a Sense of Community

All of the sites exhibit a concentrated focus on community-forming features.

The ability to share experiences and communicate online has lead to relationships between fans.

A common theme throughout all of the interviews was the importance of providing a sense of community for site visitors. “Fans want a communal experience,” said Hellmuth. Today, leagues develop their sites in multiple ways in order to answer this demand. From team, player, and front-office sanctioned blogs to interactive chats with coaches, the study interviews highlighted the heavy emphasis the sites are beginning to place on sports fans’ desire for a sense of community. Leagues continue to enhance communication on multiple levels. Not only are they providing fan-to-fan and fan-to-franchise communication through chat rooms, virtual question and answer sessions, and
blogs, for example, but they are also striving to develop site imagery, as discussed previously, and factual presentations. The White Sox blog, says Reifert, provides fans with someone they feel like they know and a go-to source for timely and accurate information. Reifert cited the posting of the day’s lineup on “Inside the White Sox” as soon as it is made available as one way in which the site remains timely and a resource to which fans can turn for communication with the team and with other fans. “Not only does it personalize the team, but it has helped form friendships, and sometimes, hateful relationships,” said Reifert. Regardless, as a result of community-forming features and communication initiatives such as blogs, fans form relationships online. In many cases, individuals cited accounts where these relationships have moved offline to more traditional settings (such as meetings at the ballpark) as well. Reifert gave examples of fans forming relationships through the blog and online communication features, and then planning and attending community functions at the ballpark where they meet in person. The interview highlighted the community-forming features of the sites, and their very real ability to connect fans virtually, and in more traditional ways, thus indicating that leagues recognize the importance of providing community-building features as a way to keep their fans-cum-consumers engaged.

Access to community-building features has provided a way for fans to achieve
communitas online.

Although the interviews highlighted the leagues’ recognition of the importance of community-forming features, no one individual connected the ability of fans to achieve
“communitas” with their desire for a sacred experience. The possibility exists, given the results, that fans do experience (or come close to experiencing) the sacred through the sense of communitas they achieve from the communal features found on sports sites. By engaging with other aspects of the site that are deemed sacred, such as the spectacular imagery and information sources, these shared actions and features help create a sense of camaraderie among the fans who visit the site. As the fans participate and become engaged with the site features, and then use specific site features such as chat rooms and posting boards to discuss them and related topics, they begin to share a common bond of experience. Through this, communitas forms and helps reinforce the sacred found online in traditionally profane objects and individuals. By connecting the fans to each other and to the team, the fan community reinforces itself by sharing their experiences with sacralized site components. Because of the emphasis the sites place on community-building features, these online cultures provide ideal environments in which fans can form relationships with others who share similar ideas of the sacred. The popularity of community-building features that the individuals in the interviews acknowledged seeing indicates that the fans do, in fact, find aspects of the sacred through the communitas they achieve online.

Commercialism and Agency

The relationships formed between the leagues, the sponsors, and the fans, are enhanced in the online environment and have helped develop the commercial interests of the sites and the sponsors.
Interviews conducted for the study revealed that as the leagues began to establish themselves online from 2000 forward, sponsors began to take notice and express an interest in developing this venue and its features as a way to meet some of their business goals. In the beginning, however, the central idea behind establishing a site like mlb.com, said Mann, was the desire to not only create a centralized asset in an evolving media culture, but also to respond to the constituency voicing opinions about the ways in which they were comfortable receiving information. It was only after an organization such as MLB addressed underserved areas such as e-commerce, e-ticketing, and streaming media that a commercial benefit began to evolve out of the newly established environment.

In the last five years, sports sponsors’ increased interest in developing the online component has lagged slightly behind fans’ acceptance of the leagues’ new online presence. But today, said Goodenow, MLB sees an increasing number of sponsors who want to use the site as a component of their sponsorship agreement. “Sponsors have stopped seeing it as a fancy, high-tech add-on, and now view it as an essential component of what you do,” said Goodenow. Many executives explained the ways in which sponsors employ online components to reach both traditional and non-traditional groups of sports fans. Common features found on sites such as nba.com and mlb.com are now integrated into sponsorship promotions as ways to engage fans; today sponsors partnering with major league sports sites use features such as streaming video to offer online-only ad clips and run Internet raffles and promotional contests. Goodenow also explained the developing idea of using mlb.com’s “Press Box” to make press releases and promotional
materials such as exclusive online video advertisements (for sponsors partnering with MLB) available to media beyond traditional MLB beat writers in hopes of reaching a consumer demographic not in touch with regular league sports coverage. The study results reveal that although the prominent idea behind establishing an online presence was not commercial, sponsorship interests in this component has grown and thus, to some extent, shifted the focus.

This shift in focus has emerged, in some degree, from the natural evolution of relationships established and supported by the new communication and interaction medium. Not only do the online sites allow the leagues to present their sponsors with varied and viable options with which to promote their partnership, but they also allow marketers to reach specific target audiences. Combined, these aspects have led to a symbiotic commercial environment. Fans, sponsors, and sites all benefit from the different, but intertwined, relationships through the development and use of technologies to provide information, entertainment, and commercial venues. The very features requested by the fans are what help to draw them to the site (i.e., online ticketing, streaming video, live scoreboards). At the same time, the leagues’ ability to attract consumers and pinpoint demographics appeals to sponsors in search of specific audiences. The sponsors’ use of site features such as streaming video and online contests appeal to and thus attract interactive visitors. In addition, sponsors often use sports sites as portals from which to link the sport fan to their own company websites. These relationships, said Courtemanche, allow high-quality delivery of content on multiple and unique levels of access to the very fans-cum-consumers for which the sponsors are
looking. The relationships and the interactive features, then, have helped shape the commercial success of the league sites established originally in an attempt to appeal to technologically innovative fans.

*The online sport sites environments are filled with influential features that studies have shown are known to overwhelm consumers and lead to a decrease in agency.*

As we have seen, the hyper-real media depictions and interactive features capable of influencing a consumer and thus affecting his or her agency are in place and prominent on these sports sites. The growing interest of sponsors in online consumer-directed initiatives has only increased the image spectacles and interactive media choices consumers find online. Given the image-heavy characteristic of online environments, the possibility exists that, to some degree, the fan-cum-consumer agency is compromised during visits to these sites. Users are potentially overwhelmed by the intense and hyper-real image technologies. We must remember, however, that the sites themselves are primarily user generated; the very features that make the sites influential spectacular environments (highlight reels, live action video, etc.) are features the most requested by the fans and presented as a response to user demand. Thus, although sponsor- and league-initiated spectacles, such as promotional video, may influence consumer agency, the reader must also believe that the fan retains some control over his or her actions. If the fans’ awareness of the site and its features are such that they are able to navigate the destination and coherently decide which features appeal to their emotions and thus which they would like to see more frequently on the site, then some degree of user agency is
retained during site visits. The opportunity for fans to be overwhelmed by their ability to access the sacred in these hyper-real and emotive environments does exist. The study results reveal, however, that even in the face of multiple stimuli fans remain cognizant enough of their surroundings to offer criticism and feedback on them. Despite the influential spectacle in which fans absorb themselves when visiting the site, they retain a sense of agency.

User Acceptance of Site Technologies

*Adoption and use of site technologies has occurred because of the constructs present to promote user acceptance.*

Many of the interview results point to the idea that fan adoption and use of the site technologies has been affected by both social influences and effort expectancy. Previous discussions have highlighted the importance of community-building features found on the sites. Many of these features include innovative technologies—some of which fans have indicated they are comfortable using elsewhere and thus would like to see on a league’s page, and others that fans encounter for the first time on the sports site. Despite the category that the community-building features fall under, fans have indicated they accept and adopt these technologies as a way to build an online community with other sports fans and in return experience a sense of communitas. The pressure to use these technologies, then, is found in the idea that without a working knowledge of the community-building features, fans could not experience the site and the sacred as fully integrated members of the online community. By adopting the community-building
technologies, fans, collectively, are able to take part in some of the same experiences. They use these shared experiences to form their connections and communities. The degree to which effort expectancy plays a part in the adoption and use of these technologies is found in the proliferation and continuation of user feedback the sites and leagues receive regarding their online technology. Because the sites choose their technological direction based significantly on the fan feedback, the features presented on the sites are telling results of what technologies fans are comfortable, and capable of, using. Fan feedback-oriented features, then, are adopted and used because they represent the technological demands of the fans. Overall, the acceptance of sport site technologies remains high not only because of the desires of fans to build and become part of the online sports communities, but also because the site features so directly correlate with the technologically innovative directions in which leagues see the fans moving.

*Sites designed to appeal to fans’ “appetite for sensation” have attracted fans-cum-consumers in search of specific experiences.*

As we have seen, the elements necessary to help fans find and experience the sacred have flourished on the pages of sports websites. This ability to find and experience the sacred helps, as Figure 1 illustrates, fans access their fantasy lives and undergo a transcendent experience. This pattern of hedonic response experienced during each sports site visit influences fans in two related ways. First, it convinces the fans of the sacredness of the site as a whole, or at the very least, of the sacredness found in its components. This elicits repeat visits. Second, the hedonic response pattern forces, to
some degree, fans to acknowledge the ways in which their desire for a sensational experience is met in this online environment through their interaction with the site. The degree to which the sports sites and their components help fans satisfy their desire for sensation and absorbing experiences thus influences the adoption of the site and its technologies. Because the sites catering to fans’ “appetite for sensation,” strive to engage fans in the online experience, and appear successful in doing so on various levels, the hedonic responses produced as a result of having these feelings met increases the fans’ acceptance of the site and the probability for return visits.
Conclusion

Results of the study have helped determine, to some degree, if the increasing popularity of these sites signals the ability of consumers to find traditionally sacred elements of a sport in a virtual environment. One main finding revealed that many elements in which fans can find and through which fans can access the sacred are featured on sports sites. Another revealed that the sites consciously cater, on some level, to fan emotion, but do not recognize specific features as helping induce fan emotions. However, the providers do acknowledge their ability to create a sense of community for their online fans. Although the study did not answer specifically if the growing popularity results from the discovery of traditionally sacred elements online, it did shed light on the possibility of finding aspects of the sacred in this new sports consumption environment. These findings seemed to indicate that as the sites evolve by means of responding to fan feedback, they will allow for increasing discovery of the sacred by consumers.

In the end, the research and studies suggest that although the sacred can be found on league sites, because so much of the site content is subject to user request and driven by user demand, a cyclical relationship exists. Fans-cum-consumers find the sacred online because it is inherent in the features they most desire, but sites provide these features because the fan constituency has expressed a strong demand for them. This demand-and-response approach makes it difficult to determine if fans visit and use the site because the features embody traditional aspects of the sacred they have previously accessed through bricks-and-mortar experiences, or if these feature requests are driven by
their other experiences with innovative online technologies (e.g. YouTube). That leagues are so responsive to user feedback raises another hurdle to determining a more concrete reason behind fan visits to the site. Because the leagues ultimately seek to make their sites supplemental, not substitutional, their sites exist as fast actors for providing the technology their constituents demand, as opposed to innovators offering their fans new features. Although sites hope to provide as much of a desired in-person game experience as possible for the fan prevented from seeing the event in person, leagues remain wary of the interactive overwhelming the “valuable and priceless” experience of watching a sporting event in the stands.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Interview Result</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fan feedback influences site features, content, and design.</td>
<td>• Site establishment was influenced by constituency feedback regarding the ways in which fans were comfortable receiving and sharing information.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “We have to figure out how to be part of a world where users are taking control of the content,” said Hellmuth.</td>
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<td>• “You have to build new media, because if you don’t they’ll go somewhere else,” said Mann.</td>
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<td>• “We all want to be innovators but we end up following things like YouTube,” said Courtemanche.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sponsorship interest in the leagues’ online presence has influenced the shift to a focus on commercial interests.</td>
<td>• Sponsorship interest in developing an online component has lagged slightly behind fans’ acceptance of the leagues’ online presence since they went online in 2001.</td>
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<td>• Sponsors increasingly want to use the sites as a component of their sponsorship.</td>
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<td>• “Sponsors have stopped seeing it as a fancy, high-tech add-on, and now view it as an essential component of what you do,” said Goodenow.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Online features are employed by sponsors to reach both traditional and non-traditional audiences.</td>
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</table>
• Components such as streaming video and Internet raffles offer ways for sponsors to interactively engage fans through promotions.

• Sponsors are better able to reach targeted audiences through placement of ads and promotions online.

• Sports sites are used as portals from which sponsors link online sports fans to their own company websites.

• Streaming video, e-commerce functions, and constantly updated statistics are some of the most commented on and accessed features of the sites and thus the features on which the leagues most focus their innovations.

• In the interviews individuals discussed the idea of catering to fans’ passion and “appetite for sensation.”

• Fans access specific sites first for current and relevant information, versus waiting to read it in a print publication or see it on a sports news broadcast.

• Sites are designed to cater to the “urgency and passion” of the fans by maintaining an intense level of change, not in design and presentation, but in content.

• Sites aim to strike a balance between “evergreen” content that’s entertaining and can’t-miss and a level of variety that “plays into convenience and any craving of details.”

Sites provide features that help fans access the sacred, but do no necessarily identify them as such.
Leagues recognize the importance of providing a sense of community and community-building aspects for fans.

- The leagues strive to offer a variety of website tools and intuitive presentation of options that are easily navigated but offer a “thoughtful and worthwhile” online experience.

- Community-forming features such as blogs and interactive chats are presented in order to help fans feel connected fan-to-fan and fan-to-franchise. They also act as “communication vehicles” for the fans.

- Organizations see blogs and chats as ways to “personalize” franchises to fans.

- “Fans want a communal experience,” said Hellmuth.

- Site images and factual presentations give fans concrete material that they can share and discuss online.

- Executives have seen, as a result of community-forming features, relationships form both on- and offline.
References


*Demographics of Internet Users.* Pew Internet & American Life Project, November 30-December 30, 2006.


[http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/Internet_Adoption_4.26.06.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/Internet_Adoption_4.26.06.pdf)


Appendix A

Questions for the Interview with Dinn Mann

Introduction

What led MLB to launch its site?

Who was behind the push for integrating onto the Internet?

Was feedback from the fans and from the front offices used?

What has your traffic growth been like since launching the site?

Based on your current knowledge, what do your demographics look like from a visitor perspective?

Given where you are today, how would you like to see your demographics change?

What is the majority of visitors looking for when they visit your site?

What is the overall process in terms of requirements gathering and design process for redesigning the site or making small changes? (Do you take a user centric approach or not; where does MLB get this information?)

How do you collect criticism?

Are users involved in the process?

Are there any certain events or factors that you have seen significantly increase traffic over long periods of time?

Do you design the site to appeal to certain sensations or emotions? (ex: excitement)
Do you design the site to facilitate an absorbing experience for the user? (absorbing experience: caught in the moment, similar to attending a game; timelessness: using the site over a long period of time)

**Effort and Performance Expectancy**

What role does ease of use and navigation of a site have on use and adoption of site features/technologies?

What is your general target audience?

Do you design for the average user, the experienced user, or both?

How easily do you find that new users are able to navigate the site and use its features?

What is the biggest user criticism about site features?

Do users indicate that this leads them to stop using the site?

How do you design the site?

Do you design it for a quick visit or for a focused and concentrated visit with a purpose?

Given the set of goals that consumers have, how does site help them meet these goals? (emotional versus user/functional goals—absorbing versus functional)

**Social Influence**

What sorts of communities do you see formed online or offline as a result of the site?

Do these communities interact and communicate via your site or through other means?

Do sports fans use your site to achieve or fulfill a sense of community with other fans?
How do established members or frequent users of the site encourage others to visit the site and use the technologies?

In what sense do fans feel that using the site and its features makes him or her part of the larger fan community?

Does the acceptance or rejection of features by certain online communities influence the overall attitude towards a site and its features?

_Hedonic Responses_

How do you design the site so that visitors can access the traditional in the virtual world?

Is there a sense that fans are becoming more comfortable with the less traditional types of sporting experiences, such as those found on your site?

Fans often place or imbue special meanings onto sports places and objects; do you find that they are doing the same to online places, images, and information?

Is there a certain level of emotional investment that sports sites require of users?—How would this manifest itself behaviorally. (ex: visiting site multiple times/day)

_Conclusion_

Where does the organization want to take the site?

What new features are planned for the future?

Who or what is the biggest influence behind these future plans and changes?
Appendix B

Questions for the Interview with Susan Goodenow

League Response to New Media

During your time with baseball, what shifts have you seen in businesses that partner with MLB towards concerns about less traditional public relations (PR) media exposure (ex: such as Internet related concerns)?

With which new areas of PR exposure are they?

What are their new marketing tools?

Are they interactive or online presences?

Influences Behind Changes in Marketing Tools

What do you think is the biggest factor contributing to the new interest in an online presence?

Is it fan demand?

Is it business interests?

Are the sponsors and businesses interested and concerned with how fans react to online marketing efforts?

In what ways?

How do the sponsors and businesses respond to fan reactions and criticisms to new marketing tools, such as the Internet?
Business Goals Behind Changes in Marketing Tools

What business goals do sponsors identify regarding the online consumer audience?

What consumer goals (goals the consumers have) do sponsors identify as trying to meet through their marketing tools?

In what ways do the sponsors identify separate online consumer goals from goals of offline consumers?

How do they help consumers to meet these goals?

Are businesses concerned about marketing in such a way to appeal to certain fan emotions?

Do they explore ways to access these fan emotions through their products and marketing tools online?
Appendix C

Questions for the Interview with Scott Reifert

*Introduction and History of Blog*

What led the White Sox to launch the blog?
- What role did fan interest play?
- What role did the front office play?
- What role did popular culture play?

*Demographics of Users*

What is your user demographic?
How has this demographic changed over time?
How would you like to see your demographics change?
What is your overall process in terms of requirements gathering and design process for making changes to the site?
- How do you collect criticism?
- Are users involved in the process?

*Social Influence*

What sorts of communities do you see formed online or offline as a result of the site?
How do these communities interact and communicate via your site or through other means?
In what ways do you see sports fans using your site to achieve or fulfill a sense of community with other fans?

Do fans feel that using the site and its features makes them part of the larger fan community?

In what ways do established members or frequent users of the site encourage others to visit the site and use the technologies?

If fans link to site from outside sites, from what types of pages are they coming?