

A qualitative exploration of the positive and negative experiences of individuals who play fantasy football

Luke Wilkins^{a,*}, Eldre Beukes^b, Ross Dowsett^a, Peter M. Allen^b

^a School of Science & Technology, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom

^b Vision and Hearing Sciences Research Centre, Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Mental health
Fantasy football
Wellbeing
Emotions
Online gaming

ABSTRACT

Fantasy football (FF) has become an increasingly popular activity and recent quantitative research has explored the potential impact it can have on mental health. The aim of the present study was to take a qualitative approach to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences of FF players. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 experienced FF players led to the identification of 4 meta themes: Potential Positives (of which there were 3 further themes and 15 further sub-themes), Potential Negatives (3 further themes; 12 further sub-themes), Mediating Factors (4 further themes; 4 further sub-themes), and Future Game Play (2 further themes; 6 further sub-themes). Based on these results, we have proposed: i) a model for initial and continued involvement in FF, and ii) a framework of hypothesised factors leading to predominantly positive or negative experiences in FF. We discuss how these findings can be used by players and game creators alike in order to optimise the experience of playing FF.

1. Introduction

“So when things didn’t go my way and red arrows hit, it really impacted my mood and mental health – there is nothing more frustrating than investing all your time in to something and it then failing”

(Twitter post discussing Fantasy Premier League, 2022) [14]

1.1. Fantasy sports overview

Fantasy sports have grown rapidly in popularity over the last twenty years due to advances in digital and internet infrastructure. In the USA and Canada alone, just under 60 million people were reported to be playing a form of fantasy sports in 2017 [13]. This growing market is forecast to be valued at \$38.6 billion by 2025 [4]. Fantasy sports are a form of gaming, but with the outcomes of a player’s actions (i.e., their team/player selection) being determined by what happens in the sporting events of the “real world” (as opposed to the virtual worlds of traditional video games). As with most games, the competitive element is key, and this can be intensified in some forms of fantasy sports with the addition of prizes and/or financial rewards. Whilst the game is likely a casual hobby for the majority of players, for a minority of individuals it can be far more serious and have a detrimental impact on their lives.

1.2. Psychosocial research in fantasy sports

Psychosocial research into fantasy sports is an emerging area, with the majority of existing work focusing on American fantasy sports and either behavioural indices (such as gambling, addictive actions, and amount of sports consumption) or motivations for participation. For instance, Martin & Nelson [23] found that fantasy sports players were five-times more likely to experience gambling-related problems than non-players, whilst Columb et al., [8] reported that internet addiction in fantasy football (soccer) players was notably higher than average levels. Even within the population of fantasy sports players, differences exist between ‘daily fantasy sports’ (DFS) players (a more intense form of the game almost always involving financial investment/rewards and where matches often occur every day) and traditional players. Engaging in formats such as DFS has been shown to increase likelihood of gambling [31] and increase the number of hours per week spent consuming fantasy-sports-related content [2].

The work by Billings et al., [2] also compared the motivations of DFS and traditional players. No significant differences were found in any of the reasons for participation, with both groups ranking competition, social reasons, and arousal as the top three motivational factors. Social interaction and competition also formed two of the three scales in Dwyer

* Corresponding author at: School of Science and Technology, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham NG1 4FQ, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: l.wilkins@latrobe.edu.au (L. Wilkins).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2023.100547>

Received 19 July 2022; Received in revised form 10 November 2022; Accepted 11 January 2023

Available online 18 January 2023

1875-9521/© 2023 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

and Kim's [11] Motivation Scale for Fantasy Football Participation, with 'entertainment/escapism' being the third, and gambling identified as a key fourth motivation but not included as it was found to negatively correlate with their chosen criterion to assess predictive validity. A recent systematic review of motivation for fantasy sports participation by Martin et al., [25], summarises this area of work nicely, revealing that the four most common reasons behind an individual's involvement in the game were entertainment, competition, social interaction/camaraderie, and enjoyment/arousal.

Whilst gambling, addiction, levels/methods of sports consumption, and motivations for participation are all inherently connected with the mental health and emotional experiences of fantasy sports players, there remains a need to focus more broadly on these latter factors (i.e., players' experiences) as entities within themselves, separate from a specific context or research question.

1.3. Fantasy football research

More applicable to the current study is the recent quantitative research by Wilkins et al., (2021) which demonstrated the potential negative impact of fantasy football (soccer). Here the 1995 participants completed clinical-based questionnaires measuring depression, anxiety, functional impairment, and problematic gaming in the context of their fantasy football gaming. Descriptive statistics revealed that 24.6% of fantasy football (FF) players experienced at least mild depression, though only 0.6% experienced severe depression. Slightly lower numbers were reported for anxiety (19.6% at least mild, 0.6% of which were severe), functional impairment (13.6% either moderate or severe), and problematic gaming (17.3% classified as having a problem).

For the statistical analyses, players were categorised as either low, moderate, or high based on different metrics for engagement (e.g., numbers of leagues played, and number of hours spent playing) and experience. The results revealed significantly greater levels of reported depression, anxiety, functional impairment, and problematic gaming for the highest engaged players compared to the lowest engaged players. Interestingly, experience either had no effect (functional impairment and problematic behaviour) or the reverse effect (depression and anxiety), such that more experienced players were at less risk of poor wellbeing.

The effect sizes reported in the study were very low, though it should be noted that the use of conventional standards for interpreting effect sizes has been questioned, particularly in nascent psychosociological domains such as this one [33]. Furthermore, the authors suggest that their findings may actually be *underrepresenting* the negative impact of fantasy football on mental health due to the social desirability bias of their questionnaire method. A qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews has the potential to reduce social desirability bias [1], lead to deeper insights into the experiences of FF players, and can be particularly effective for sensitive topics such as emotional wellbeing and mental health. Given that the study by Wilkins et al., (2021) is one of the first published papers exploring the emotions and mental health within fantasy sports, it is not surprising that qualitative work is even more scarce.

1.4. Aims and justifications

To address this knowledge gap, the present study aimed to investigate the experiences of individuals who play FF. Specifically, the research centred on exploring the following three questions:

1. What are the perceived positives associated with FF?
2. What are the perceived negatives associated with FF?
3. What can be done, either at an individual or game-creators level, to reduce any potential negatives and/or increase any potential positives associated with FF?

By taking a broad approach to investigating the experiences of FF players, the findings should be able to identify areas that warrant examination going forwards, and therefore provide justification for more specific and targeted studies. Optimising the experiences of FF players should be a high priority, not just for game creators, but for governing bodies of sports as well. Research with fantasy American Football players has shown that participation in the game is associated with increased consumption of the NFL via televised programming [10] and a more diverse form of NFL engagement [9]. Thus, ensuring the continued growth of the fantasy sports market is likely a very important goal for the wider sports industry.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

A cross-sectional qualitative study design was used. Ethical approval was obtained from the first author's institution (Non-Invasive Human Ethics Committee application number 20/21–80). The study adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki and is reported according to the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ; [34],

2.2. Participants

The study was advertised on social media platform (www.Twitter.com) and a popular FF website (www.FantasyFootballScout.com). Fifteen male individuals volunteered to take part in the study with an age range of 23 to 52 years ($M = 32.7$, $SD = 7.6$). In previous FF research, between 95.9% (Wilkins et al., 2021) and 98.2% [8] of participants were male, thus, it was decided that only male players would be recruited for the study. A homogenous sample of male players best reflects the intended population and avoids potential gender-based differences resulting from only a few female participants (were the sample to be representative of the population). The sample size is in line with existing interview-based fantasy sports research (e.g., [9,18,20]). Eleven of the individuals were British, with one individual each from Canada, Ireland, Indonesia, and Denmark. Nine of the individuals resided in the United Kingdom at the time of the interview, with two residing in Ireland, and one each in Canada, France, Singapore, and Denmark. Participants had a mean of 8.1 years ($SD = 4.1$) of experience playing FF and had played in a mean of 5.9 fantasy leagues ($SD = 4.7$) in the previous season. When asked to subjectively report their FF performance in the previous season on a scale from 1 ("worst possible") to 10 ("best possible"), responses ranged from 3 to 10, with a mean of 7.1 ($SD = 2.0$).

2.3. Procedure

On agreeing to take part in the study, participants were sent a link to an online consent statement and short questionnaire to obtain demographic and basic FF information (see Appendix). A suitable day and time for the interview was then arranged. All interviews took place during July 2021 (the off-season for English Premier League football).

A pilot interview was conducted with a 30-year-old male FF player with a reported nine years of experience playing the game to determine the feasibility of the questions and the approximate length of the interview. Following this, the interview script was finalised in collaboration with the research team. All interviews took place using Microsoft Teams and were carried out by the lead author (LW).

The interviews began with the researcher introducing themselves and recapping the purposes of the study, as well as necessary ethical information. Next, the main section of the interview was conducted. A semi-structured interview approach was taken in order to ensure that participants addressed the key research questions whilst also maintaining a freedom and flexibility to discuss personal experiences and opinions in detail. The script (see Appendix) consisted of seven sections which explored the following aspects: a) why participants played FF, b)

general emotions with regards to FF, c) potential positives of FF, d) potential negatives of FF, e) the role of social media in FF, f) FF going forwards, and g) overall experiences within FF. Twenty questions were included on the script, though the total number asked varied depending on the particular flow and circumstances of each interview. Specifically, and in accordance with Patton [27], prompts and probes were used when necessary to elicit clarification and/or further detail on a participants' response. Interviews ranged in duration from 21 min to 60 min ($M = 38.5$, $SD = 9.4$).

Following the interviews, all participants were sent a short, online questionnaire aimed to obtain quantitative data on three specific sub-topics. First, participants were asked: "Which of the following best describes the balance in terms of the FREQUENCY of emotions you experience when playing FF?" Responses ranged from "0% positive, 100% negative" to "100% positive, 0% negative", in 10% increments. Second, participants were asked: "On a scale from 1 to 10, how INTENSE are the positive emotions experienced when playing fantasy football?" (This was repeated for negative emotions). Third, participants were asked to rate their support for the effectiveness of a variety of ideas to address the potential negatives associated with FF on a scale from 1 (no support; bad idea) to 10 (fully supportive; great idea). The full questionnaire can be seen in the Appendix. This was a post-hoc design based on responses during the interviews.

2.4. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed full verbatim by a professional transcribing company. This naturalised form of transcription was deemed appropriate for the purposes of this research in which detailed accounts were sought about real-world experiences, and where the idiosyncratic elements of speech may in themselves provide meaningful data [6].

Thematic Analysis. Braun and Clarke's [3] six phases of thematic analysis were followed to interpret the transcripts. Given the lack of existing research on the area, an inductive approach was taken. Specifically, LW and another member of the research team (EB) familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcripts and listening to the audio files on multiple occasions and making initial notes. Next, in order to reduce potential researcher biases, LW and EB agreed upon initial codes from six of the transcripts before collating the codes into potential themes. Following this, EB generated codes and themes for the remaining nine transcripts. A thematic map was created to provide a visual representation from which both researchers then reviewed all of the themes and ensured that the names and definitions ascribed accurately represented the data and analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The thematic analysis produced four meta-themes of 'Potential Positive', 'Potential Negatives', 'Mediating Factors', and 'Future Game Play'. Within these meta-themes were further themes and sub-themes. Tables 1-4 illustrate these results and include representative quotes for each theme and sub-theme (pseudonyms are used throughout). Note: the frequency of codes refers to the number of participants in which the sub-theme was evident, not the number of instances of the sub-theme itself (i.e., a single participant often had multiple instances of a sub-theme).

3.2. Thematic analysis

3.2.1. Potential positives

Potential Positives (see Table 1) was the most frequently cited meta-theme amongst the majority of participants, with three further themes emerging from this: Social Connections (with an additional three sub-themes), Involvement in Football (four sub-themes), and Personal

Benefits (eight sub-themes).

3.2.1.1. Social Connections. The social aspect of FF was one of the primary positives cited by participants. Specifically, three sub-themes were identified within this. 1) Creating Friendships. FF was seen as an excellent way to create new relationships. The game was cited as a 'talking point' for people and participants often highlighted the workplace or school/University as settings in which they were able to get to know new people through the playing of FF. 2) Maintaining Friendships. A number of participants began playing FF during their school/University years and stated that a primary reason for their continued participation was that it allowed them to maintain the friendships forged at this time. FF was seen as an "excuse" to keep in contact with people that one would otherwise have been less likely to communicate with. 3) Sense of Community. The majority also discussed the sense of community that comes through playing FF, particularly online and in social media. The ability to feel part of a group and have shared interests with people all over the world was recognised as an important positive to the FF experience.

3.2.1.2. Involvement in football. Whilst the connection between FF and the real-world game seems an obvious one, it was still highlighted by a number of participants as being an important positive factor in their playing experiences. Within this, four sub-themes were identified. 1) Increases Knowledge of Football. A number of participants stated that FF helped enhance their knowledge of football, be it with regards to the specific players, teams, strategies, or other aspects related to the game. In particular, several participants emphasised that, because of FF, they watched matches that they otherwise would not have. 2) Mimics Real Football. Not surprisingly, many participants had a strong interest (as a spectator, player, or both) in real-world football, and therefore the nature of FF – based as it is on what happens in real-world matches – was seen as an important positive factor for their involvement. 3) Opportunity to Strategize. Many participants highlighted positively how the gameplay of FF affords them the opportunity to strategize, akin to that of a real-world football manager. 4) Pre-Season Anticipation. Finally, FF also acted to enhance the anticipation and excitement for real-world football, particularly during pre-season. Interestingly the relationship between FF and real-world football appeared to be cyclical, such that events in the latter also generated further anticipation and excitement for FF.

3.2.1.3. Personal Benefits. The positive impact that FF had at an individual level (outside of social factors and football involvement) were experienced by all participants. Eight sub-themes were identified within this. 1) Enjoyment. This was a primary emotion experienced when playing FF and a key driver for participation. 2) Opportunity to Compete. FF as a vessel for competition was cited by ten participants, and in particular, the ability to compete at both a micro-level (with close friends and colleagues) and a macro-level (within the global ranking system). 3) Escapism. FF was seen by some as a positive distraction from the more unpleasant realities of life; an aspect that was exacerbated by the timing of the interviews which occurred following a COVID-disrupted football season. 4) Challenging. FF also provides the opportunity for intrapersonal challenge and competition. 5) Big Part of Life. For many participants, FF was seen as more than just a hobby; it was a positive aspect of their life in general. 6) Rewarding. The gratifying nature of successful decisions made during FF was mentioned by 14 of the participants. It was also notable that the rewarding experience tended to be perceived as greater when the individual felt that their decision was unique or went against the majority. 7) Provides a Routine. All but one of the participants highlighted that FF provided a structure to their week and/or life. The fact that it (normally) had distinct days and times within which the action took place was seen as a positive factor. 8) Develop Transferrable Skills. Finally, an interesting positive raised by

four participants was how FF helped developed skills useful in other areas of their lives. The idea of personal improvement was highlighted, whilst FF's association with the learning of maths, data, and analytics was also mentioned.

3.2.2. Potential Negatives:

Within the meta-theme of Potential Negatives (see Table 2), three further themes emerged: Wellbeing (with an additional seven sub-themes), Online Impact (three sub-themes), and Intensity of Involvement (two sub-themes).

3.2.2.1. Wellbeing. FF was seen to have a negative impact on wellbeing via a number of different avenues. Specifically, seven sub-themes were identified which linked the game to negative aspects of an individual's mental health and emotions. 1) Anxiety-Provoking. One of the most frequently cited negative impacts of FF on wellbeing was in terms of its anxiety-inducing nature. Participants spoke of the competitive aspect (and the desire to win) and the lack of control over the outcome as the primary drivers of this anxiety. 2) Addictive. FF was reported to have an addictive quality, with seven participants reporting that they were aware that they invested too much (both time and emotionally) but were unable to manage and/or reduce their participation. 3) Frustrating. Frustration was another commonly cited negative emotion by FF players. Unsurprisingly, the central source for this tended to be real-world events that led to poor performance (e.g., a fantasy player not scoring many points). 4) Impacts on Mood. The overall effect that FF had on individual's mood was cited regularly, with the connection between poor performance and poor mood often acknowledged. 5) Affects Self-Confidence. Another common negative impact of FF was on self-confidence. Participants stated that poor performances led them to question their decision-making skills and their football knowledge. 6) Pressure to do Well. The perceived burden of succeeding was also cited as a potential negative impact. For the majority of participants this pressure came from themselves, though a few also mentioned that they believed other players expected them to perform to a high standard, and that this caused stress. 7) Disappointment and Regret. These emotions were reported by ten of the participants and were often synonymous with a particular incident, such as a 50/50 decision made that led to poor performance when the alternative choice would have led to better performance.

3.2.2.2. Online impact. FF has a strong connection with online platforms such as social media, websites, and forums. The impact of these sources was highlighted as having a potential negative impact on an individual's FF experience. Within this, three sub-themes emerged. 1) Influence of Social Media. Social media was regularly cited as a factor that had an unhealthy impact on individuals, with Twitter being the primary source mentioned. Participants specifically condemned the negativity and/or power of FPL "influencers" (social media accounts with large followings of FPL players). 2) Online Negativity. General negativity online was reported often, with participants using terms such as "toxic" and "abusive" to describe interactions on social media and other online sources. Participants felt that this was a growing issue for the game. 3) Social Media Bullying. Whilst similar to the previous, the repeated, specific references to 'bullying' by a number of participants warrants recognition as a sub-theme within itself.

3.2.2.3. Intensity of involvement. The extent of engagement that was perceived to be required when participating in FF was deemed a potential negative and manifested itself in two sub-themes. 1) Time Consuming. Thirteen participants made statements concerning the amount of time they invested in the game (in the form of researching decisions and strategy via browsing websites, listening to podcasts, etc.), with many stating that this was necessary for success. 2) Impinging on Life. For twelve of the participants, the time and intensity of

Table 1

Potential positive experiences of playing fantasy football.

Theme (frequency of codes)	Sub-Theme (frequency of codes)	Representative Quotes
Social Connections (36 – overall across all sub-themes)	Creating friendships (13)	"It brings about that element of, of social support, talking with your friends, perhaps...or even being on, on social media and interacting with people you've not met...I know there's many people on social media who have made friends through FPL that if there wasn't the medium of FPL they probably would never have met" (Kyle. 29 years old, 5 seasons of experience)
	Maintaining friendships (12)	"And it kind of keeps us all together really. We're all in separate parts of the country now. And so, it's a fun competitive way to kind of keep the group chat going almost 24/7 to be honest" (Harry. 25 years old, 10 seasons of experience)
	Sense of community (11)	"If you're very lonely, it could give you a way of connecting with a big community of very engaged and mostly nice people, all sort of ostensibly talking about this fantasy game but actually it is still a community and I did really enjoy that factor especially during lockdown where we were all obviously isolated from each other and it was a way of feeling part of a collective experience" (Phil. 38 years old, 3 seasons of experience)
Involvement in Football (36 – overall across all sub-themes)	Increases knowledge of football (7)	"...like two lower division teams, but I never had an interest in otherwise. And also then, that would push me towards knowing about the teams more, so it will increase my football knowledge" (Tyrone. 52 years old, 12 seasons of experience)
	Mimics real football (11)	"What excites me about fantasy football is that it's actually based on the real game. I mean, you kind of have to pick your players and the score will be based on how they actually play, the actual match, so that kind of excites me as well." (Kalvin. 26 years old, 4 seasons of experience)
	Opportunity to strategize (12)	"I really love the long term strategic element of, like how it requires...it's a bit like chess that requires you to think several moves ahead and to try to call trends and patterns that are likely to happen, I think that's really satisfying" (Jordan. 28 years old, 14 seasons of experience)
Personal Benefits (76 – overall across all sub-themes)	Pre-season anticipation (6)	"It's the excitement of just before the season starts with these new transfers coming in and the players coming in, the price reveals that are now out" (Declan. 32 years old, 6 seasons of experience)
	Enjoyment (14)	"I think for a lot of people, and me included, a lot of the time it's something enjoyable that you can look forward to" (Ben. 26 years old, 10 seasons of experience)

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Theme (frequency of codes)	Sub-Theme (frequency of codes)	Representative Quotes
	Opportunity to compete (10)	"It was just like another thing to compete with my friends on, you know, we already competed pretty much through every platform possible. Whether it was like online games like Call of Duty or FIFA, or in physical things like in PE when playing football and stuff. So, it was just another thing to try and, 'one-up' your friends at" (Luke. 23 years old, 2 seasons of experience)
	Escapism (5)	"I think because of the lockdown... I found myself looking for things to occupy me away from the concerns of young children and just the four walls of my house, so I think it became a form of escapism would be how I would describe it" (Phil)
	Challenging (7)	"It keeps your mind active which is always a good thing. It keeps your mind active because you're challenged as well" (Tyrone)
	Big part of life (8)	"It's a big part of kind of my life to be honest, because as I said, it keeps six friends together really closely and as soon as the season ended, it was talking about next season... So, I mean we almost make it a yearly, year-round thing even when Fantasy Football is not on, we're kind of thinking of things we can do to setup for the next season" (Harry)
	Rewarding (14)	"there is that high that you get when, you know, you pick a player that's got a hat trick and - especially when not many people own them" (John. 34 years old, 8 seasons of experience)
	Provides a routine (14)	"It can give a sense of routine. If you...really get into the, sort of, planning side of it, not overboard, but, it can give you a good structure" (Ben)
	Develop transferrable skills (4)	"I try to have better improvements... I think it's a good trait in terms of personal improvements just generally in life, looking for ways to improve. So if I'm still enjoying playing the game and I can... try and develop and improve, then I'll carry on playing" (Bukayo. 39 years old, 11 seasons of experience)

involvement often meant neglecting other important parts of their lives, such as their relationships with family members and friends, their sleep, and aspects of their work or school.

3.2.3. Mediating factors

Within the meta-theme of Mediating Factors (see Table 3), four further themes emerged: Ability to Maintain Balance, Online Involvement, Performance (with an additional two sub-themes), and Perspectives Towards the Relationship with Gambling (two sub-themes).

3.2.3.1. Ability to maintain balance. Over half of the participants alluded to the importance of balance in determining whether FF had an overall positive or negative impact. Some emphasised this from the perspective of how much time they invested in the game (generally

Table 2

Potential negative experiences of playing fantasy football.

Theme (frequency of codes)	Sub-Theme (frequency of codes)	Representative Quotes
Wellbeing (68 – overall across all sub-themes)	Anxiety-provoking (12)	"Sometimes anxiety maybe like just as soon as I wake up on Saturdays because again here in North America, game starts at like 7 a.m. So, as soon as I wake up, I'm all giddy and I got a bit of anxiety just getting ready for the games. And team sheets come out and let's say a player is not starting or something happens and it's a bit of anxiety in that sense where you just, it's the unknown factor so I guess that's where I would say that" (Declan)
	Addictive (7)	"Unfortunately it does become addictive and you can feel... when you pick up your phone, it becomes one of the sort of three apps that you'll click on" (Phil)
	Frustrating (10)	"It's the frustration, the feeling I get if my player doesn't perform the way I would hope" (Declan)
	Impacts on mood (11)	"So, you know, if, if your team has done particularly well over the weekend then you might be a bit happier and if they haven't then... a little bit sadder" (Bukayo)
	Affects self-confidence (9)	"It just makes you question - question yourself and leave you - It does leave you feeling down because you've kind - you know, watched games, you've heard opinion of some - of a player, and then instantly someone's kind of cut it down, and it's just then... You know - You know, like I said, it makes you question yourself: Am I right?" (John)
	Pressure to do well (9)	"If I'm being too close with my competitors in the mini league, I actually become worried and I keep thinking on how I enlarge the gap between me and whoever that is so yeah" (Kalvin)
	Disappointment and regret (10)	"I think that sense of regret can be very disappointing... that really tight, 50/50 call on should you do this or should you do that, and you go the other way and it doesn't pay off... I think that's a shame, and there's sense of like, yeah, a sense of regret with it" (Jordan)
	Influence of social media (6)	"I think the one negative, erm... relating to, sort of, social media, I think, we're at a bit of a cusp point now where people need to...really look at what the positive social media should be offering, and sort of, I guess, limit the negatives. Because, yeah, I've definitely seen the trend towards a bit more, like, toxic behaviour. So, I think that's my one worry that going forward it becomes a shouting match which is something I never thought FPL would be" (Ben)
	Online negativity (6)	"That's why I block people but there are people that are like abusive and really, are hard on other people and stuff. I block
		(continued on next page)
Online Impact (17 – overall across all sub-themes)		

Table 2 (continued)

Theme (frequency of codes)	Sub-Theme (frequency of codes)	Representative Quotes
Intensity of Involvement (25 – overall across all sub-themes)		those because the negativity, I try to sort out of my feed.” (Mason. 40 years old, 5 seasons of experience)
	Social media bullying (5)	“I think there’s a lot of bullying on online fantasy sites” (Tyrone)
	Time consuming (13)	“You can take it too seriously, and it becomes - it doesn’t become a game anymore. It becomes a sort of - It did start to become like - like a job. But it would feel like you’d have to put a certain amount of hours in each week” (John)
	Impinging on life (12)	“Saying ‘I can’t do this, this is really negatively affecting my relationships, you know, I’m going out the room to check my phone, to check the Bet365 notifications, to check scores.’ You know, and that has profound impact on things like relationships and friends” (Kyle)

referring to not becoming overly involved) whilst others highlighted the emotional balance (such as not getting “too high” with the successes or “too low” with the failures). Overall, it seems evident that moderation was an important mediating factor in how FF was experienced.

3.2.3.2. Online involvement. The extent to which participants involve themselves in the online world of FF was another mediating factor that emerged from the interviews. Online resources, and in particular, social media, amplified the emotional experiences, making poor performances seem even worse, and good performances seem even better. Participants cited forums, websites, podcasts, YouTube, and Twitter as the most common environments in which both the positive and negative impact of FF can proliferate.

3.2.3.3. Performance. Not surprisingly, performance in FF (i.e., whether you had good or bad gameweeks) was a key mediating factor in whether the game was seen positively or negatively. Within this, two sub-themes emerged. 1) Rollercoaster Ride. FF was acknowledged as generating both positives and negative emotions, frequently fluctuating between the two experiences depending on the outcome of a gameweek. 2) Reflection of Football Acumen. Some participants discussed FF as a possible reflection of football knowledge or decision-making skills and inferred that the extent to which one agrees with this could influence the emotional impact that FF has.

3.2.3.4. Perspectives towards the relationship with gambling. Seven of the participants discussed FF with respect to gambling. Interestingly, this was often expressed in two diametric positions and thus, form the two sub-themes here. 1) Alternative to Gambling. FF was seen positively as a way to reduce or remove the need to gamble by replicating the escapism, distraction, and adrenaline rush that gambling can provide. 2) Addition to Gambling. FF was also seen as another method of gambling. Some perceived this positively (increased competitiveness) though many noted the negatives (increased stress, potential for financial worries, possible addictive elements).

3.2.4. Future game play

The final meta-theme of Future Game Play (see Table 4) yielded two further themes: Game Creator Suggestions (with an additional four sub-themes) and Self-Preservation (three sub-themes).

Table 3

Mediating factors within the experiences of playing fantasy football.

Theme (frequency of codes)	Sub-Theme (frequency of codes)	Representative Quotes
Ability to Maintain Balance (8)		“Again, it comes down to my own – if I can take it less seriously and just focus on the positives and just laugh off the negatives. So again, don’t get upset if last minute you lose a double clean sheet. Focus on the positives and just block out the negatives. That’s why I’ve been making it a more fun experience for me. Yeah, whether that happens, we’ll see” (Raheem. 29 years old, 11 seasons of experience)
Online Involvement (9)		“I’m going to take a step back from it. I’ve like unfollowed most of the podcasts that I would listen to. So, I’m trying to reduce them, my content that I would consume, and yeah, if I can limit it to 20, 30 min a week of planning” (Raheem)
Performance (11 – overall across all sub-themes)	Rollercoaster ride (7)	“In being placed higher than the majority of players, that is where a lot of enjoyment comes from. If I was like sat outside the top 2 million or something then I suppose that would be a different story” (Luke)
	Reflection of football acumen (4)	“there was a lot of lad’s banter of this person isn’t very good at football, and doesn’t really know much about football, they can’t even...they supposedly watched loads of football and you can’t even get out the top 10” (Jack. 38 years old, 6 seasons of experience)
Perspectives Towards the Relationship with Gambling (7 – overall across all sub-themes)	Alternative to Gambling (4)	“I think it’s a better alternative than say gambling or something like that...I think this is a good distraction away from gambling really” (Marcus. 32 years old, 15 seasons of experience)
	Addition to Gambling (3)	“I suppose, like the analogy with poker, if you sit down and play poker with no money people will make ridiculous decisions...they won’t take it as seriously...I won’t play silly money that, you know, threatens my normal life...I’ll bet just enough to keep it interesting and so I think playing for money and getting towards the end of the season where, you know, people are caring because they may win, you know, couple of hundred quid or something, you know, I think it does add an element of competitiveness to it” (Bukayo)

3.2.4.1. Game creator suggestions. When discussing the future of FF, a number of the ideas suggested by participants were ones focused on what the creators of the game could do to maintain the positive experiences or reduce potential negative ones. Within this, four sub-themes were identified. 1) Resources to Counter the Negative Impact. Most

ideas here centred around the inclusion of mental health support and guidance, though some participants also discussed the feasibility of time-limits or other ways of imposing restrictions on over-involvement. Ideas were split amongst ones that could be implemented via the app, through social media (including via prominent figures like the footballers themselves), and through other online resources. 2) Changes to the Format. Most participants had suggestions for specific changes to the format of the game, and many of these focused on “captaincy” (an assignment to one specific player each week that results in double points) and the removal or amendment of certain “chips” (bonus features that can be played once or twice a season to boost performance). No clear consensus emerged between participants in this context. 3) Compacting the Schedule. Many participants voiced their frustration with elongated gameweeks and inferred that changes could be made in this regard, though often without specifying exactly what could be done. It was noted by most that this is likely a transient negative due to COVID’s impact in terms of real-world match postponements. 4) Managing Uncertainties. Some participants discussed the idea of managing uncontrollable uncertainties in the game (i.e., COVID’s impact on the scheduling of fixtures). Flexibility over “deadlines” (the point in the gameweek after which changes to your team cannot be made) was raised as a possible solution.

3.2.4.2. Self-preservation. Participants also discussed what they or others could do on a personal level to ensure that the experience of FF was an optimal one. Specifically, three sub-themes were identified here. 1) Level of Engagement. Ten of the participants highlighted the importance of not investing too much time and emotional energy on FF. However, specific actions or strategies to achieve this were rarely stated. 2) Awareness of Engagement. Many participants also discussed how becoming more aware of their engagement (interestingly in this instance it was primarily the emotional impact it was having as opposed to the time commitment) was key for their future enjoyment of the game. 3) Cognitive Dissonance. Whilst not acknowledged by participants themselves, the idea of cognitive dissonance emerged in interviews with seven of the participants. That is, individuals often recognised the potential for FF to have a negative impact – even stating to have witnessed it in other people in many cases – but denied that it had been experienced by themselves. This applied to both emotional experiences and behavioural ones (i.e., how much time they dedicated to the game).

3.3. Post-Interview questionnaire

Following the interviews, a questionnaire was designed to help clarify various points made by the participants. In total, 10 of the 15 participants completed the questionnaire, with the responses detailed in Table 5.

In terms of the frequency of positive and negative emotions, 90% reported the ratio of experiences to be between 70 and 30 and 90–10 in favour of positive emotions. The average intensity of the positive emotions experienced was 7.9 out of 10, with all participants reporting values between 6 and 10. The average intensity of the negative emotions experienced was 5.9 out of 10. There was a much greater range of responses reported here, with three participants reporting values of 4 or lower, and three participants reporting values of 8 or higher.

In terms of suggestions to increase the potential positives/reduce the potential negatives when playing FF, no clear consensus was found for seven of the nine ideas. Only “Transparency of Bonus System” (clearer communication regarding an aspect of scoring which uses a wide array of in-depth statistics to attribute points to players) and “Mental Health Advice Tab” (the inclusion of a dedicated tab for mental health advice and guidance on the game’s mobile app) produced unified responses. For the former of these, 60% strongly supported the need for full transparency (i.e., values of 8 or higher out of 10) and the remaining 40% moderately supported it (i.e., values of 4 and 5 out of 10). For the

Table 4

Future game play for individuals playing fantasy football.

Theme (frequency of codes)	Sub-Theme (frequency of codes)	Representative quotes
Game Creator Suggestions (25 – overall across all sub-themes)	Resources to counter the negative impact (7)	“I do think that’s something that the Premier League via their app or their website are going to have to do more on in the next few years. Erm...perhaps try and get some big names on there talking about, yeah, how to manage expectations, how to cope with pressures, what to do if you’ve had a bad gameweek, what to do if you’ve had a good gameweek” (Kyle)
	Changes to the format (10)	“The captaincy is the biggest element of gambling in the game. And I do feel like it brings more negatives than it brings positives because you have a lot of people missing out on the captaincy each week. And it does really, it feels really bad every time. So, for me, it would be removing the captaincy because it has, comparatively, it has a too big effect on your performance of a given game week” (Mason)
	Compacting the schedule (3)	“And because there were a lot more spread outs, I think that also probably would’ve had a major impact on it. So, because you’re not getting, you know, 4:00 pm or 3:00 pm kick-offs, you know, it’s not... the gameweek’s not played over two or three days, it’s playing over seven days pretty much for a lot of it, so it was more drawn out, so if you were thinking about it, I think yeah, there was a lot more negatives this season because of that” (Raheem)
Self-Preservation (20 – overall across all sub-themes)	Managing uncertainties (5)	“I think another uncertainty that we must take into consideration in every game week is on the COVID news. So for example, there are a couple of players that were unable to play, it adds more like anxiety. Because usually, you just need to see how they do in the previous game if he’s okay and maybe not limping off from the game then he should be okay for the next game week. But now, in between those gameweeks, you kind of have to keep yourself updated like what’s going on with this player, is there any COVID related news” (Kalvin)
	Level of engagement (10)	“I think again, it depends how serious you take the game. Every individual is different and every individual approaches the game a different way and I think if you do take it to a point where you know you’re really focusing so much of your energy on fantasy football, it could pay a toll. I can see that” (Declan)
	Awareness of engagement (3)	“One thing that I would like to do is just to go back and watch a football game and not be so invested in what’s that score

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Theme (frequency of codes)	Sub-Theme (frequency of codes)	Representative quotes
	Cognitive dissonance (7)	going to mean to my points" (Jack) "You know, and I can't put myself in that position, in their shoes, because I don't take it to that level but I definitely feel like it would affect someone's mental health if they are deeply invested in the game and it takes up a lot of their time and energy" (Marcus)

latter, 70% strongly supported its inclusion, though two participants did value this idea as a 3 out of 10. Many ideas generated strongly divergent responses, with some participants reporting strong support and others reporting minimal support. This was particularly applicable for the ideas of removing captaincy/vice-captaincy bonus points and the inclusion of regular mental health questionnaires on the game's mobile app.

4. Discussion

4.1. Overview of the findings

The present study aimed to provide deeper insights into the experiences of FF players by utilising a qualitative, semi-structured interview approach with 15 individuals. Thematic analysis identified four meta-themes: Potential Positives (of which there were three further themes and 15 further sub-themes), Potential Negatives (three further themes; 12 further sub-themes), Mediating Factors (four further themes; four further sub-themes), and Future Game Play (two further themes; six further sub-themes). Overall, participants painted a mostly positive picture of their FF experiences, and a number of interesting mediating factors became evident. Quantitative data collected from a post-interview questionnaire confirmed the generally positive perspective, though it failed to provide conclusive support for most of the strategies for future game play that had been suggested by participants.

Many of the sub-themes identified under the Potential Positives have been found in existing literature exploring motivations behind fantasy sports participation. In relation to the most frequently reported motivations highlighted in Martin et al.'s [25] systematic review on the topic, notable *unique* ones in the present study included that FF provided a routine to the week, FF helped develop transferrable skills, and that FF had become a big part of life. It is not surprising to see the first of these, given football's less intense and more structured scheduling (centred around the weekend) compared to that of baseball and basketball, which would have been the focused sports in a number of the studies in the systematic review. Intuitively then, the antithesis of this leads to a negative experience. That is, when the routine and structure is broken (as with the COVID-induced rescheduling of fixtures), individuals feel that the game begins to impinge on their lives and becomes too time consuming. The less frequent structure of football may also be why FF players spoke of the transferrable skills developed through the game, as it allows more time for reflection and analysis which are fundamental principles in learning of all types. Additionally, the present study generated sub-themes from the idea of social connectedness (in Martin et al.'s phrasing, "social interaction/camaraderie") to emphasise that FF enabled players to maintain existing *and create new* friendships, whilst also asserting the sense of community that can be generated through the game.

4.2. Model for initial involvement and continued involvement in FF

It is possible to view the Potential Positives within a model of initial

Table 5
Post-interview quantitative data regarding perceptions of the balance in positive and negative emotions experienced, the intensity of positive and negative emotions experienced, and the effectiveness of a variety of ideas in addressing potential negatives associated with FF.

Ideas														
Frequency		Intensity		Game Format				Social Media				FPL App		
Participant	Ratio of Emotions (Pos-Neg)	Positives		Negatives		Removal of Bench Boost	Removal of Triple Captain	Removal of Free Hit	Removal of and Vice-Captaincy	Transparency of Bonus System	Twitter Verification	Time Limits	MH Advice Tab	MH Questionnaire
Bukayo	80-20	7	7			1	1	1	1	5	8	1	3	6
Harry	80-20	9	4			1	1	1	1	5	8	7	7	2
Luke	80-20	8	7			7	2	2	4	8	1	5	9	1
Mason	70-30	8	10			8	10	3	10	8	10	8	9	9
Marcus	80-20	8	3			2	2	2	2	4	7	8	8	5
Declan	70-30	8	7			8	8	8	2	9	9	2	10	2
Tyrone	90-10	6	2			9	9	9	2	10	5	1	10	8
Ben	80-20	8	2			5	2	7	7	8	1	4	9	2
Phil	30-70	7	9			4	7	5	8	8	3	7	3	3
John	70-30	10	8			1	1	1	6	4	10	1	10	8

Note: Frequency of Emotions was rated on a scale from 0-100 to 100-0, with the former reflecting proportion of positive emotions experienced when playing the game and the latter reflecting proportion of negative emotions, thus, a response of 50-50 would represent an individual perceiving an equal split of positive and negative emotions. Ratings for Intensity were on a scale from 1 ("very low/minimal") to 10 ("very high/maximum"). Ratings for the effectiveness of potential ideas were on a scale from 1 ("no support/bad idea") to 10 ("full support/great idea"). MH = Mental Health. Jack, Jordan, Kalvin, Raheem, and Kyle did not complete the post-interview questionnaire.

involvement and continued involvement (see Fig. 1). We hypothesise that individuals begin playing FF due to: 1) expectations of enjoyment, belief that it will provide an escape, and the opportunity to compete ('personal benefits'); 2) the opportunity to create new friendships and maintain existing friendships ('social connections'); and 3) the desire to increase football knowledge, the appeal of mimicking real football, and the opportunity to strategize ('involvement in football'). Individuals then continue to participate in FF for the same reasons, plus: 1) that it has become an integral part of their life, the challenge it offers, the routine it provides to the week, and the opportunity to develop transferable skills, 2) the sense of community generated, and 3) the heightened sense of anticipation that is generated during pre-season. These additional motivations are likely ones that individuals only become cognizant of once they have played the game. Future research to test this model is, of course, warranted, as support for it may help drive future amendments of FF games (and the creation of new ones) which enhance the experience of players.

4.3. Potential negatives of FF

A number of the sub-themes found under the Potential Negatives corroborate the quantitative study by Wilkins et al., (2021). Specifically, the idea that FF can be anxiety-provoking, addictive, impacts on mood, affects self-confidence, generates disappointment and regret, is time consuming, and impinges on life all tie into the measures of anxiety, depression, functional impairment, and problematic online gaming used in Wilkins et al.'s work. These experiences were discussed at length by the majority of participants, perhaps suggesting that the numbers reported by Wilkins et al., (e.g., 24.6% with at least mild depression, 0.6% of which had severe depression; 19.6% with at least mild anxiety, 0.6% of which had severe anxiety, etc.), may be underrepresenting the potential negatives of FF as the authors had suggested. For the most part, the potential negative online impact of FF (in the form of the sub-themes of social media influence, online negativity, and social media bullying) is likely a reflection of wider societal issues in this area which are beyond the scope of this paper (though see [17] for a recent systematic review). Nevertheless, the fact that FF is an *online* game with various *online* resources to increase participation (such as podcasts; YouTube videos; and dedicated websites, social media accounts, and forums) demonstrates the ease at which participants could be drawn into a potentially negative environment. Further research is needed that specifically focuses on FF in terms of its relationship with online involvement and social media.

4.4. Potential mediating factors for FF experiences

Importantly for players and game creators alike, the current study

highlighted several mediating factors which seem to influence whether one's FF experience is a positive or negative one. Maintaining a healthy emotional balance (predominantly not taking the game too seriously) is key and there is a wealth of psychological literature exploring the association between emotional regulation and wellbeing. For instance, Gratz and Roemer [16] state that difficulties will likely arise when there is a lack of awareness and understanding of one's emotions, a lack of acceptance towards those emotions, an inability to control negative emotions, and incongruence with one's emotional regulation strategies. Another important factor is the extent of online involvement; too much can exacerbate the potential negatives already discussed, but too little may also be suboptimal as it could reduce the potential positives (in particular, the escapism, development of transferable skills, social connections, and increased knowledge of football). Such a finding is congruent with Przybylski and Weinstein's [29] Goldilocks Hypothesis, which posits that moderate use of digital technologies is advantageous for wellbeing and has received a growing amount of support (e.g., [30,28,36]). The hypothesis also emphasises the importance of "when" the involvement takes place, which links to another mediating factors of whether the time invested impinges on other aspects of an FF player's life. In the hypothesis, which is based on data pertaining to the amount of digital screen time of adolescents, consumption could increase by 22–133 min before negative effects were experienced, if done so on a weekend. A similar finding may be true in FF given that weekend involvement for many people may mean a reduced likelihood that the game impinges on other aspects of their lives (e.g., work or childcare). Adherence to this guidance may also partially explain why "provides a routine" was seen as a Potential Positive.

Successful FPL performance is perhaps the most obvious mediating factor for wellbeing, with research supporting such similar success-and-positive-wellbeing relationships in the near-domains of video gaming (e.g., [35]), sports (see [32]), work on Self-Determination Theory), and gambling (e.g., [15]). Interestingly, this somewhat conflicts with the next mediating factor: the acceptance of the "rollercoaster ride" (i.e., that performance will fluctuate, and thus, so too will emotions). If FF players are to accept that fluctuations in performance are inevitable, it is logical that they must also accept that they do not have full control over outcomes in the game. This contradicts much of the literature on perceived control, which generally finds that increases in this component lead to beneficial effects on wellbeing [22]. In addition, research by Dwyer et al., [12] has found that individuals tend to reduce their communication with others when their fantasy team loses. Given that the present study has identified this ('Social Connections') as a key positive of FF involvement, further research is needed to clarify the complex relationship between success, acceptance of outcomes, perceived control, and social relationships.

Viewing performance in FF as a reflection of footballing acumen also



Fig. 1. Model for Initial Involvement and Continued Involvement in FF.

seems to mediate the experience of players. Playing fantasy sports to demonstrate knowledge has been discussed as a potential motivation in previous research [21], though the present work suggests that it is healthier for individuals to not hold this perspective. Finally, how one perceives the relationship between FF and gambling could also determine their experience. Considerable research has found a strong relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling [23,24,26], though it remains to be seen whether, for a subset of the population, fantasy sports is actually used as a substitute to the potentially harmful activity [7,37]. Future research should explore this, given the positive societal impact it could have.

4.5. Practical implications

Fantasy football has a large global following, likely totalling into the tens of millions across all versions of the game. As such, the practical implications of the current study are of considerable importance, and we believe that the framework that we have proposed (see Fig. 2) is applicable to all stakeholders of the game. From a player perspective, a number of factors have been identified which may enhance the experience and benefit wellbeing. Whilst many participants cited success as an antecedent for enjoyment in FPL, and indeed, our framework acknowledges it as a likely mediating factor, it is important that individuals should not attempt to rely on or hope for this when playing the game. Rather, we believe that acceptance of the rollercoaster ride supersedes it as a long-term strategy for wellbeing. This is supported by literature

which finds that confidence of success (almost certainly correlated with success itself) can lead to addiction and increased monetary involvement [5,19].

Awareness of one's level of involvement also seems to be critical and may help reduce the potential negatives of the game. In this respect, an important first step is to educate players on the possible impact that FF can have on their wellbeing. Individuals with potentially excessive engagement first need to be made aware of this before they can put into action methods to reduce it. In such cases, cognitive approaches like taking time to reflect on the many positive reasons for participation, or behavioural approaches like setting self-imposed time limits on playing, could prove useful in optimising the experience of FF. That said, it was clear from the current findings that many participants had cognitive dissonance in this regard. They acknowledged that other players could invest too much time, or become too emotionally attached, but that this was not applicable to them. This may make awareness a difficult skill to acquire, but support could be provided by game creators, for example, in the form of pop-up warning messages after a certain number of minutes of using the app.

There are other important implications for game creators too. Three ideas received fairly favourably by participants in the present study are included in the 'Future Game Play' component of our Framework (Fig. 2), though, of course, this is far from an exhaustive list, and even some of the less-supported ideas (see Table 5) still warrant discussing with a much larger sample of the consumer base. Indeed, gaining full consensus for an idea is an impractical approach; a more effective

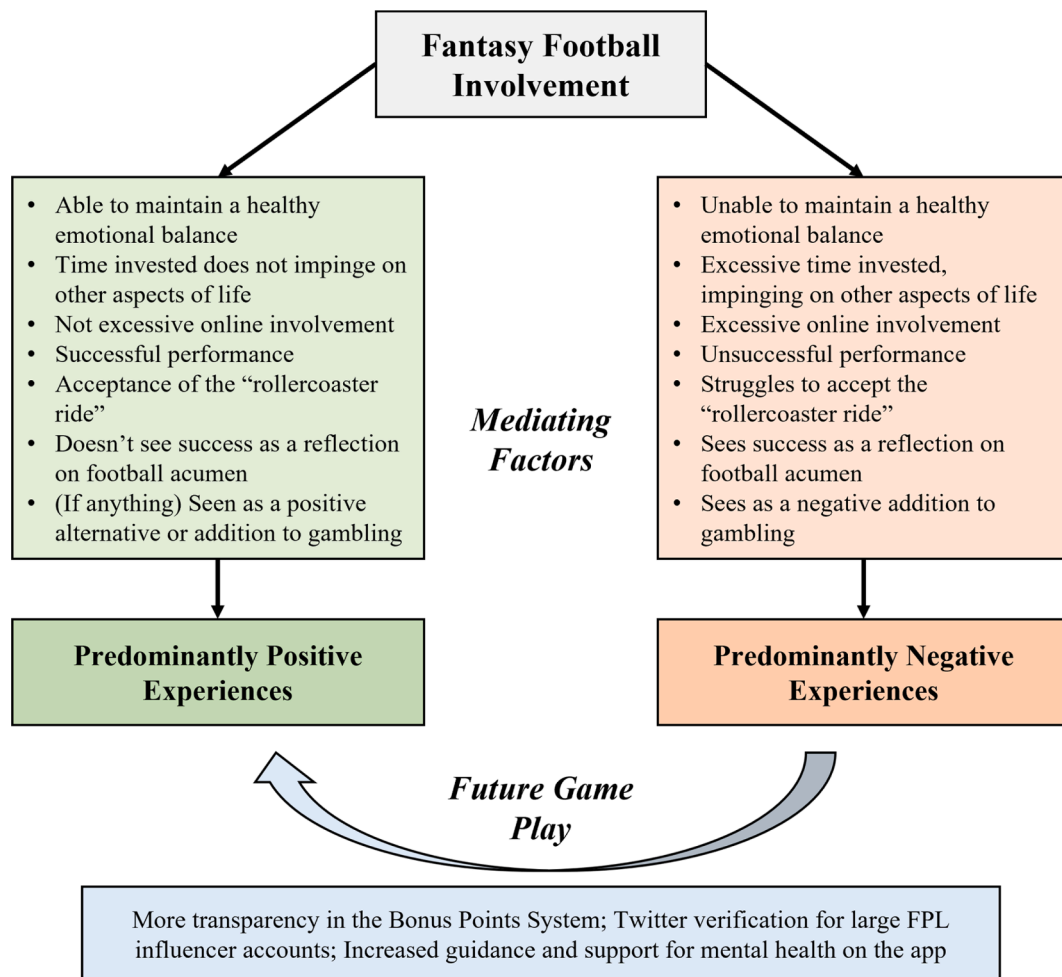


Fig. 2. Framework of Hypothesised Factors Leading to Predominantly Positive or Negative Experiences in FF Note: The suggestions included in the Future Game Play component (blue box) are based on data taken from the post-interview questionnaires. Specifically, ideas which received ratings of at least 6/10 by at least half of the participants (5/10) are included. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

method may be for game creators to introduce a menu of support tools, from which players can select the ones suitable for themselves. With regards the idea of ‘Twitter verification’, we think that huge improvements in online negativity and social media bullying could be had if large FPL influencer accounts received verification (i.e., a symbol similar to the blue check mark already used on Twitter) if they met criteria such as completing a formal identification procedure and committing to certain standards of ethical behaviour. Being verified would likely increase an individual’s following (people generally don’t want to follow toxic accounts), thus making verification – and by association, the positive criteria to obtain it – a desirable commodity.

Finally, implications also exist for other key stakeholders. Whilst participation in the game often originates from watching the sport (‘mimics real football’), there was a clear cyclical relationship here in that many participants reported watching *more* football *because* of their involvement in FF. Organisations such as the Premier League could increase their audiences even further by embracing FF and incorporating it into their TV coverage, much like US networks do with their coverage of American sports. If the game continues its rapid growth, and FF players become an increasingly vital subset of the Premier League’s TV audience, it may be that the Premier League would benefit from ensuring a consistent and compact fixture schedule, as desired by participants in the present study. In a separate manner, perhaps even individuals in education could utilise the growing popularity of FF to help teach skills such as data analysis and numeracy, given that several participants highlighted this opportunity to learn as a personal benefit from the game.

4.6. Future research and limitations

As alluded to in previous sections, testing the various hypothesised mediating factors in our framework (Fig. 2) would add considerably to the literature and help optimise the experiences of FF players. It may be that, despite stemming from the results of our interviews with players, a factor such as excessive online involvement does not, in itself, lead to negativity. Excessive online involvement may only become an issue when combined with other harmful factors such as unsuccessful performance. A similar relationship may exist for the factor of “performance as a reflection of football acumen”.

Given that research into the experiences of FF players is still in its infancy, the present study deliberately took a broad approach with its investigation. In doing so, a number of fruitful avenues for future research have been identified that warrant a narrower and deeper exploration. For instance, it is clear that gambling, social media, and in-game success/failure are three important factors in how the game is experienced, but each generate a number of subsequent questions that could be explored in detail. For example, are individuals who play FF for financial rewards at greater risk of incurring the negatives of the game? Does social media use predict the emotional wellbeing of players? And in a game of varying formats, what measures of success are used by FF players with functional/dysfunctional experiences with the game?

It is important to note that the inclusion criteria for the study required participants to have taken part in the most recent FPL season (2020–21). This requirement for recent engagement likely results in a sample skewed towards positive experiences of the game (as if an individual has had negatives experiences, then they would probably have stopped playing) and therefore whilst the findings are generally promising, it is important to be mindful of this potential bias. Interestingly, a number of participants specifically mentioned that their awareness of the potential negatives in FF is what incentivised them to take part in the study. Whilst recruitment of such a sample may be difficult, future research should look to replicate the current methodology with a group of individuals who have recently quit playing the game. To support this idea, it is noteworthy that Phil’s quantitative responses were clear outliers, and he was one of only two participants (alongside John) who stated that, at the time, they were not sure whether they would be

continuing to play FF in the following season.

Another key consideration is the timing of the interviews. Taking place in the off-season (July 2021) ensured that participants were not influenced by their current participation and may have allowed for greater reflection on their experiences. However, the prior season (September 2020 to May 2021), from which participants were likely basing most of their responses, had been severely impacted by COVID. The majority of participants highlighted this and spoke of how the consequent uncertainty and prolonged nature of the game was almost always negative. It is almost certain that the themes emerging from a non-disrupted season would have some differences, though whether the overall picture is altered is unknown.

4.7. Conclusion

By taking a qualitative, interview approach (with post-hoc quantitative data to support), the present study has built on work by Wilkins et al., (2021) and provided a more detailed account of the positive and negative experiences of FF players. Overall, a mostly positive account of the game was generated, with thematic analysis identifying Personal Benefits, Social Connections, and Involvement in Football as the main themes. A model based on these themes (and sub-themes) has been proposed which distinguishes between motivations for initial involvement and continued involvement. Negatives of the game exist in terms of Wellbeing, Online Impact, and Time Commitment. A number of mediating factors were also identified, and based on these, a Framework was introduced which establishes the key antecedents of positive and negative experiences in FF. Given the growing popularity of the game, a number of important practical implications (specific to players, game creators, and other stakeholders) and future research directions based on the findings have been suggested.

Contributors

Author A conceived and designed the study, carried out the data collection, contributed analysis tools, performed the analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author B also contributed analysis tools, performed the analysis, and contributed to the writing of the final version of the manuscript. Author C assisted in designing the study and contributed to the writing of the final version of the manuscript. Author D assisted in designing the study and contributed to the writing of the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the 15 participants who took part in the study for giving up their time to discuss their fantasy football experiences.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2023.100547>.

References

- [1] N. Bergen, R. Labonte, “Everything is perfect, and we have no problems”: Detecting and limiting social desirability bias in qualitative research, *Qual. Health Res.* 30 (5) (2020) 783–792, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319889354>.
- [2] A. Billings, B.J. Ruihley, Y. Yang, Fantasy gaming on steroids? Contrasting fantasy sport participation by daily fantasy sport participation, *Commun. Sport* 5 (6) (2017) 732–750, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479516644445>.

- [3] V. Braun, V. Clarke, Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qual. Res. Psychol.* 3 (2) (2006) 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- [4] Business Wire. (2021, August 3). Global fantasy sports market report 2021 featuring DraftKings, Dream Sports, Sportito & WinView Games among others. Business Wire. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20210830005273/en/Global-Fantasy-Sports-Market-Report-2021-Featuring-DraftKings-Dream-Sports-Sportito-WinView-Games-Among-Others—ResearchAndMarkets.com>.
- [5] A.W. Chau, J.G. Phillips, Effects of perceived control upon wagering and attributions in computer blackjack, *J. Gen. Psychol.* 122 (3) (1995) 252–269, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.1995.9921237>.
- [6] C. Davidson, Transcription: imperatives for qualitative research, *Int. J. Qual. Methods* 35–52 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800206>.
- [7] S.A. Churchill, L. Farrell, The impact of gambling on depression: new evidence from England and Scotland, *Econ. Model.* 68 (2018) 475–483, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econmod.2017.08.021>.
- [8] D. Columb, M.D. Griffiths, C. O’Gara, Fantasy football (soccer) playing and internet addiction among online fantasy football participants: a descriptive survey study, *Int. J. Ment. Heal. Addict.* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00436-4>.
- [9] J. Drayer, S.L. Shapiro, B. Dwyer, A.L. Morse, J. White, The effects of fantasy football participation on NFL consumption: a qualitative analysis, *Sport Manage. Rev.* 13 (2) (2010) 129–141, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2009.02.001>.
- [10] B. Dwyer, J. Drayer, Fantasy sport consumer segmentation: an investigation into the differing consumption modes of fantasy football participants, *Sport Mark. Q.* 19 (2010) 207–216.
- [11] B. Dwyer, Y. Kim, For love or money: developing and validating a motivational scale for fantasy football participation, *J. Sport Manag.* 25 (1) (2011) 70–83, <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.25.1.70>.
- [12] B. Dwyer, R.M. Achen, J.M. Lupinek, Fantasy vs. reality: exploring the BIRGing and CORFing behavior of fantasy football participants, *Sport Mark. Q.* 25 (3) (2016) 152–165.
- [13] Fantasy Sports & Gaming Association, 2021. Industry Demographics. FSGA: Fantasy Sports & Gaming Association. <https://thefsga.org/industry-demographics/>.
- [14] FPLMuzzy [@FplMuzzy], 2022, January 28. So when things didn’t go my way and red arrows hit, it really impacted my mood and mental health – there is nothing more frustrating than investing all your time in to something and it then failing – or you perceiving it to have failed [Tweet]; <https://twitter.com/FplMuzzy/status/148713222461251590>. Twitter.
- [15] P. Gee, K.R. Coventry, D. Birkenhead, Mood state and gambling: Using mobile telephones to track emotions, *Br. J. Psychol.* 96 (2005) 53–66, <https://doi.org/10.1348/000712604X15536>.
- [16] K.L. Gratz, L. Roemer, Multidimensional assessment of emotion regulation and dysregulation: Development, factor structure, and initial validation of the difficulties in emotion regulation scale, *J. Psychopathol. Behav. Assess.* 26 (1) (2004) 41–54, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOBA.0000007455.08539.94>.
- [17] B. Keles, N. McCrae, A. Grealish, A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents, *Int. J. Adolesc. Youth* 25 (1) (2020) 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851>.
- [18] R.J. Kissane, S. Winslow, “You’re underestimating me and you shouldn’t”: Women’s Agency in fantasy sports, *Gen. Soc.* 30 (5) (2016) 819–841, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243216632205>.
- [19] D.H. Kwak, C.H. Lim, W.Y. Lee, J. Mahan III, How confident are you to win your fantasy league: Exploring the antecedents and consequences of winning expectancy, *J. Sport Manag.* 24 (4) (2010) 416–433, <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.24.4.416>.
- [20] B. Larkin, B. Dwyer, C. Goebert, Man or machine: Fantasy football and dehumanization of professional athletes, *J. Sport Manag.* 34 (5) (2020) 403–416, <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2019-0106>.
- [21] S. Lee, W.J. Seo, C. Green, Understanding why people play fantasy sport: development of the Fantasy Sport Motivation Inventory (FanSMI), *Eur. Sport Manag. Q.* 13 (2) (2013) 166–199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2012.752855>.
- [22] V. Ly, K.S. Wang, J. Bhanji, M.R. Delgado, A reward-based framework of perceived control, *Front. Neurosci.* 13 (2019) 65, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2019.00065>.
- [23] R.J. Martin, S. Nelson, Fantasy sports, real money: Exploration of the relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems, *Addict. Behav.* 39 (10) (2014) 1377–1382.
- [24] R.J. Martin, S.E. Nelson, A.R. Gallucci, J.G.L. Lee, Daily and season-long fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems among a sample of college students at three universities, *Int. Gambl. Stud.* 18 (3) (2018) 395–407, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2017.1409248>.
- [25] R.J. Martin, K.G. Kozel, K.B. Sewell, J.G. Coghill, J.G.L. Lee, A systematic review of motivations for fantasy sport participation, *J. Sport Behav.* 43 (3) (2020) 352–372, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2014.05.017>.
- [26] L. Nower, K.R. Caler, D. Pickering, A. Blaszczyński, Daily fantasy sports players: Gambling, addiction, and mental health problems, *J. Gambl. Stud.* 34 (2018) 727–737, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-018-9744-4>.
- [27] M.Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th Ed., SAGE Publications Inc., 2015.
- [28] A.K. Przybylski, A. Orben, N. Weinstein, How much is too much? Examining the relationship between digital screen engagement and psychosocial functioning in a confirmatory cohort study, *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry* 59 (9) (2020) 1080–1088, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2019.06.017>.
- [29] A.K. Przybylski, N. Weinstein, A large-scale test of the goldilocks hypothesis: Quantifying the relations between digital-screen use and the mental well-being of adolescents, *Psychol. Sci.* 28 (2) (2017) 204–215, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616678438>.
- [30] A.K. Przybylski, N. Weinstein, Digital screen time limits and young children’s psychological well-being: Evidence from a population-based study, *Child Dev.* 90 (1) (2017) e56–e65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13007>.
- [31] B.J. Ruihley, A.C. Billings, N. Buzzelli, A swiftly changing tide: Fantasy sport, gambling, and alternative forms of participation, *Games and Culture* 16 (6) (2021) 681–701, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020966161>.
- [32] R.M. Ryan, E.L. Deci, Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being, *Am. Psychol.* 55 (1) (2000) 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>.
- [33] T. Schafer, M.A. Schwarz, The meaningfulness of effect sizes in psychological research: Differences between sub-disciplines and the impact of potential biases, *Front. Psychol.* 10 (2019) 813, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00813>.
- [34] A. Tong, P. Sainsbury, J. Craig, Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups, *Int. J. Qual. Health Care* 19 (6) (2007) 349–357, <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042>.
- [35] S. Trepte, L. Reinecke, The pleasures of success: Game-related efficacy experiences as a mediator between player performance and game enjoyment, *Cyberpsychol. Behav. Soc. Netw.* 14 (9) (2011) 555–557, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2010.0358>.
- [36] J.M. Twenge, W.K. Campbell, Association between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: evidence from a population-based study, *Prev. Med. Rep.* 12 (2018) 271–283, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003>.
- [37] H. Wardle, S. McManus, Suicidality and gambling among young adults in Great Britain: results from a cross-sectional online survey, *Lancet Public Health* 6 (1) (2021) e39–e49, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30232-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30232-2).