

ECONOMICS

Sociology

Ghosh Dastidar, S., & Basu Roy, S. (2023). An effective distraction? Fantasy football during the times of COVID-19. *Economics and Sociology*, 16(1), 138-158. doi:10.14254/2071-789X.2023/16-1/10

AN EFFECTIVE DISTRACTION? FANTASY FOOTBALL DURING THE TIMES OF COVID-19

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Received: January, 2022
1st Revision: December, 2022
Accepted: March, 2023

DOI: 10.14254/2071-
789X.2023/16-1/10

ABSTRACT. The popularity of fantasy sports has increased exponentially over the last few decades. The existing literature has predominantly focused on the negative effects of fantasy football (or, fantasy sports in general) on mental health because of its association with gambling and internet addictions. Using primary data collected through online surveys, this study attempts to examine the role of fantasy football within a completely new context by asking whether it acted as an effective distraction for the fantasy football managers during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 70% of the participants consider fantasy football to be an effective escape from day-to-day activities. Approximately two-thirds of the managers in our sample report that they were negatively affected by the suspension of fantasy football at the advent of COVID-19. Once resumed, fantasy football helped mitigate some of the negative emotions caused by COVID-19 and it worked as a distraction for 78.5% of the managers during the pandemic. The statistical analysis indicates that though the role of fantasy football as a distraction was evident across all age groups the effect was more acute in case of the highly involved managers (defined by, level of competitiveness and time invested in the game during weekends).

JEL Classification: L82, L83 **Keywords:** fantasy football, COVID-19, English Premier League, fantasy sports

Introduction

Fantasy sports is a highly lucrative online activity that has experienced unprecedented growth in the last two to three decades. The fantasy leagues allow fans to experience their favourite sports away from the stadium or arena (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007; Dwyer, 2009). The global fantasy sports market was valued at \$18.6 billion in 2019 and the market size is expected to more than double by 2027 (Vig & Deshmukh, 2021). A significant factor which led to the growth of the fantasy sports market is digitalisation. An increased number of smartphone users has also contributed to the growth of the fantasy sports industry. The number of users has increased almost by 15 times since 1994 and, in 2017, there were around 59.3 million fantasy sports participants in US and Canada (Fantasy Sports and Gaming Association, 2019). A perusal of the participation data for the official fantasy football league (FPL) of the Premier

League (also known as the English Premier League) points towards a similar trend. For instance, the number of fantasy football managers (hereafter, referred to as FFM) playing FPL increased from less than 1 million in 2007-08 season to almost 8 million in 2019-20 (Gastmans, 2019). The COVID-19 outbreak has also led to a significant growth in the number of FFMs as people tended to rely more on online gaming platforms for entertainment amidst the lockdowns and restrictions imposed by the national governments across the world (Research & Markets, 2021).

Given the rapid growth in popularity of fantasy sports, additional research on the impact of the same on the participants is warranted. A few studies (such as, Roy & Goss, 2007; Bernhard & Eade, 2005; Wann et al., 2001) have attempted to analyse the negative effects of fantasy sports on the FFMs. In fact, the past literature has predominantly focused on the negative impact of the fantasy games on mental health and its association with gambling problems (Martin and Nelson, 2014; Marchica and Derevensky, 2016; Griffiths, 2017; Nower et al., 2018). This paper attempts to explore if there are any positive effects associated with fantasy sports (using Fantasy Premier League or FPL as the case study).

Fantasy football requires the FFMs to select an online team of real-world players based on the rules outlined on the Fantasy Premier League website. The FFMs are then awarded points based on the real-world performance of those players every week (Columb, et al. 2020). For example, the points are awarded based on various criteria, such as, number of goals and assists registered, number of clean sheets, duration of engagement of the players in a game. So, in order to be successful in fantasy football, one not only has to follow the weekly football games but also needs to stay abreast of the regular developments in the league.

In a normal football season itself, predicting how a professional player is going to perform and accordingly selecting a player seems like a complex task but during COVID-19 era (due to significant disruptions) it became even more complicated. As a result of the pandemic, all football matches in the English Premier League were suspended from 13th March 2020 (Maguire, 2021) which led to a disruption in the FPL as well. During this time, numerous countries were also adapting to social distancing measures along with lockdown restrictions (BBC, 2020). These restrictions negatively affected the mental health of several people and gave rise to new barriers for people already suffering from mental wellbeing and substance abuse issues (Panchal et al., 2021).

In this context, using primary data collected through online surveys, this paper aims to understand whether: a) suspension of FPL at the advent of COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental wellbeing of the FFMs; and b) resumption of FPL in the middle of the pandemic acted as an effective distraction for the users and the game was successful in mitigating some of the negative emotions experienced during the pandemic. In short, the novelty of this paper lies in the exploration of the potential positive role of fantasy sports within the context of the pandemic era.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 1 reviews the relevant literature, Section 2 outlines the methodology and the research hypotheses tested in this study, Section 3 presents and analyses the survey data, followed by the concluding section.

1. Review of the relevant literature

The literature on fantasy sports can be divided into two categories. Studies in the first strand attempt to unearth the reasons why people play fantasy sports whereas the second strand concentrates on the effects of fantasy sports on a FFM (particularly on their mental wellbeing).

According to Roy and Goss (2007), the reason why people play fantasy sports game is influenced by various variables. Like in the case of any purchase decision, a combination of internal and external factors direct the consumption pattern of fantasy sports. The internal factors comprise of psychological characteristics, and the external factors are social interactions and market-controlled influences. Psychological influences on fantasy sports consumption include the capability to exert control, the need to escape from reality and/or the feeling of accomplishment after winning fantasy leagues (Roy & Goss, 2007). The feeling of control in fantasy sports is created through making decisions about purchase and sell of fantasy players every week as one competes with managers of other fantasy teams during a season. It not only allows the person to participate vicariously in professional sports (Bernhard & Eade, 2005) but also provide the fantasy sports team owners the opportunity to experience an aspect of the careers of certain sports management professionals (Davis & Duncan, 2006 and Birch, 2004). Roy and Goss (2007) point out that the more knowledge a FFM has about player statistics, the stronger are the feelings of control and confidence in decision-making. Fantasy sports game marketers have also used messages of control and ownership in advertising campaigns that appeal to people who are interested in playing (Shipman, 2001).

In his influential 1961 book, entitled “Man, Play and Games”, Roger Caillois argues that one of the core characteristics of sports is that it provides an escape from the everyday reality. In other words, sports offer people an opportunity to escape the reality and briefly escape into an imagined world (Wann et al., 2001). Fantasy sports provide a similar refuge to consumers who want to relieve their stress by escaping from the reality. Given that fantasy sports allow one to use fantastic imagery to assume the role of a sports team-owner, it is an ideal mean of enabling consumers to accomplish their desire to escape (Roy and Goss, 2007).

Another internal motive which influences consumers to play fantasy sports is achievement. The competitive nature of fantasy sports, where the goal is to outperform the other fantasy teams, provides consumers with an opportunity for achievement (Davis and Duncan, 2006). In research conducted via an online questionnaire that was shared on different fantasy sports games blogs in Europe and North America, 47.5% of the respondents said that they play fantasy games to ‘beat friends’ (Dorda, 2019). Fantasy game marketers thus recognise that some fantasy sports players can be motivated to play fantasy sports because of the opportunities to compete and succeed in the weekly match ups. As a result, advertising strategies for improving certain fantasy sports participation are based on the suggestion that successful players (such as, the fantasy league champions) can acquire public recognition (Shipman, 2001).

The external factors, such as, social interactions and marketer-controlled influences also affect the direct consumption of fantasy sports. An important aspect of the consumption of fantasy football is based on ‘playful interaction with other people’ or ‘having fun’ (Roy & Goss, 2007; Dorda, 2019). Holt (1995) describes the consumption pattern in which the fantasy managers’ desire to interact with fellow managers can be identified in two forms: communing and socialising. Communing provides the managers with a platform to interact with one another regarding a shared interest. Fantasy game tools provide them with a sense of community through message boards and social media groups. Davis and Duncan (2006) moreover point out that since fantasy sports is male dominated it provides the consumers with a platform for male bonding. This also leads to the creation of “men’s clubs” that serve as venues for reaffirming masculinity.

Another strong influence on the consumption pattern of fantasy sports is the prospect of socialising with family, friends and co-workers (Dorda, 2019). For instance, fantasy sports participants can create their private leagues, which allows them to socialise with their acquaintances. Moreover, public league players are brought together because of their shared

interest in sports (Roy and Goss, 2007). Wann et al. (2001) identify that socialisation (especially spending time with family and group affiliation) is a major motive for sports consumption.

The second strand of the fantasy sports literature looks at the effects of fantasy sports on its consumers' mental wellbeing. For most individuals, participation in fantasy sports is a harmless form of entertainment, however, for some individuals, there can be harms associated with these sports (Houghton et al., 2019). Multiple studies (Kahn, 2016; Levy, 2019; Irvine 2020, to name a few) have explored the mental health complications and addiction to fantasy sports.

The risks of playing fantasy sports have been closely linked to the psychological effects posed by gambling. The argument here is that daily fantasy sports and pay-to-play fantasy sports strongly resemble gambling (Feldman, 2014; Martin and Nelson, 2014; Levy 2005). As Houghton et al. (2019) point out, pay-to-play fantasy sports can be used to win money which converts the straightforward form of entertainment into a gambling activity. Bernhard and Eade (2005) draw a similar parallel between fantasy sports (baseball) and gambling. The 2005 study posits that '*if we broadly define gambling as an activity that risks something of value (substantial amounts of money) on an event whose outcome is undetermined (such as the whims of a professional baseball season), fantasy baseball clearly qualifies*'. In both fantasy sports and gambling, research is helpful and unforeseen events can negatively or positively affect performance. Further, in both games, expert opinions can be availed (for a price) and there are suitable times for buying or selling 'performers'.

Nowar et al. (2018) attempt to study the nature of the relationship between fantasy sports and gambling, particularly the development of gambling behaviour and its severity. A survey of more than 3000 New Jersey residents was conducted. The results reveal that daily fantasy sports players are characterised by high gambling frequency and notably suicidal thoughts. Using data from the 2004, 2008 and 2012 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Marchica and Derevensky (2016) find that approximately half of college student-athletes who qualified as at risk or having gambling problems were found to have participated in fantasy sports wagering. Martin and Nelson (2014) analyse data on more than 1500 college students and find that those who participated in fantasy sports were five times more likely than non-participants to endorse at least one criterion for a gambling disorder. An analysis of the significant characteristics of the fantasy sports players reveals a positive correlation with high frequency gambling and reports of suicidal thoughts in the past one year. Some studies have also found that fantasy sports players face negative consequences at both work and home, because of their behaviours associated with addiction and gambling (Goodhart, 2007; Snyder, 2014; Carter, 2012). Bergevin et al. (2006) indicate that fantasy sports tempt vulnerable consumers. For instance, a growing market for fantasy sports is the 12-17-year-olds who are not capable of dealing with gambling's negative outcomes (Teitell, 2012; Subramaniam, 2013). As a result, adolescent gamblers struggle with poor academic performance, low self-esteem, depression, and poor interpersonal relationships. Using a sample of 684 fantasy football participants, Columb et al (2020) report some evidence of positive association between fantasy football participation and internet addiction.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the existing literature has predominantly examined the risks of fantasy sports associated with gambling and internet addiction. This study examines fantasy sports in a new light. More specifically, as mentioned earlier, taking fantasy football as a case study, we investigate whether fantasy sports played a more positive role in the life of the FFMs during the COVID-19 crisis.

2. Methodology

Primary data were collected between 29th March and 2nd May 2021 via an anonymous online survey that was posted on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and LinkedIn. A total of 141 participants completed the survey. The criteria for participation were that: a) the respondent is at least 18 years of age at the time of participation and b) the respondent was engaged with fantasy football during the pandemic period. Anyone not satisfying either of these criteria were dropped from the sample.

Each survey began with a participant information sheet detailing the outline of the study, the objectives of the study and the relevant General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) information. Each respondent completed a consent form acknowledging their understanding of the information sheet, their voluntary agreement to participate in the study, their understanding of how the collected data would be used, and their opportunity to ask questions prior to completing the questionnaire. Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of Derby (UK).

The survey comprised of 21 questions in total; the first three questions asked for demographic data like age, gender and country of residence. The next set of queries (4-9) asked the respondents some generic questions relating to fantasy football trying to gauge the participants' level of competitiveness, experience of the game, amount of time spent on the game during weekdays and weekends as well as reasons behind engagement. From question 10 onwards, the survey asks questions which explore fantasy football-related experience of the FFM within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualitative research method was adopted in the analysis of the collected data. After describing the data with the aid of charts and graphs in the following section, we proceed to perform statistical tests like the Chi-Square test of Independence in order to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The extent of the impact of fantasy football as an effective distraction during COVID-19 pandemic varies across various age groups.

It can be hypothetically argued that the age group that predominantly engages with the game should experience the distracting role (if any) of the same to a larger degree as compared to the other age groups. There are studies which report that fantasy sports are predominantly played by 18-34 year olds (Farquhar and Meeds, 2007). Similarly, the 2019 survey by the Fantasy Sports and Gaming Association concluded that 50% of all the fantasy players were between 18 and 34 years. In this context, we try to examine if age plays any role as far as dependency on fantasy football during the COVID-19 period is concerned. The null and alternate hypotheses have been respectively formulated as follows:

H₀: Role of fantasy football during COVID-19 is not associated with the age of FFM

H₁: Role of fantasy football during COVID-19 is associated with the age of FFM

Hypothesis 2: Fantasy Football played a distracting role for the more competitive managers.

Accordingly, the null and alternate hypotheses have been formulated as follows:

H₀: Role of fantasy football is not associated with the level of competitiveness of FFM

H₁: Role of fantasy football is associated with the level of competitiveness of FFM

Hypothesis 3: Fantasy Football worked as a distraction for those FFM whose mental wellbeing was adversely affected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

H₀: Role of fantasy football is not associated with mental wellbeing effects of COVID-19

H₁: Role of fantasy football is associated with mental wellbeing effects of COVID-19

Hypothesis 4: How much time a FFM spends on fantasy matters. In other words, the more the time managers spent on activities relating to fantasy football, the bigger the distraction the game provided.

H₀: Role of fantasy football is not associated with time spent on the game during weekdays

H₁: Role of fantasy football is associated with time spent on the game during weekdays

H₀: Role of fantasy football is not associated with time spent on the game during weekends

H₁: Role of fantasy football is associated with time spent on the game during weekends

The test statistic for the Chi-Square test of Independence (χ^2) is computed as:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^R \sum_{j=1}^C \frac{(O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}}$$

where,

O_{ij} is the observed cell count in the i^{th} row and j^{th} column of the table

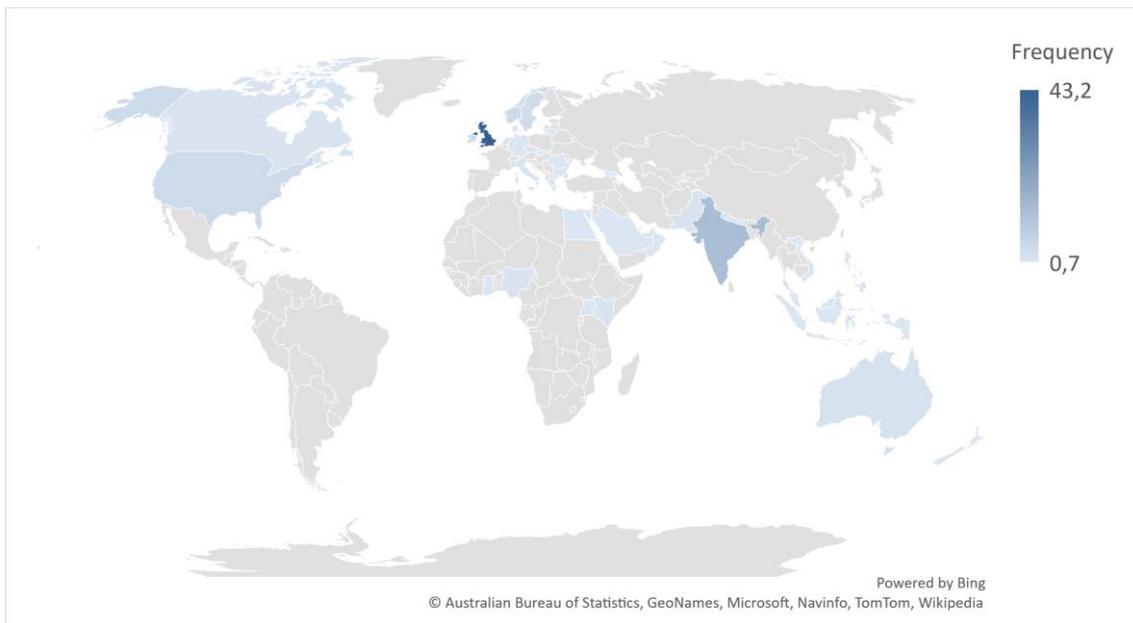
E_{ij} is the expected cell count in the i^{th} row and j^{th} column of the table, computed as

$$E_{ij} = \frac{\text{row } i \text{ total} * \text{column } j \text{ total}}{\text{Grand total}}$$

3. Data analysis and discussion

The survey was completed by 141 fantasy managers. Males accounted for majority of the participants in the sample (around 97%), consistent with past surveys on fantasy football (Dwyer, 2009; Columb et al., 2020). Only 3 (2.1%) respondents were female. The global evidence overwhelmingly indicates towards a significant gender gap in this context. For instance, Fuentes (2019) reports that only 20% of fantasy football players are women, and there are 27 million more male players than female.

The respondents come from all over the world (35 countries) with the majority coming from the UK (43.2%) and India (13.4%), followed by Norway (4.3%), USA (4.3%), Ireland (3.5%) and Sweden (3.5%). The worldwide spread of the FFMs underlines the global appeal of the English Premier League which has the largest global television audience among all football leagues (Columb et al., 2020).

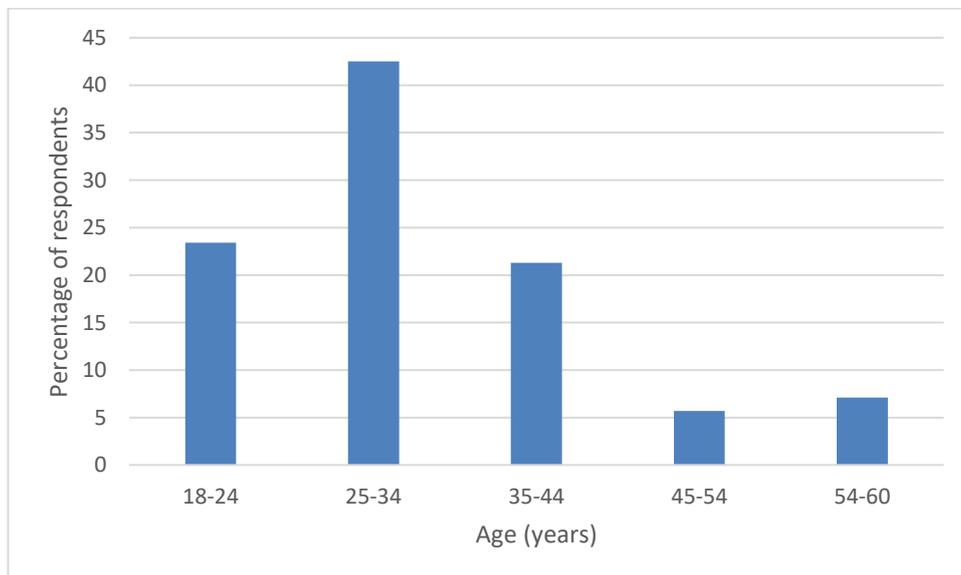


Graph 1. Country distribution of respondents

Source: *Based on authors' own calculations.*

Note: *See Table A1 in the Appendix too.*

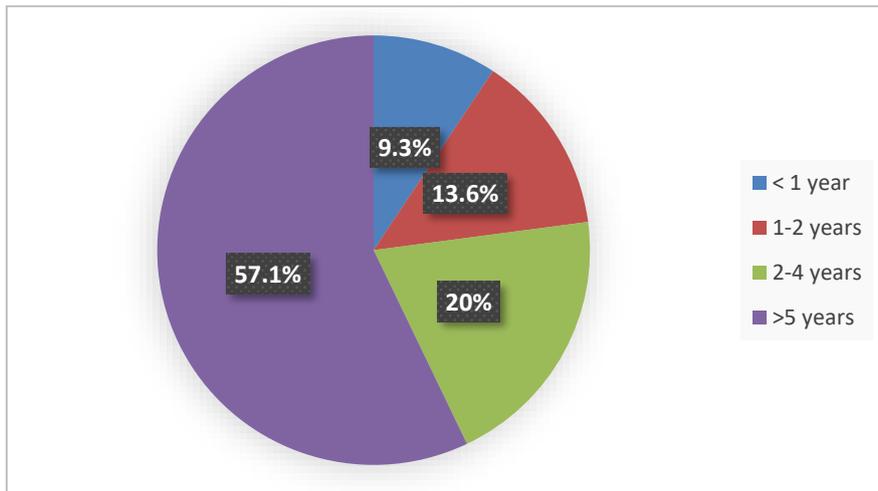
The age range of the sample is very broad with the minimum being 18 years and the maximum being 58 years. The mean age of the sample is 28.2 years. Most of the respondents belong to the 25-34 years category (42.5%) followed by the 18-24 age group (23.4%) and 35-44 age group (21.3%).



Graph 2. Age Distribution of Respondents

Source: *Authors' own calculations*

Most managers (57.1%) are 'veterans' with over 5 years of experience. Another 28 managers or 20% of the respondents have between 2-4 years of experience of playing fantasy football. 13.6% and 9.3% of the sample have 1-2 years and less than 1 year of experience respectively.

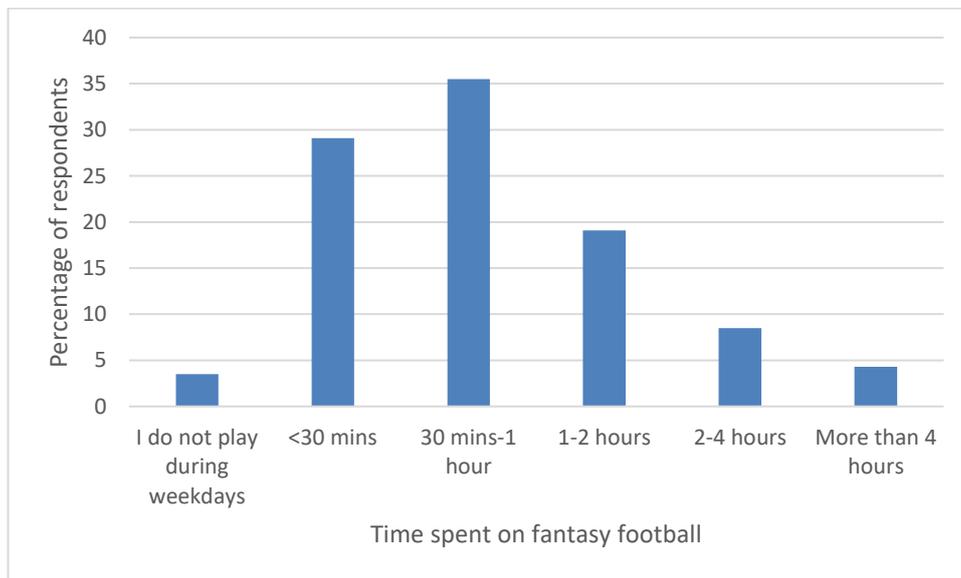


Graph 3. Manager Experience

Source: Authors' own calculations.

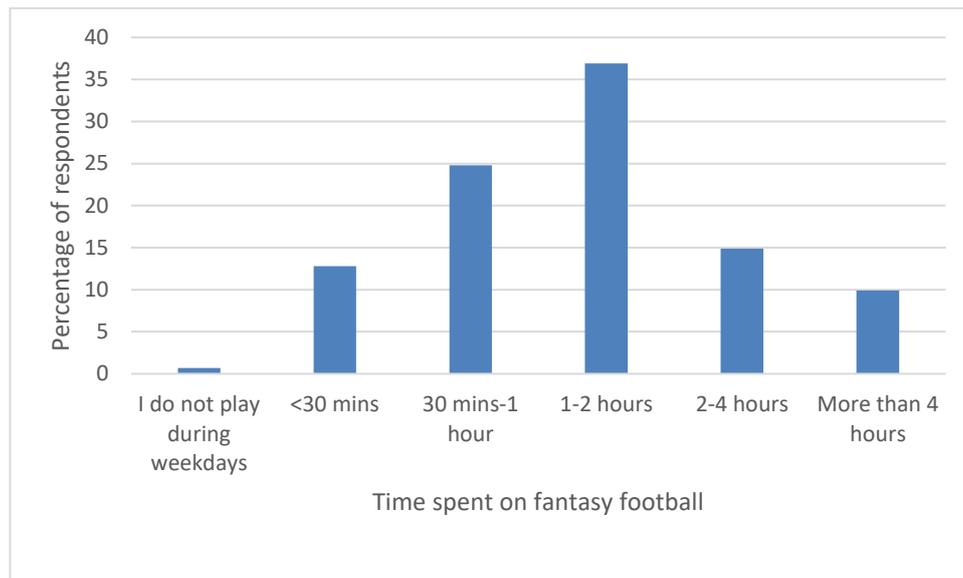
Note: 140 out of 141 respondents answered this question.

As Graphs 4 and 5 below indicate, somewhat unsurprisingly, managers on an average tend to devote more time towards fantasy football activities during the weekends as compared to weekdays. 35.5% (50) and 29.1% (41) of the managers respectively spend 30 minutes to 1 hour and less than 30 minutes per day during weekdays. Whereas, only 19.1% spend 1-2 hours on fantasy football activities during the same. However, that same percentage almost doubles (36.9% or 52 out of 141 managers) when it comes to weekends. Likewise, the percentage of managers spending more than 2 hours on fantasy activities almost doubles during the weekends, as compared to those during weekdays.



Graph 4. Time spent on fantasy football (including research) during weekdays

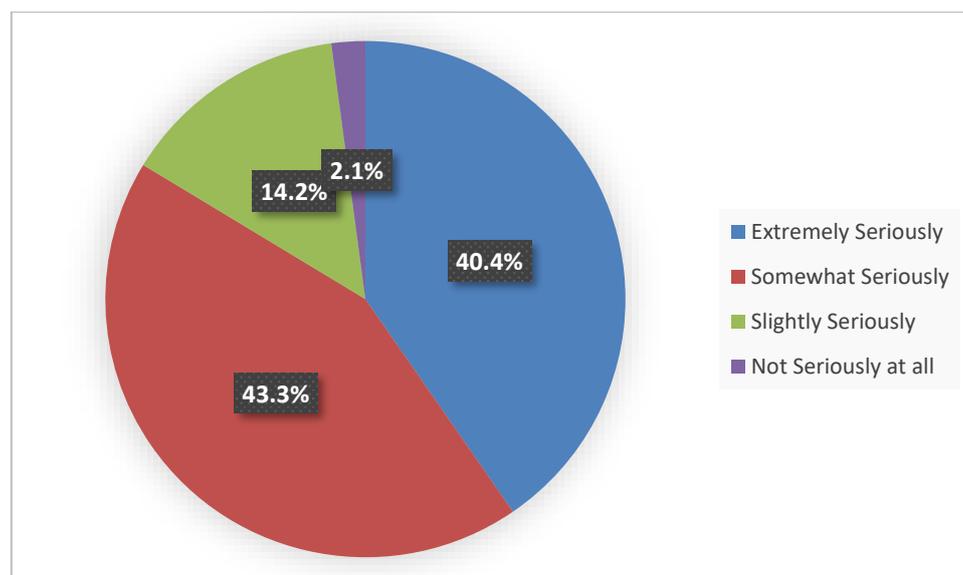
Source: Authors' own calculations



Graph 5. Time spent on fantasy football (including research) during weekends

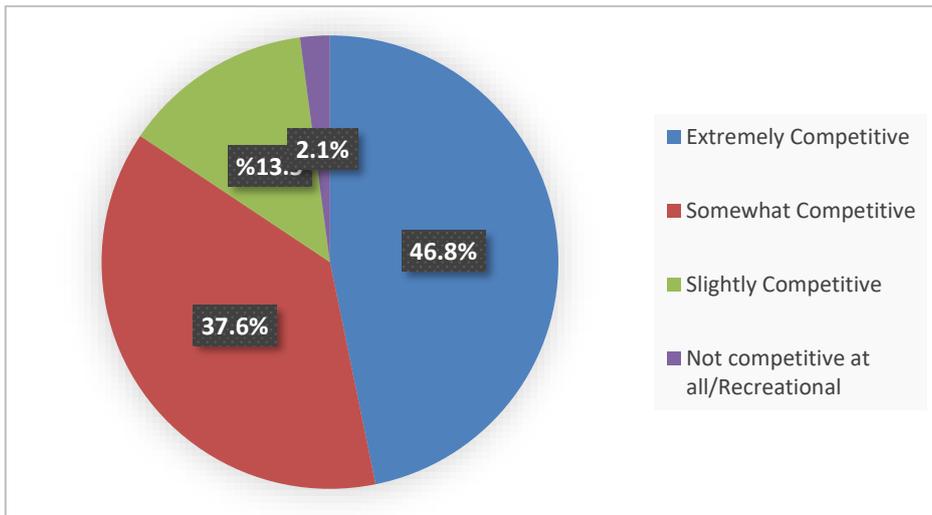
Source: Authors' own calculations

Hypothetically speaking, the overall trends observed in Graphs 6 and 7 are in line with our expectations. The aims of both questions were to decipher the extent of competitiveness in the managers towards the game. Only 2.1% of the managers reported that they play only for recreation (Graph 7) and do not take their performance seriously at all (Graph 6). As seen in Graph 6, 40.4% of the managers (57) reported that they take their fantasy football performance extremely seriously. Approximately similar proportion (46.8%) regarded themselves as “extremely competitive” players (see Graph 7). Correspondingly, 61 (43.3%) managers take their performance somewhat competitively and 53 (37.6%) evaluate themselves as “somewhat competitive” FFM.



Graph 6. How seriously do you take your fantasy football performance?

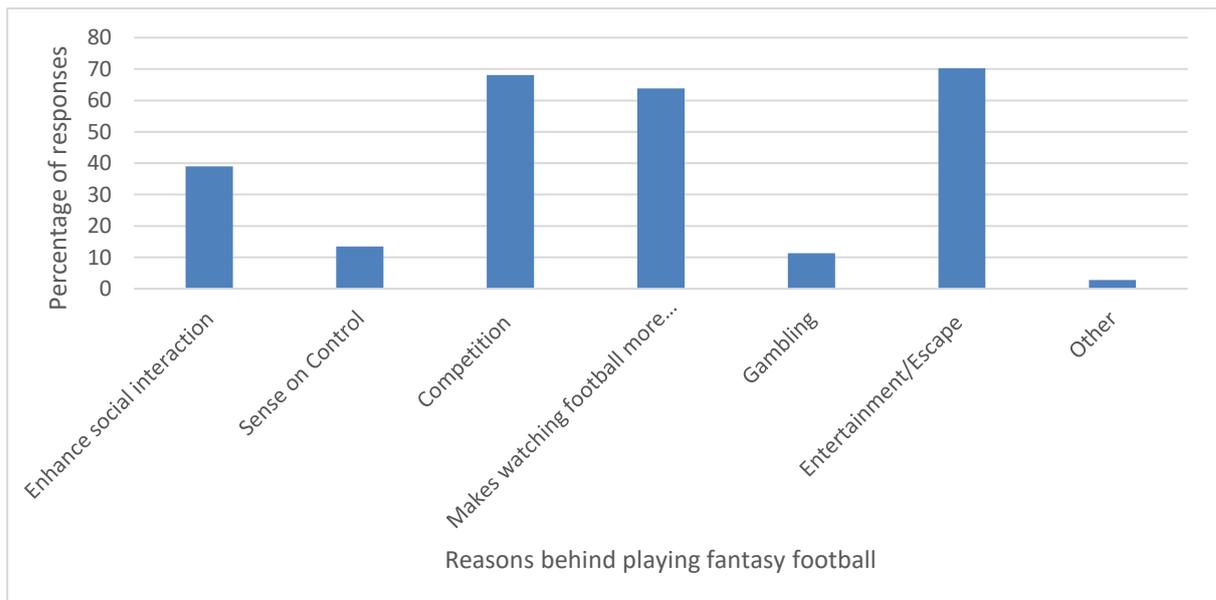
Source: Authors' own calculations



Graph 7: How do you evaluate yourself as a fantasy football player?

Source: *Authors' own calculations*

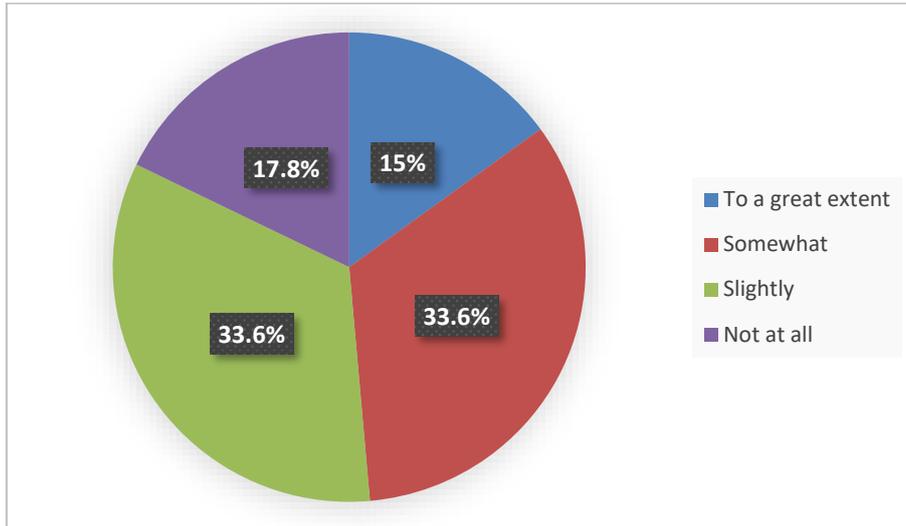
Question 11 asked respondents to identify the reasons behind their engagement with fantasy football. They were allowed to choose multiple options. 99 managers or 70.2% of the sample felt that one of the perks of engagement with the game was its utility as a source of distraction (escape) from day-to-day activities and a source of entertainment. Thus, it can be argued that people overwhelmingly use fantasy sports as a distraction. The second most common reason of engagement was the element of competition with friends, families, co-workers and other fantasy football participants (68.1%). The data further suggests that many managers treat fantasy football as a complementary product to real football and consequently 63.8% managers report that playing fantasy game 'makes watching real football more fun'. Around 11% of the managers report gambling as one of the reasons behind their engagement. 39% of the managers feel that there is a social aspect to this activity as playing increases scope for social interaction with other participants.



Graph 8. Reasons behind playing fantasy football

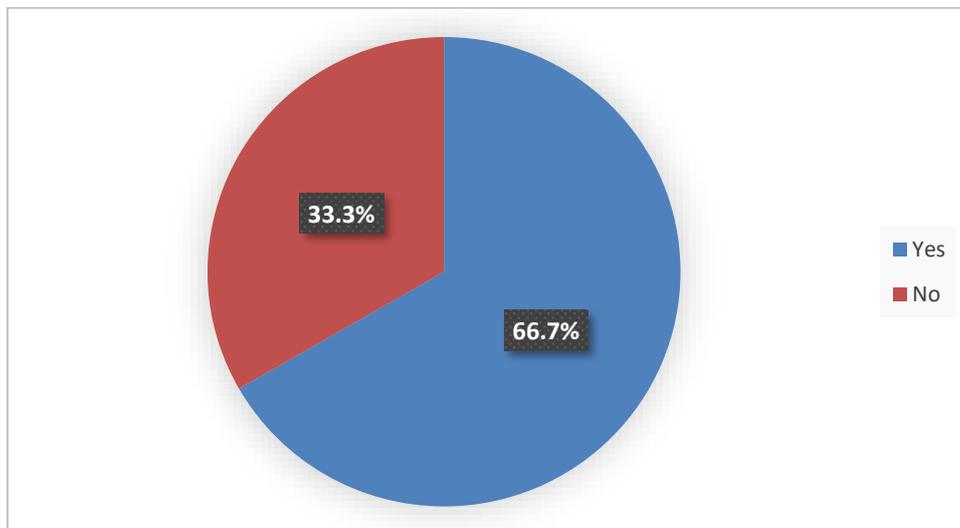
Source: *Authors' own calculations*

The subsequent questions in the survey were related to the experience of FFM in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. Most people agreed that their mental wellbeing was affected by COVID-19 in some way, though the degree of the effect varies across individuals. 15% of the managers (21) report that they were affected ‘to a great extent’ by the advent of the pandemic whereas another 33.6% report that they were ‘somewhat’ affected by the same. 25 or 17.8% of the participants were unaffected by the pandemic.



Graph 9. Effect of COVID-19 on mental wellbeing
Source: *Authors’ own calculations*

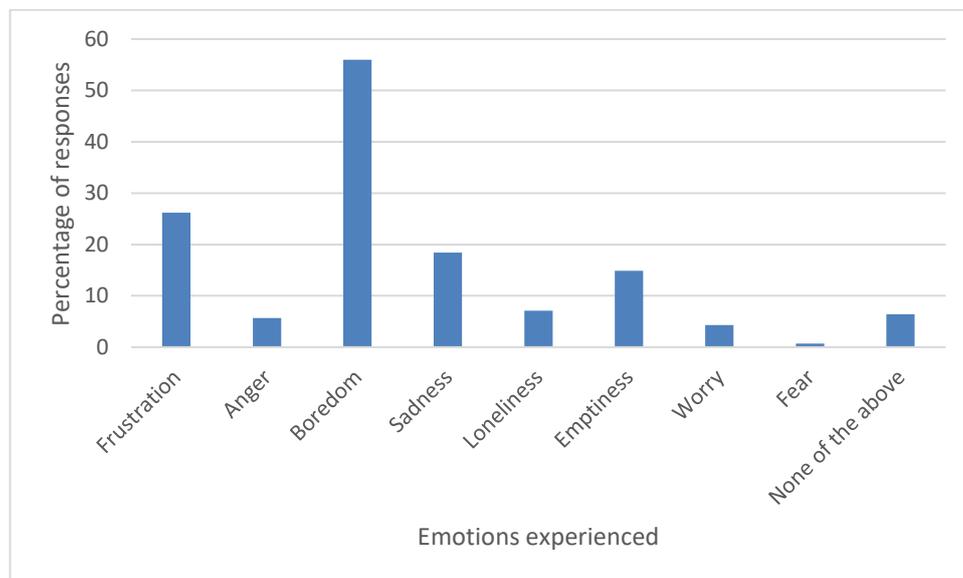
About two-third of the participants in the sample (66.7%, 94 out of 141) say that they were affected when fantasy football was suspended at the outbreak of the COVID-19 in early 2020 (Graph 10). The succeeding question asks about the negative emotions that were evoked due to the suspension of fantasy football. Participants were given a selection of the eight negative emotions, namely, frustration, anger, boredom, sadness, loneliness, emptiness, worry and fear. There was also an option of ‘none of the above’ for those who were unaffected by the suspension.



Graph 10: Were you affected when fantasy football was suspended due to COVID-19?
Source: *Authors’ own calculations*

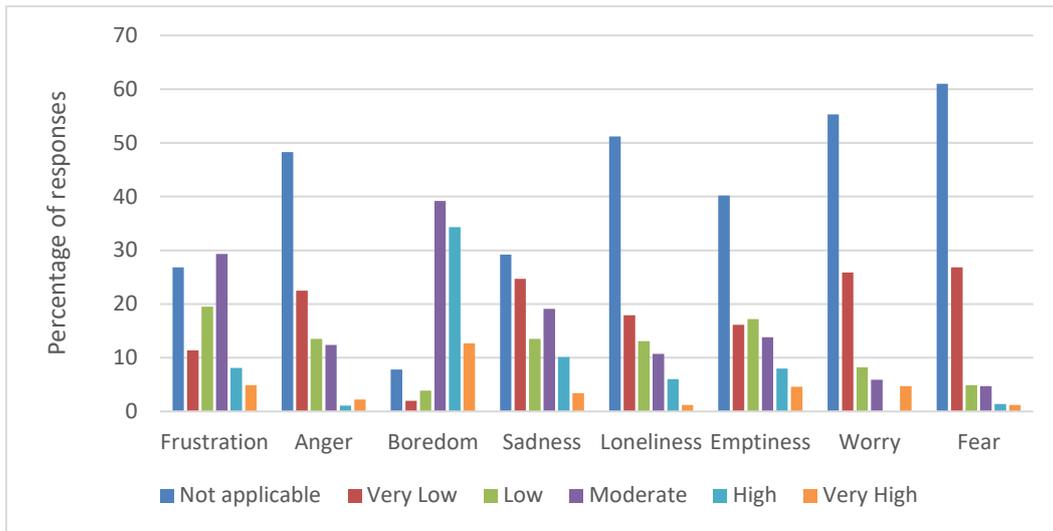
Boredom was the dominant emotion experienced due to suspension, as reported by 79 managers or 56% of the sample. Frustration was the next most common feeling as chosen by 26.2% of the managers. 18.4% and 14.9% experienced sadness and emptiness respectively. About 7.1% report having experienced the feeling of loneliness whereas 5.7% and 4.3% felt angry and worried respectively due to the aforesaid development. 9 managers or 6.4% of the sample did not experience any of the emotions under consideration.

Consequently, question 12 asked about the intensity of those emotions experienced by the managers (see Graph 12). 47% of the sample felt boredom with high or very high intensity; another 39% felt at a moderate level. The next highest frequency was recorded by frustration where around 13% of the participants felt the same at a high or very high level. About 29% felt frustrated at the suspension of fantasy football to a moderate extent. Sadness (32.6%), emptiness (26.4%) and loneliness (17.9%) registered the next most votes when it comes to experiencing these emotions within the moderate-very high range. One counter-intuitive finding is that only 4.3% of the managers report that they felt ‘anger’ as an emotion due to the suspension of fantasy football (see question 11) but, when it comes to the intensity question, about 15.7% report that they felt angry from a moderate-very high level at the suspension which is a significantly higher proportion when compared to the responses to question 11. There can be two explanations behind this anomaly: either, some of the participants erroneously omitted the ‘anger’ option while answering Question 11 or, some of the managers who felt angry for a very short period of time (for instance, for less than a minute, see question 13 and Graph 13) did not consider ‘anger’ to be a relevant emotion in their case while answering question 11.



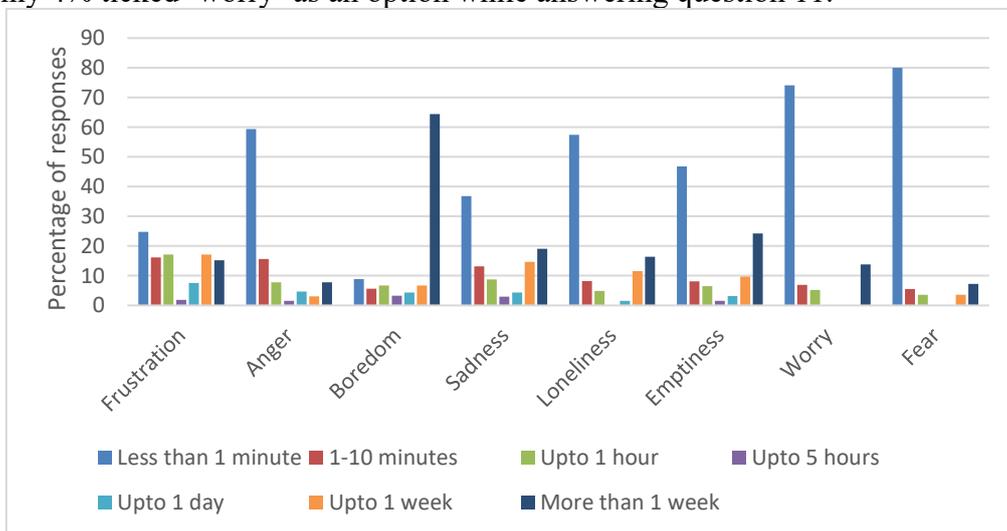
Graph 11. Emotions experienced due to suspension of fantasy football

Source: *Authors' own calculations*



Graph 12. Intensity of emotions experienced due to suspension of fantasy football
Source: *Authors' own calculations*

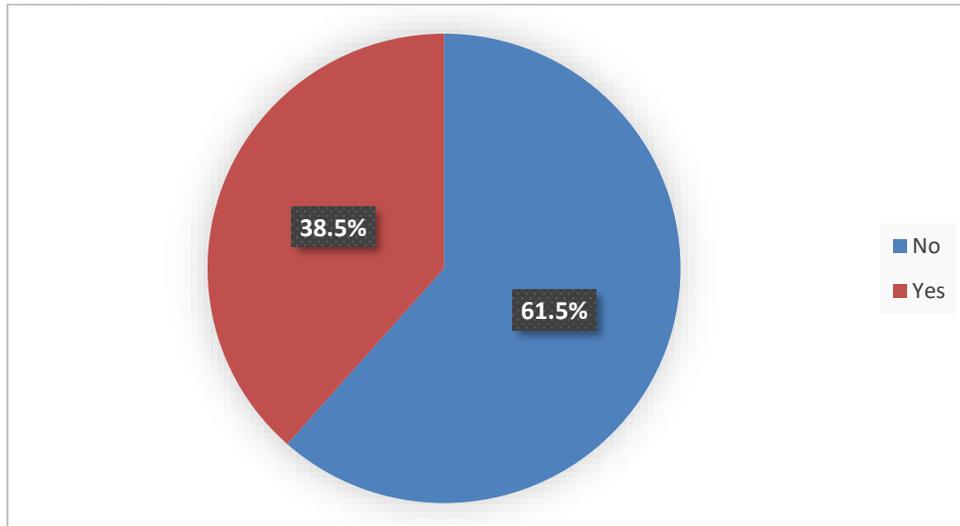
In line with the previous questions, the longest lasting categories were the most frequent emotions of boredom, frustration, emptiness, sadness and loneliness. In case of 64.4% of the participants, boredom caused by suspension of fantasy football lasted for more than a week. 24.4% participants suffered from a feeling of emptiness for more than a week, caused by the somewhat sudden disappearance of fantasy football from their routine. 33.8%, 32.3% and 27.9% respectively experienced sadness, frustration and loneliness for upto 1 week or more than that. 13.8% felt worried for more than a week, which is a somewhat astonishing finding given only 4% ticked 'worry' as an option while answering question 11.



Graph 13. Upon suspension of the fantasy football, how long did the emotions last for?
Source: *Authors' own calculations*

130 participants answered the question whether they took up any alternate activity to cope with the negative emotions caused by suspension of fantasy football. About 80 participants or 61.5% did not take up any other activity, as seen below. One interpretation of this finding is that, from the perspective of majority of FFM, fantasy football as an activity does not have any obvious substitute. Another probable explanation can be that, during the government-imposed lockdowns, people were not left with many alternate options to explore especially when it came

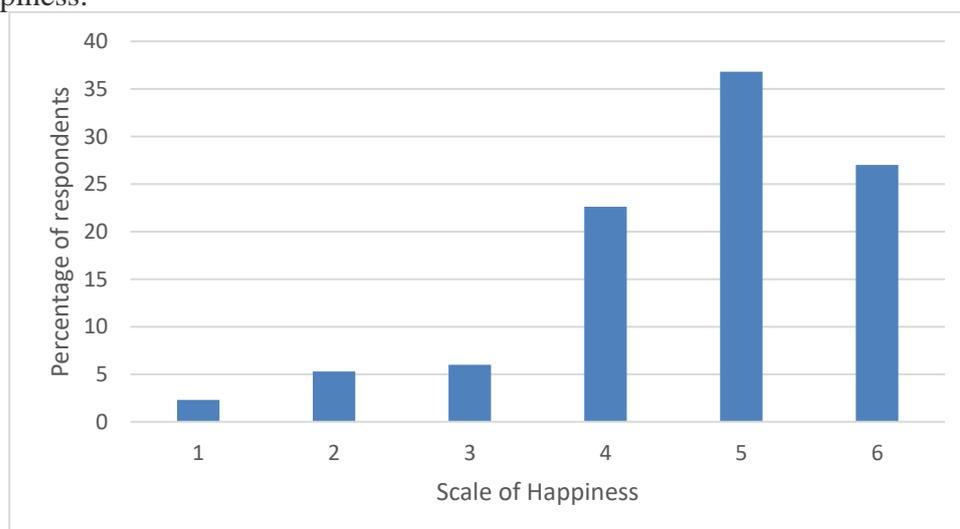
to outdoor activities. The subsequent question in the survey, which asked the participants to give details about the activities they took up, did indicate towards the lack of take-up of outdoor activities. Out of 49 responses, only 9 indicated towards such activities like photography, hiking and outdoor exercises (like running or cycling) and the rest of the 40 responses mentioned other indoor activities such as computer games, learning chess and online streaming of movies and shows, to name a few.



Graph 14. Did you take up any other activity during this time to help you manage the negative emotions caused by the suspension of fantasy football?

Source: *Authors' own calculations*

There was a general level of elation among the managers when fantasy football resumed with the restart of the Premier League on 17th June 2020. Participants were asked a Likert scale question (see Graph 15 below) where the scale was set from 1-6. Participants were asked to choose '1' if they were neutral about the resumption of fantasy football and '6' denoted very high level of happiness. Almost a third (27%) of the managers report that they experienced very high level of happiness whereas 36.8% selected '5' which can be interpreted as high level of happiness.

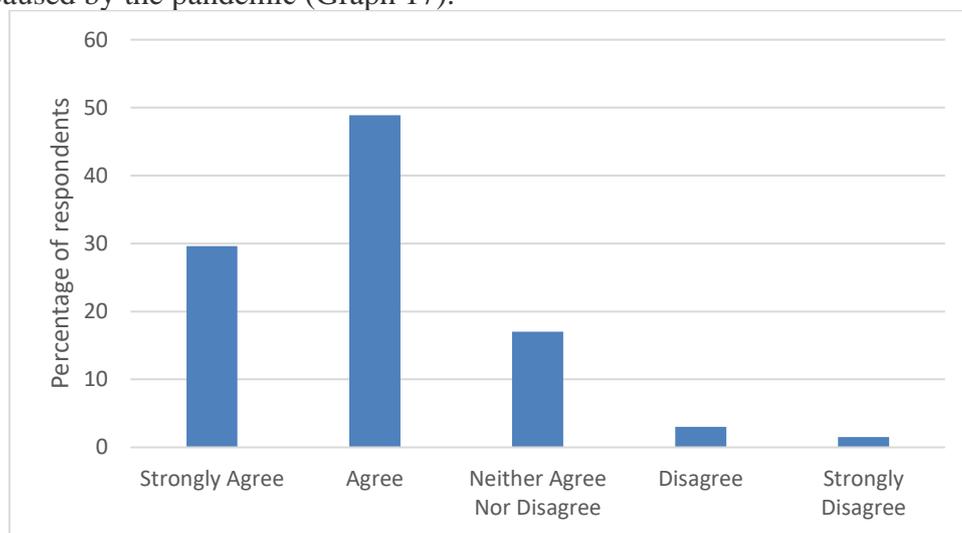


Graph 15. On a scale of 1-6, what was your level of happiness when fantasy football resumed again?

Source: *Authors' own calculations*

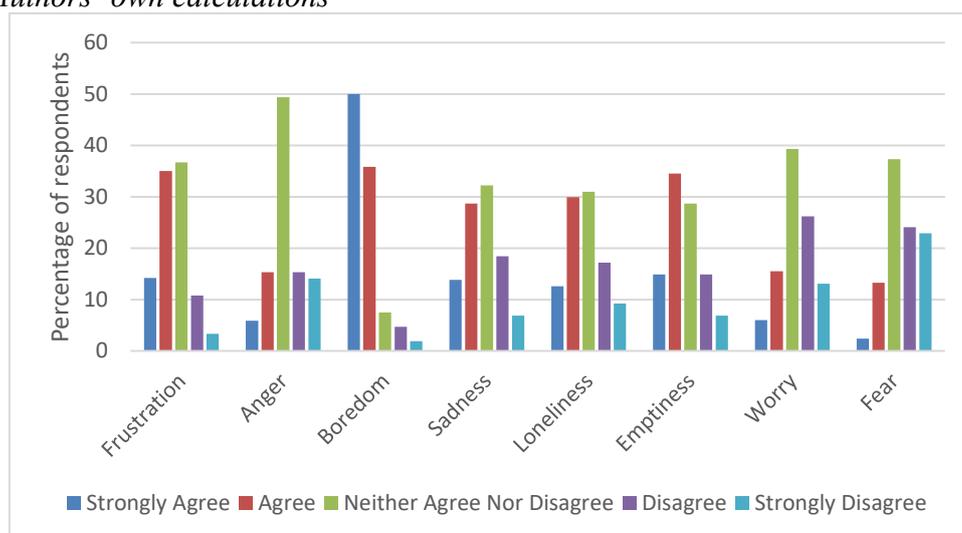
There is a consensus among the FFM that fantasy football has acted as a distraction during the times of COVID-19. As indicated by Graph 16 below, 78.5% of the participants answered in the affirmative. This finding is consistent with the views presented in Graph 8 above where it was seen that more than 70% of the managers consider escape or distraction and entertainment as the primary reasons why they engage with fantasy football. Given this, it is perhaps no surprise that the game played a distracting role for the majority of participants during the trying times of COVID-19.

A whopping 85.8% of the participants agree that fantasy football helped them tackle the boredom caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost half the sample (49.4% and 49.2%) report that it helped them deal with the emptiness and frustration faced during the pandemic respectively. Loneliness is the next most prevalent category (42.5%). Slightly more than a fifth of the managers felt that playing fantasy football helped deal with the emotions of anger and worries caused by the pandemic (Graph 17).



Graph 16: When fantasy football resumed again, did it act as an effective distraction from the challenges posed by Covid-19 in your daily life?

Source: *Authors' own calculations*



Graph 17. Did fantasy football help you manage or cope with any of the following emotions during the difficult times of Covid-19?

Source: *Authors' own calculations*

3.1 Statistical analysis

Having established that fantasy football did act as a distraction for majority of the FFM in the sample, we proceed to identify the sub-groups within the sample for which the role of fantasy football was more pronounced during the pandemic. As discussed previously, we will employ Chi-Square test of independence in order to test some relevant hypotheses. The first hypothesis tests whether age plays a role in determining the manager's dependency on fantasy football. Since the 18-34 age group is the biggest consumer of this game, we hypothesise that, for the younger participants, fantasy football played a more prominent role as compared to that for the elder groups of players. Similarly, we test three more hypotheses with respect to level of competitiveness, mental wellbeing and amount of time devoted towards the game.

Table 1. Chi-Square test results

Hypothesis	Computed χ^2	P-Value	Conclusion
H ₀ : Role of fantasy football during COVID-19 is not associated with the age of FFM	6.695	0.570	Fail to reject null hypothesis
H ₁ : Role of fantasy football during COVID-19 is associated with the age of FFM			
H ₀ : Role of fantasy football is not associated with the level of competitiveness of FFM	14.922	0.021**	Reject null hypothesis
H ₁ : Role of fantasy football is associated with the level of competitiveness of FFM			
H ₀ : Role of fantasy football is not associated with mental wellbeing effects of COVID-19	11.828	0.065	Fail to reject null hypothesis
H ₁ : Role of fantasy football is associated with mental wellbeing effects of COVID-19			
H ₀ : Role of fantasy football is not associated with time spent on the game during weekends	18.915	0.046**	Reject null hypothesis
H ₁ : Role of fantasy football is associated with time spent on the game during weekends ¹			

Note: ** and *** denote statistical significance at 5% and 1% respectively.

The statistical analysis indicates that there is no relationship between age and dependence on fantasy football as a distraction during COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, it worked as distraction for all age groups. Table 2 below presents the conditional distribution of fantasy football dependence given age. The proportions are not widely different across the different age groups. For example, 84% of the 18-25 year olds feel that fantasy football did act as a distraction which is similar to the perceptions of other age categories up until 55 year old managers. In the 46-55 age group too, 80% answered in the affirmative. Apparently, it seems that the experience of the age group 56-59 years is somewhat different from the rest as only

¹ When we tested the hypothesis for time spent on weekdays we failed to reject the null.

50% felt the effectiveness of the game however there were only 6 respondents in that age category and, therefore, probably too small as a sub-group to influence the statistical finding.

Table 2. Conditional distribution of fantasy football dependence during COVID-19 given age

Did Fantasy Football act as distraction during COVID-19?				
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	
Age	18-25	84%	13%	3%
	26-35	79%	16%	5%
	36-45	75%	21%	4%
	46-55	80%	10%	10%
	56-59	50%	50%	0%

Source: *Authors' own calculations*

The global evidence on extent of engagement with fantasy sports and age is somewhat mixed. On one hand, as suggested earlier, the 18–34-year-old group is the biggest consumer of the game but, on the other hand, there are surveys which imply that it is the more senior segment of the population which engages more frequently with fantasy sports on a weekly basis. As per the findings of a 2019 survey on fantasy sports gamers in India, it was noted that the 37–50 age group had the highest frequency of engaging with fantasy sports. Over 44% of the respondents in this age group reported to play more than five times a week, compared to only 19% in the 18-24 age group (Statista, 2021).

The Chi-square test results indicate that, the more competitive the managers are, the more pronounced the role of fantasy football during the pandemic. The P-value came out to be 0.021 so we reject the null hypothesis of no association between competitiveness and dependence. In fact, almost 90% of the ‘extremely competitive’ managers agree with the distraction point whereas, in case of the recreational managers, the percentage drops to 33.3%.

There is no strong evidence to suggest that, the worse the managers’ wellbeing was affected by the COVID-19 period, the bigger the role fantasy football played as a distracting force or escape during the pandemic as we fail to reject the null hypothesis of no association at 5% significance level (P-value=0.065). A closer examination of the data does support the inference of the test. 95% of the managers, who said that their mental wellbeing was affected ‘to a great extent’ during the pandemic, agreed that fantasy football worked as an escape. But even when it comes to the managers who report that their mental wellbeing stayed unaffected by the pandemic, the percentage stays as high as 73.9%. Thus, in the context of the mental wellbeing-pandemic nexus, it can be asserted that fantasy football worked as an effective distraction across the board during the pandemic. Finally, the managers who tend to spend more time on fantasy football related activities on the weekends found the game to be more beneficial during the pandemic (p-value=0.046).

Conclusion

The paper examines whether fantasy football acted as an effective distraction for the fantasy football managers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Relevant data were collected via an online survey which was completed by 141 participants. The survey responses indicate that around 70% of the managers generally consider fantasy football to be an effective source of escape from day-to-day activities. Approximately two-thirds of the managers in our sample report that they were negatively affected by the suspension of fantasy football at the advent of the pandemic. Consequently, a very high percentage of the managers (78.5%) report that the game, once resumed, did work as a distraction during the pandemic. There is robust evidence

in our data that the game helped mitigate some of the negative emotions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost two-thirds of the managers report that they treat fantasy football as a complementary activity to watching live football games. Therefore, when a manager engages with the fantasy game, not only there is a direct boost to positive (or, negative, depending on the circumstances) emotions of the manager via factors, such as, increased social interaction and element of competition but there is also an indirect (positive) effect as it amplifies the positive experience of watching the live game. In case of majority of the managers, there are no obvious substitutes for this activity which underlines the general reliance on the activity and, in turn, explains why fantasy football played such a significant role for most of the managers during the pandemic. The statistical analysis subsequently identifies the sub-groups of managers for whom the distracting role of the game was most pronounced. We find that the distracting effect of fantasy football during COVID-19 was more acute in case of the highly involved managers (defined by level of competitiveness and amount of time invested in the game during weekends).

As far as mental wellbeing and COVID-19 nexus is concerned, 15% of the managers reported that their wellbeing was affected 'to a great extent' by the advent of the pandemic whereas 33.6% managers noted that they were 'somewhat' affected. Consequently, we wanted to examine if FPL worked as a distraction for those FFM whose mental wellbeing was adversely affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that FPL served as an effective distraction across the board and there is no statistically significant evidence to suggest that the game played a more prominent role in case of the managers whose mental wellbeing was adversely affected due to the pandemic.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the Editor and the anonymous referees for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Appendix

Table A1. Country distribution of respondents

Country	Number of respondents
United Kingdom	61
India	19
Norway and United States of America	6
Ireland and Sweden	5
Australia, Canada, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan and Singapore	2
Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Egypt, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, Israel, Lithuania, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Oman, Philippines, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Uganda, Vietnam	1