

## **National Football League television viewing: Why are loyal fans watching less?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

National Football League (NFL) television viewing numbers have been in decline for much of the past decade. Limited research has been undertaken to understand the reasons loyal NFL fans are turning away from NFL game broadcasts. The present study examines NFL fan perceptions of factors including player performance, injury concerns, fantasy football participation, fragmented media platforms, and off-field misbehavior of NFL players as potential influencers of declining NFL television-ratings. Results indicate that on-field performance, fantasy football interest, and NFL player misconduct might be significant concerns for NFL and television network executives.

Keywords: National Football League, NFL, Television Viewing, Fan Perceptions

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## INTRODUCTION

Fluctuations in television-ratings are expected. Rarely do any television programs see perfectly consistent ratings increases for decades at a time. The same premise holds true for professional sporting leagues. Similar to network dramas and situation comedies, a variety of factors influence sports fans and impact their television viewing habits. And it is important to point out that nearly all sports deal with these fluctuations. As early as 1985, network executives became concerned about the fragmenting viewing habits of sports television viewers (Taaffe, 1985). NASCAR television-ratings sky-rocketed in the mid-2000's, but the sport has since seen race attendance and television viewing decline consistently for over a decade. The 2022 Daytona 500, NASCAR's annual preeminent race, produced the lowest television rating for a regular running of that race in the history of the sport (Konenski, 2022). The National Basketball Association (NBA) experienced a similar television-ratings boom from 1990 until its lockout-shortened season of 1999. Unfortunately, that success was short-lived, as the average regular-season NBA game television rating for the 2021-2022 season was shockingly *less than one-third* of its average for the 1998-1999 season ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Basketball](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Basketball)).

The television-ratings declines currently taking place in the National Football League (NFL), the most-watched sport in the United States, are gaining the attention, and concern, of nearly all sports television executives in the industry. The average annual television viewing of regular season NFL games peaked in the 2015 season (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/289979/nfl-number-of-tv-viewers-usa/>). Since 2015, the NFL has seen multiple seasons with television viewing down as much as 16%. Although the NFL ratings slightly rebounded in 2021, the networks broadcasting NFL games on television have been forced to give away advertising spots due to lower-than-expected audience viewing multiple times since 2015 (Boren, 2016; Smith & Shaw, 2016). Even more alarming is news that the most watched annual television program in the United States, the Super Bowl, is steadily declining in terms of viewership. The 2021 Super Bowl drew its lowest television audience since the 2007 game, and continued the 10-year trend of declining viewership from the vital 18-49 year-old demographic (Sherman, 2021). The focus of the present paper will attempt to assess the reasons loyal NFL fans are watching fewer games on television.

## FACTORS POTENTIALLY IMPACTING NFL TELEVISION VIEWING

A variety of potential causes exist and have been proposed as explanations for the NFL television-ratings decline. One of the earliest perceived issues related to flagging NFL fan interest was related to players kneeling for the national anthem when it was played before every game. Many fans perceived players kneeling as disrespectful (Feldman, 2018; Gillette, 2016). While the national anthem controversy created issues for some fans, others suggest that football fans were simply unhappy with the actual NFL games. Some longtime NFL fans believe the football being played is lower quality than it was in previous decades, possibly due to expansion of the league, and football talent being spread too thin over the additional number teams. Other fans decry what they see as inconsistent officiating, and instant replay reviews that take far too long to resolve. Others, still, suggest that a lack of star quarterbacks makes the games difficult to watch (Gillette, 2016). There is also the issue of concussions. The NFL has been heavily criticized about its lack of concern over the head trauma experienced by current and former players, as many former players have been diagnosed with significant brain deformities and

mental acuity deficiencies upon their deaths (Shpigel, 2022). The NFL's response to the concussion concerns has been viewed as half-hearted by many in the media and by fans of the league (LaGree et al., 2019)

Similar to other sports leagues, the NFL is also dealing with a fragmented media landscape, with games being broadcast on a variety of networks, and platforms. As younger consumers use phones, tablets and other devices not included in the category of television, it has become more difficult for networks broadcasting NFL games to accurately calculate the number of viewers actually watching NFL games. As the NFL seeks additional television revenue through negotiated contracts, the issues related to streaming content will need to be resolved (James, 2021). Additionally, this fragmentation does not end with new platforms or media options. A large number of NFL fans are heavily involved in fantasy football leagues. Many of these fans admit to following individual players and their statistical accomplishments more so than actual NFL games. Fantasy football league participants often peruse web-based information sources for fantasy league updates, cutting into the time they would spend watching NFL games. The NFL and multiple media partners also offer fans the opportunity to subscribe to broadcasts such as the "*NFL RedZone*", which allows viewers to watch multiple games simultaneously based solely on which teams are close to the end zone and likely to score. These types of media offerings are clearly aimed at fantasy football players.

Finally, issues involving NFL players and their behavior off the field are an increasing problem for the NFL. The NFL is concerned that high-profile sexual assault cases involving NFL players are creating a dearth of female fans. The perception that the NFL has imposed very light punishments on the majority of the players involved in sexual assault cases has led to the conclusion that the league is most concerned about protecting its image (Vrentas, 2022). This issue is critical for the NFL, as recent research shows that approximately 45% of NFL fans are females (Harwell, 2014). As shown in the previous paragraphs, a host of reasons exist that potentially explain the decline of NFL television viewership.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Executives of NFL teams are in a precarious position as they attempt to understand the decline of NFL television game viewing. Television network contracts account for a significant amount of revenue each season for NFL franchises, and television-ratings for NFL games significantly impact negotiations of future television network contracts (Birnbaum, 2021). League and network executives continue to guess or hypothesize as to the causes of decreased television viewing for NFL games (Battaglio, 2021), but in reality, very limited consumer research has attempted to understand the underlying factors that might be contributing to the increasing lack of interest in NFL games on traditional television.

As scant research attention has been given to the aforementioned issue, it is challenging to develop explicit hypotheses to examine. Therefore, the study undertaken in this research project is designed to be exploratory, weighing the possibility of a variety of possible explanations leading to decreased NFL television viewing. Each of the possible explanations has been proposed as a potential contributor to decreased NFL television viewing by multiple sources who cover the NFL on a regular basis. As such, the present study will attempt to assess the perceptions of loyal NFL fans in terms of the likely issues that might be influencing their commitment to watching NFL games on television.

**Research Question #1**

What are NFL fans' perceptions of the on-field NFL performance, including game-related factors?

**Research Question #2**

What are NFL fans' perceptions of NFL player concussions and injury concerns?

**Research Question #3**

Are NFL fans taking advantage of increased availabilities of NFL game broadcasts on devices and platforms other than television?

**Research Question #4**

Are NFL fans more interested in NFL games or NFL fantasy football?

**Research Question #5**

What are NFL fans' perceptions of NFL off-the-field issues, including player misbehaviors and misconduct?

**METHODOLOGY****Sample and Data Collection**

Students from upper-level marketing courses were trained in identifying potential respondents for the present study. Each survey was administered in the presence of these trained interviewers, and the interviewers collected and returned all administered surveys. A total of 840 surveys were distributed to NFL fans. Surveys from respondents that did not meet the requirements of being labeled a loyal NFL fan (established in the Survey section) were eliminated from analysis, as were incomplete surveys. A final total of 776 surveys were deemed usable.

**Survey**

The present study sought to analyze the perceptions of loyal NFL fans. Each respondent was asked to estimate a) her or his weekly NFL television viewing habits, and b) the length of time in years the respondent has been a fan of the NFL. To be included in the final analysis for the present study, potential respondents must have met the thresholds of watching at least one NFL game on television per week, and have identified as a loyal NFL fan for at least five years. Respondents must also have been able to identify a specific favorite NFL team. To address and analyze the research questions established in the current study, survey statements were developed to assess the perceptions of loyal NFL fans in the areas of on-field performance, concussions, broadcast viewing options, fantasy football, and off-field player behavior. Each of the survey statements, identified in the results section, was accompanied by a Likert scale option of Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Respondents were also asked to include relevant demographic characteristics.

## RESULTS

To analyze the research questions from the present study, mean scores on a variety of survey statements related to each question were reviewed and analyzed. These means give a strong indication of the current perceptions of NFL fans on a variety of potential influences of television viewing.

### Research Question #1

Research question #1 was focused on NFL fan perceptions of actual NFL game performance. Seven separate survey statements were utilized to examine NFL fans perceptions of current NFL game performance. These seven statements are listed below, as is the accompanying mean score for each statement (scale of 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

The quality of football in NFL games has declined in recent years. (2.95)

NFL referees/officials do a good job the majority of the time. (2.36)

The NFL has made football games less exciting by eliminating or penalizing certain types of hits by defensive players. (4.14)

Defensive players should be allowed to hit/tackle NFL Quarterbacks more often. (3.83)

Quarterbacks are the most important players on NFL teams. (4.01)

I like the use of instant replay in NFL games. (3.64)

Instant replay causes too many interruptions in NFL games. (3.02)

A cursory review of the means for each statement indicate that certain potential concerns for NFL executives do not appear to be significant. The impact of instant replay during NFL television broadcasts appears to be negligible for most NFL fans, and does the quality of the actual football games. Issues that do stand out from a statistical perspective include concerns about NFL officiating, the mandated lack of physical play in many NFL games, and the importance of having quality quarterbacks in each NFL game.

### Research Question #2

Research question #2 was focused on the concussion issues of NFL players. Two survey statements dealt with this concern.

NFL players accept the injury risks associated with playing football. (4.08)

The impact of concussions on NFL players has caused me to watch fewer NFL games on television or other electronic devices. (2.23)

The responses of NFL fans to issues of concussions appears to suggest that fans of the game are not noticeably influenced by these concerns. The results indicate that fans are not watching fewer games because of concussion concerns, and that fans place the onus of concussion responsibility on the players who choose to play the game. These results should ease concerns of NFL executives that concussions are driving NFL fan interest declines.

### Research Question #3

Research question #3 revolved around the increasing number of media options available to so many NFL fans today, including NFL games on multiple nights, multiple channels, and

multiple digital platforms. The survey instrument contained four statements focused on NFL fans' perceptions of televised game options.

There are too many NFL games televised each week. (2.58)

I often watch NFL games on electronic devices (laptop, cell phones, tablets, etc.) instead of television. (3.62)

I wish I had more time to watch NFL games. (2.94)

I frequently watch multiple NFL games simultaneously. (3.02)

Although the majority of the responses in this category indicate that fans are satisfied with current NFL television viewing options, the one result that likely will need greater review and analysis is the number of NFL fans who are watching NFL games on non-traditional platforms (laptops, cell phones, tablets, etc...). The most recent NFL broadcast contract includes games being provided by Amazon Prime through a video streaming service (Birnbaum, 2021), suggesting that non-traditional media device viewing will likely increase. Older consumers and those averse to technology might have concerns or negative initial perceptions of this shift in broadcast availability.

#### Research Question #4

Research question #4 examined the interest of NFL fans in fantasy football. Fantasy football is most often a competition where individual NFL fans select teams of NFL players, each of whom can gain points based on his performance each week of NFL games. Individuals in a league compete against each other, with "winners" being determined by which fantasy team of NFL players scores the most points. The basic tenant of fantasy football is that fans who participate often end up more interested in the results of their fantasy players, who represent a variety of individual NFL teams, and less interested in the result of one specific NFL team. The mean results associated with each of these survey statements indicate that fantasy football is clearly a focus for many current loyal NFL fans.

I play fantasy football every year. (4.37)

I am more interested in fantasy football statistics and results than I am in the outcome (winner or loser) of NFL games. (4.14)

I subscribe to one of the NFL Red Zone viewing options (NFL RedZone, Red Zone Channel, ESPN Goal Line) that allows me to watch when all NFL teams are close to scoring.

Yes 17%    No 65%    Do Not Know 5%    Service Not Available To Me 13%

#### Research Question #5

Research question #5 deals with the off-field behavior issues and concerns relevant in the NFL today. Only two survey statements were used to evaluate NFL fan perceptions in this area, but the results indicate strong personal feelings toward each.

The unethical or criminal activity of certain NFL players has caused me to lose interest in the NFL. (3.97)

All NFL players should be required to stand for the national anthem. (4.74)

While there is a noticeable difference in terms of gender perceptions of NFL player off-field behavior issues (discussed later), there is no such difference in the opinions of female and male NFL fans regarding players who kneel for the national anthem. Females (mean score =

4.77) and males (mean score = 4.72) both strongly feel that NFL players should stand for the national anthem.

## DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Three specific areas of concern arise from the analysis of mean scores in the present study. Each of these is discussed in greater depth, with managerial implications examined for each potential issue.

Research question #1 focused on the perceptions of issues involving the actual football games. The first notable concern noted by NFL fans in the present study focused on poor officiating, with more respondents having a negative view of NFL officiating than a positive one. As early as 2019, many journalists who cover the NFL were expressing concern about the poor standards and performance of NFL game officials (Seifert, 2019). The common perception of both those directly associated with the game (players, coaches, owners) and those indirectly involved (fans and journalists) was that NFL officials are not held accountable for their mistakes. This is a dangerous perception in terms of its impact on fans. If fans truly believe game officials are not being held accountable for their performance, questions arise about the legitimacy of officials' calls on the field, and the legitimacy of the outcomes of games. This inevitably will lead to fewer fans paying attention to games.

Results from research question #1 also identified the 'softening' of the league as a major concern for NFL executives. The majority of the respondents in the survey find NFL games less exciting because of the lack of physical play occurring in games. This result, coupled with the respondents stated lack of concern with player concussions, places NFL decision-makers in a very difficult situation. NFL executives have implemented rule changes, including penalizing certain dangerous tackles and hits, that are designed to make the game safer for its players. However, these changes are seen by fans as making the game softer, leading to fewer of the violent hits and tackles that fans often want to see in games. This challenge will likely continue for the NFL as it must weigh the safety of the game participants versus the desires of fans to see violent collisions between those game participants.

A more positive outcome of the survey results in the present study identifies many NFL fans as consistent and committed participants in NFL fantasy football leagues. NFL fans who participate in fantasy football are critical to the future of NFL game broadcast viewing as they likely represent a very loyal subset of NFL fans. The league must work diligently to satisfy the viewing desires of these loyal fans by making statistics and results available to these fans as conveniently as possible. Providing access to viewing options such as the *NFL Red Zone* and other fantasy-focused television options is a great start. However, only 17% of NFL fans in the present study are subscribers to one of the fantasy-related television viewing options. NFL executives and the media partners of the league must focus on increasing the availability and convenience of fantasy-focused viewing options to at least double, if not triple, the percentage of fans who subscribe to these types of services.

Finally, the results of the present study suggest that the NFL appears to be reaching a breaking point in terms of the off-field behavior issues involving NFL players. The fans in the present study expressed a clear disdain for the off-field behavior problems recently exhibited by NFL players, suggesting that these problems are diminishing the fans' interest in the league. There have been multiple high-profile sexual assault and domestic abuse cases involving NFL players in recent years. Many of these cases have resulted in lenient punishments from the NFL

in the eyes of NFL fans (Vrentas, 2022). As mentioned earlier, female fans make up nearly one-half of NFL fans, yet few studies of NFL fandom have attempted to understand the attitudes and perceptions of female fans (Shane-Nichols et al., 2021). Females in the present study clearly have concerns focused on the off-field issues, as female responses to the survey statement “*The unethical or criminal activity of certain NFL players has caused me to lose interest in the NFL*” resulted in a mean score of 4.59 on a scale of 1 to 5. Even worse, the most recent sexual assault case involving NFL player Deshaun Watson was only recently settled by the NFL and the NFL players association, with Watson receiving what even those employed by the NFL decry as a lenient suspension of 11 games (Battista, 2022). Females are the fastest growing segment of new NFL fans, and the league is alienating a large percentage of them with its lack of significant punitive policies for player misbehavior. This is a critical negative NFL fan perception that must be addressed.

In summary, the NFL is facing a number of issues that might be driving fans away from watching NFL game broadcasts. Poor officiating, lack of physical on-field play, and reckless off-field behavior are confirmed in the present study as possible explanations for declining television-ratings for NFL broadcasts. Adjustments in these areas will hopefully draw a greater number of fans back to NFL broadcasts. The study results also identify positive trends for NFL television viewing, suggesting that the NFL take advantage of opportunities to place a greater focus on satisfying the viewing desires of fantasy football participants and those fans who seek greater access to streaming media platforms for NFL game access.

J B  
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