

MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Marketing #WeTheNorth: Analyzing Fandom, Nationalism, and Brand Loyalty of the Toronto Raptors Basketball Team

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Abstract

Established as a successful marketing slogan during the 2014 NBA playoffs, the #WeTheNorth campaign became the face of branding for the Toronto Raptors franchise that enhanced brand loyalty and unified Canadian basketball fans. The following Major Research Project (MRP) explores two different research questions surrounding a social media analysis of the Toronto Raptors #WeTheNorth campaign. The first research question examines the Raptors' fan perspective, and focuses on the connotative messages that are incorporated into the #WeTheNorth campaign to broaden the team's message and re-vamp the team's national identity. The second research question examines the organization's perspective and focuses on how the Raptors brand utilizes sports nationalism in their social media efforts to support fan engagement. This paper also reinforces research from previous academic findings that include: nationalism, community, collective fandom, social media, semiotics, and branding.

Using an analytics tool named *Sysomos*, a content analysis of the Raptors' official Twitter account was conducted to gather primary research. One Hundred Tweets were gathered per research question, and then coded to provide insight regarding the #WeTheNorth campaign from the 2018/19 NBA regular season. Findings for the first research question reinforce national fandom, and the support fan unification via the use of the #WeTheNorth hashtag. In addition, over 35% of Tweets from fans included positive sentiment, compared to the 17% that had negative sentiment. Findings for the second research question focus on branding, semiotics, and fan engagement levels that the Toronto Raptors social media team tries to enforce. Results proved that over 60% of Tweets included some form of request for fan participation, with 17% of Tweets containing positive Tweet sentiment. Overall, as long as the #WeTheNorth campaign

remains the Raptors' primary marketing slogan the campaign should continue to reinforce national fandom and support positive online fan engagement.

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Introduction

This major research project (MRP) will provide a social media marketing analysis of the Toronto Raptors' #WeTheNorth campaign. This campaign originally began as a simple 60-second television advertisement, but quickly sparked into one of the most successful marketing campaigns in Canadian sports history (Raptors, 2019). Initial research from this paper will analyze the marketing re-brand of the Raptors to change the team dynamic and culture of basketball not only in Toronto, but also across the country. In addition, this paper will focus on the effects of the #WeTheNorth Twitter campaign, and how it impacted the Raptors' fan culture both on and off the court.

Shannon Hosford, who was the marketer behind the development of the #WeTheNorth campaign, was tasked with the challenge of re-branding the Raptors in 2014. The success she and her team shared is largely attributed to taking the former negative connotations about Toronto basketball, and turning them into an emotionally charged marketing campaign (Niedoba, 2016). S. Hosford (personal communication, February 27, 2019) reveals that there were three main objectives to transforming the lackluster Raptors brand into the iconic symbol that it is today. S. Hosford stated that these measures included hosting the NBA All-Star Game in 2016, hiring the musician Drake as the team's global ambassador, and creating a memorable slogan (#WeTheNorth) that resonated with basketball fans across Canada Hosford (personal communication, February 27, 2019). The Raptors were able to successfully reach all three of these objectives by the end of the 2016 season. Evidently, sports culture in Toronto has slowly shifted from a traditional "hockey town" with the NHL team, the Maple Leafs, to a more balanced appreciation for both teams competing to win their respective leagues. As a result, the success of the Raptors' campaign translated to their increase in online followers, where their

social media growth rate in 2016 was among the top five in the National Basketball Association (De, 2016, pg. 1). The Raptors' social media success also translated to ticket sales, where they increased new ticket purchasers from 6.6% per year prior to the #WeTheNorth campaign, to 68% the season of the campaign launch (De, 2016, pg. 1). This success has only continued to grow, with the Raptors acquiring arguably one of the best players in NBA during the 2018 off-season in Kawhi Leonard (Raptors, 2019). Although the trade resulted in All-Star player and fan favourite DeMar DeRozen leaving the team, the Raptors' went on to win the NBA championship for the 2018/19 season.

As successful as the campaign turned out to be in the years since its initial launch, there were many tribulations that proved to be a challenge for the Raptors' marketing team. S. Hosford (personal communication, February 27, 2019) expressed that one of the major difficulties of the campaign was that the original #WeTheNorth commercial was pushed to be launched *during* the 2014 playoffs. S. Hosford (personal communication, February 27, 2019) stated that this was not the initial plan for the Raptors, as the team had originally planned to launch the new Raptors logo at the same time as the #WeTheNorth slogan. However, the NBA would not allow them to unveil their new logo during the playoffs, and they had to wait until the following 2015/16 season (Raptors, 2019). This meant that the marketing team had to conduct two separate product launches – one for the slogan, and one for the logo. Although both product launches turned out to be extremely successful, implementing an entirely new campaign to the only Canadian NBA team was a risk right before the beginning of the playoffs.

Taking all of the previous stereotypes about Toronto being the “outsiders” of the NBA and giving them a positive context gave the Raptors new-found life in a competitive sport-marketing environment. The Raptors are the only Canadian team in the NBA and the phrase

“North” from the #WeTheNorth campaign is derived from the Canadian national anthem’s lyrics “true north strong and free” (Niedoba, 2016). In the majority of marketing advertisements for the #WeTheNorth campaign, the Canadian flag was typically linked with the phrase “North”. The Raptors also switched their team colours from purple and white to the Canadian national flag colours of white and red. This further echoes the team’s close ties to Canadian culture, and perfectly aligns with the #WeTheNorth slogan. The following paper will conduct a social media case study analysis of the #WeTheNorth campaign based on the Raptors’ official Twitter handle.

Research Questions

The first research question will explore the emotional connection between the Raptors’ fan base and their commitment to promoting national identity. With the Raptors being the only Canadian team in the NBA, the #WeTheNorth campaign has put Toronto basketball on the American radar. According to Forbes, the Raptors are ranked the 11th most valuable team in the NBA out of the thirty NBA teams (Badenhausen, 2019). The campaign reflects on how the Raptors not only represent the city, but the entire country. This question will solely focus on online fan interaction and online commitment in supporting national identity behind Canada’s only professional basketball team. Although the campaign was launched as one brief hashtag during a 60-second commercial, it created a sense of patriotism that the Raptors’ fan base had never seen before. The questions will explore how the team broadened the Raptors team values and turned #WeTheNorth into one of the most successful sports marketing campaigns in Canadian history.

RQ1 – *What connotative messages are incorporated into the Toronto Raptors #WeTheNorth campaign to broaden the team's message and re-vamp the team's identity from a brand management standpoint?*

RQ2 – *How does the Raptors brand use sports nationalism in their social media efforts to support their fan engagement?*

The second research question is solely focused on the Raptors Twitter account and how they engage with fans. RQ1 examines how the fans engage with the campaign, but RQ2 will explore how the Raptors marketing team utilizes sport nationalism and Canadian identity to support fan involvement across the entire country.

Literature Review

This Major Research Project focuses on understanding the formation of community and the ideology of fandom created from an online context, which further correlates to offline support. Sport is one of the unique phenomena that is able to bring people of all ages, races, and genders together. This idea of inclusiveness could not be better represented than in a city like Toronto, which is known for its cultural diversity. In addition to community and nationalism, other themes such as group identity theory, social semiotics, and the spectacle of fandom can be further examined to understand the marketing efforts of the #WeTheNorth campaign.

Community & Nationalism

Social media scholar Nancy Baym unpacks the reasoning behind how both online and offline communities are formed. Baym stresses the importance that these communities have on the individuals bonding together over a common purpose (Baym, 2015). Online groups develop a strong sense of group membership, being able to form connections seamlessly with others that transcend time and space (Baym, 2015). The world is becoming more interconnected and our

web of personal connections allows us to create and recreate meaningful social formations. Baym presents five different qualities found in online groups that also share the many definitions of community. These include: space, shared practices, shared resources, interpersonal relationships, and shared identities (Baym, 2015). In relation to social media (Twitter in particular) these five qualities are apparent in the way users interact with online applications. This directly relates to the findings of both research questions, as online groups supported by the Raptors and their fan base portray all five of these qualities.

Users are not tied to geographical space, but are involved in online Twitter threads, following accounts that allow for open discussion via shared platforms. Users also share the same traditions, resources, and practices while using social media applications. For example, a hashtag may start a trending discussion that others are interested in, which would allow a group of people to discuss the topic over a Twitter thread. Typically, if the topic is related to a specific account or is directed towards a specific group of people, the same users could be classified as a community. In addition, social networks and technology create shared goals and objectives that these group relationships can thrive off of to strengthen the virtual community (Baym, 2015). Lastly, social media offers a different role to each individual, who is then shaped and developed by the group dynamic of the online discussion.

Benedict Anderson's (1983) theory of imagined communities and nationalism is essential to #WeTheNorth. The ideology of the Raptors' fandom (online and offline) directly coincides with Anderson's theory of imagined communities. Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined political community" that is powerful but limited as they are contained to their specific interests (Anderson, 1983, pg. 49). Furthermore, Anderson states: "Nations are imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them

or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983, pg. 49). As a result, these “imagined communities” are created as a result of a nation being formed, which in this case would be the Toronto Raptors and their #WeTheNorth identity. Even if they have never met before, Raptors fans would be able to mutually connect and have intensive conversations online about the passion that they share. The relationship between the Raptors team and online fan interactions will be examined in both research questions.

Sport offers an opportunity to reflect on how individual, national, and global factors synthesize to affect national identities in what can be referred to as ‘sport nationalism’ (Sieppel, 2017). In relation to the spectacle of live games, fandom, and storytelling through branding, sports become central symbols in modern nationalism for societies. Seippel’s 2017 study was conducted to measure the levels of sport nationalism across 25 different countries, measured on a variable scale between 1 and 4 (Sieppel, 2017, pg. 50). The researcher concluded that all of the countries involved have means between 2.9 and 3.8, suggesting that the vast majority of countries treat sport as a national phenomenon (Sieppel, 2017, pg. 50). The idea of sport nationalism not only intertwines with Anderson’s original ideology of nationalism, but also defines the economic importance of sport consumer behaviour. The underlying factor that has amplified sport consumer culture is no doubt social media. Using these ‘technologies of power’, marketers are able to stimulate storytelling on a scale that brings the brand to life (Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2018). Although the Raptors have been a popular sports team since their inception in 1995, the #WeTheNorth campaign significantly increased their market value from a national perspective in comparison to the other 29 NBA teams.

The media is an essential part of constructing modern nationalism, and has changed the way major sporting events and professional leagues are organized. For example, the Olympics

produce a global event that exemplifies nationalism in the 21st century. However, in recent years, the Summer Olympics are also a media event where new technology and means of communication are introduced and tested every four years (Mori, 2019, pg. 27). More specifically, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games will be the most modern in history, and feature a new digital media environment that has the potential to produce global nationalism (Mori, 2019, pg. 27). Social media has brought upon a new way for consumers to engage with the Olympics, as users around the world can now communicate with each other supporting and uniting nations through sport. The first major impact social media had on the Olympics was introduced in London 2012, where over 4.73 billion people viewed the website, making it seven times more popular than the previous 2008 Olympics in Beijing (Mori, 2019, pg. 37). These astonishing numbers show how the London Olympics produced a staggering number of online fans that provide an indicator of just how important the Olympics are for global nationalism. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have provided fans/consumers with the ability to speak out on occurring events in recent Olympics, whereas previously they were only able to watch the Games on television with minimal national interaction.

Social media is particularly important because it made this imaginative third person visible in the real world by reorganizing media experiences. In just 140 characters or less, Twitter presents real human voices that are recognizable, interactive, and communicative. In doing so, Twitter replaces the laugh track or the proxy viewers on the television screen. “Like” buttons on Facebook and other social media make all immediate affect countable, visible, and even marketable (Mori, 2019, pg. 38).

As such, the interaction potential via social media amplifies the involvement of the Olympics to allow for the entire world to be involved with every event. Although every country in the world may not have equal access to Internet, social media is the outlet that represents modern globalization and sport nationalism at its peak.

Sport nationalism is the phenomenon that allows for the creation of these imagined communities, especially in the case of #WeTheNorth fandom. Taking a theoretical approach, sports activate ideas and memories of who we are as citizens of a country, but also bridge the gap between private and public worlds to formulate these imagined communities (Seippel, 2017). Sport nationalism can be seen both online and offline for the Raptors, as fans form bonds that exist because of one underlying factor: supporting #WeTheNorth. Furthermore, studies show that there are significant benefits of allowing fan experiences to be socially visible to others around them (So, Wu, Xiong, & King, 2018). The online presence of the Raptors and #WeTheNorth campaign is vividly apparent throughout social media as the team is active on all major platforms – especially Twitter.

Social Media & Collective Fandom

Social media was the driving factor behind the success of the #WeTheNorth campaign back in 2014, and five years later it remains the face of the Toronto Raptors franchise. “In particular, the advent of social media and social TVs (e.g., Twitter) have significantly increased the ability of sports fans to publicly express their feelings, and to collaborate their identity with other fans” (Ko, Yeo, Lee, Lee, & Jang, 2016, pg. 17). In addition, online social networks hold the power to share experiences, and influence users buying behavior (Lund, et al., 2018). Research also shows that social media is used to increase customer interactivity and spectator interest in relation to sports clubs (Nisar, Prabhakar, & Patil, 2018). The #WeTheNorth campaign suggests that there is a parasocial relationship between Torontonians/Canadian basketball fans and the Raptors team. The relationship between the Raptors brand and sport nationalism will be further explored when measuring the team’s fan engagement success via Twitter for RQ2.

The phenomenon of fan culture having a sense of “community” directly correlates to group identity theory. This theory states that fans of sports teams, which would be the Raptors in this scenario, see themselves as members of an organization and not just consumers of a service (Heere & James, 2007). This term is also interchangeable for collective identity theory, which can be defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Heere & James, 2007, pg. 234). However, the emotional attachment of the #WeTheNorth campaign must come from participating in the fandom, as well as emotionally investing in the team’s success.

The story behind the brand turned into a nation wide following, allowing all people living in the suburbs and cities of the country to identify with the Raptors team as their own. Since basketball is a growing sport worldwide and especially in Canada, there are not as many global studies on the sport as there is for sports such as soccer. A study was conducted to measure the website interactivity of thirty-two soccer teams in Europe from 2014-2015 (Nisar, et al., 2018). Results revealed that consumer interactivity (in relation to spectator interest) proves that social media can be used to effectively manage customer relationships (Nisar, et al., 2018). This study also noted that in order for marketers to uphold complete engagement for fans, they must constantly contribute content into their social networking world (Nisar, et al., 2018). It is evident that in the modern social media landscape, fan engagement has become more significant. Teams now have full-time staff responsible for engaging with fans on social media to increase their consumer interactivity before, during, and after the game. Social media fan engagement ranges from various methods that include replying to comments, fan contests/giveaways, and rewarding fans that are loyal to the brand.

As the evolution of athletes and sport continues to evolve, so does the world of online marketing and branding. Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan coined the term “the global village,” to refer to how the world adapts to technological communication (Dixon, 2009). McLuhan also explained that the global village is the phenomenon of the world shrinking due to the pervasive technological advances that allow society to instantly connect with people around the world (Dixon, 2009). The role of social media in sport fandom has only increased, and part of accelerating the globalization process is to connect fans of different teams around the world. One of the modern goals of the NBA, and the Toronto Raptors specifically, is to focus on creating a global fan base outside of North America. The Raptors have already announced that they plan to host pre-season games next year in Japan, and already have games that are nationally broadcasted in different languages around the world (Raptors, 2019). Maintaining brand visibility outside of Toronto not only increases the national awareness of the Raptors across Canada, but also increases brand exposure around the globe.

Fans can actively participate in sport fan culture by attending games, or by watching/interacting online during games. Visual models of factors that influence sporting event attendance include situation involvement, emotional attachment, and enduring involvement for a team (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). These all relate to fans having *identity salience*, which correlates to them attending more games in the future (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Fan identity salience can be defined as the motivational desire for a fan’s urge to define themselves as supporters of a specific team (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Identity salience is unique to sports, as the emotional desire to connect with a team is unlike any other form of support we experience in our lives. In the case of the Toronto Raptors, most fans of the team not only want to support the players, but also the Canadian culture that is expressed through #WeTheNorth.

Understanding that fan motivation is primarily driven through social media interaction and engagement is essential in breaking down the success of the #WeTheNorth campaign. It is estimated that by 2020, the number of social media users around the world will reach over 2.95 billion (Anagnostopoulos, Parganas, Chadwick, & Fenton, 2018). Stavros conducted a study on the nature of social media use by revealing motivations underpinning the desire of fans to communicate on Facebook/Twitter accounts of several NBA teams (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013). Findings concluded that fans exercised four key motives drawn from social media back in the 2011-12 season that enabled connection to the team including: passion, hope, esteem, and camaraderie (Stavros, et al., 2013). All of these emotional actions connect to the connotative meanings referred to in RQ1 and further expand on the importance of interactivity via social media for sport franchises. It is evident that the greater the emotional attachment from a fan, the further intertwined they will become in a team's social media fandom.

An emotional attachment is an essential part of building any successful marketing campaign, regardless of the product/service classification a brand falls under. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle referred to pathos as the “public speaker putting the audience in the right frame of mind by appealing to the audience's emotion” (Allen, 2017, pg. 1). Emotional attachment is a critical aspect of not only attracting an individual to become a fan/customer, but to retain their attention throughout the years to come. Pathopeia, derived from pathos, is the rhetoric used to drive passion and emotion, which in turn influences the perceptions of that individual (Allen, 2017). Although pathos is only one of the three types of rhetorical devices related to persuasion, the emotional attachment of fans to sport teams build fan loyalty that aids in the development of the brand year after year. Furthermore, team identification and high passion levels are seen as a result of an individual's perceived belonging to a team (Karjaluoto, Munnukaa, & Salmi, 2016).

In relation to the rhetorical device of pathos, several studies have analyzed the cognitive response of individuals in relation to mood and persuasion. In 1990, psychology analyst Herbert Bless conducted a study with 162 female university students to examine the impact of happy and sad moods related to persuasive communication techniques (Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 2007, pg. 337). During the experiment, “sad” students were shown to have counter-attitudinal messages if the arguments presented were only strong (Bless, et al., 2007, pg. 337). However, it was also found that “happy” students were influenced equally by both strong and weak arguments (Bless, et al., 2007, Pg. 338). To summarize the findings, students that were deemed to be in a “happy” mood through positive messaging are more likely to be receptive to persuasive messaging. The only time happy students were persuaded in a different manner is when they were explicitly told to pay attention to the message behind the content of what they were shown (Bless, et al., 2007, Pg. 338). This correlates to collective identity theory, as a larger group of consumers that present positive emotional connection towards a persuasive marketing campaign could be more inclined to believe in it. Although there isn’t definitive evidence relating individual cognitive responses to group identity formation, assumptions can be made to infer the impact of persuasive marketing campaigns on large social groups.

Relating to the concept of globalization and persuasive marketing, buying decisions of consumers are crucial to understand from a sport marketing perspective. Modern persuasive communication is bidirectional, which means it comes to and from many different online applications (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015, Pg. 778). Maneuvering through the clutter on social media can prove to be difficult, and it is important for major sports teams to have a collective set of platforms where they are able to view verified information from an official source. In addition,

these sources also provide a collection of platforms where users can discuss and promote their ideas in an informal public setting.

Both marketing managers and Internet users provide messages, targeting individuals and social alignments that comprise their links or relationships. Communication technologies such as bulletin board systems for collecting public opinion, blogs which share personal messages, and interactive and connective social media can achieve message diffusion and popular cohesion (Chang, et al., 2015, pg. 778).

Several sporting teams have continued fan loyalty success over the years with the increase of social media usage by the younger generation of consumers. In addition, users tend to use and refer to their time reflecting on social media based on two factors: usefulness and preferences (Chang, et al., 2015, Pg. 778). The usefulness of having social media providing updates and forum discussions at the fingertips of consumers is invaluable and allows for intense involvement from fans anywhere in the world. Lastly, users can modify their preferences of where they access their information and can filter exactly what content they want to follow based on the options presented by the sporting team they support.

In a way, the spectacle of fandom does not end after the game is over, but continues over social media with live updates, contests, and sports analysis that fans can actively engage in. There are even ways in which fans can become part of an organization such as the Green Bay Packers that was officially owned by 111,507 people representing 4+ million shares as of 2006 (Heere & James, 2007, pg. 320). Even if fans do not invest financially into stock markets or even pay to attend live games, the “imagined community” of a professional sport fan base is prevalent throughout social media. Group identity and collective fandom intertwined with social media marketing has made #WeTheNorth an important branding for the Raptors, as it still remains the face of the franchise five seasons later. Overall, these findings reinforce the importance of brand building, fan loyalty, and fan identification with sports marketing campaigns.

Semiotics & Branding

Roland Barthes is one of the founding theorists of semiotics. In his book, *Rhetoric of The Image*, Barthes examines how ideologically charged images transmit educational messages to society (Barthes, 1977). Barthes references how a concept (also known as the *signified*) can be represented by having either a connotative or denotative meaning (Barthes, 1977). These two representations are critical in understanding the many symbols and branding efforts seen throughout modern marketing. Barthes' research focuses on the message behind commercials, which usually have to portray intensive images to convince a target demographic to buy into their product/service in thirty seconds or less (Barthes, 1977, pg. 156). Barthes' theory of semiotics can be a useful lens through which to analyze visual components of advertisements that have an influence on younger consumers. In relation to RQ1, the purpose of sports marketing exemplifies the connotative methods of interpreting the association of signs with reference to cultural contexts, such as the #WeTheNorth campaign (Barthes, 1977). Overall, the concept of semiotics could be a useful tool to understand modern branding efforts, especially those that have a large social impact.

Social semiotics is a concept that was further developed from Barthes' study of semiology. It builds on his visual analysis, allowing researchers to apply some of these core concepts to social media campaigns extending the analysis beyond just the visual component. It can be defined as:

Social semiotics is a synthesis of several modern approaches to the study of social meaning and social action. One of them obviously is semiotics itself: the study of our social resources for communicating meanings.... Formal semiotics is mainly interested in the systematic study of the systems of signs themselves. Social semiotics includes formal semiotics and goes on to ask how people use signs to construct the life of a community (Lemke, 1990, pg. 183).

In recent years the way people use signs to construct the life of a community is essential to marketing and branding, specifically in relation to sport. Especially in our interconnected society, we are exposed to global marketing awareness of various sporting teams around the world. Due to this, there may also be a vast difference in understanding the context of a branding image, slogan, or commercial. “For example, the color red indicates mourning for people in Ivory Coast, whereas, in contrast, it represents procreation and life for people in India” (Harrison, 2003, pg. 48) In reference to #WeTheNorth, other fans of sporting teams in Europe that notice the campaign might not relate to the significance of the patriotic slogan.

More specifically, the modern definition of social semiotics can be defined as “the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted” (Harrison, 2005. pg. 48). There are also three important principles when analyzing an image using social semiotics. The first is how Semioticians believe all people see the world through signs, as the many systems in our society (such as the media) make us accustomed to inherently recognizing these signs and their generation of shared meaning (Harrison, 2003, pg. 48). The second principle is that people create the meaning of signs, and therefore these signs cannot exist separately from their social community (Harrison, 2003, pg. 48). If these signs are shown outside of the social setting that created the sign, it may not provide the message the originators intended. Lastly, semiotic systems provide people with resources for making meaning, and therefore allow people to make their own choices of deciding which signs to follow in the plethora of messages forced on us in our society (Harrison, 2003, pg. 48). The formation of community is dependent on a group of people maintaining a common belief, and continuing to support that belief. Many sporting fan bases are formed off of semiotics, and their values are

carried onto the generations of players and fans before them. The importance and value of a brand carries different meaning to each individual, but in sport a brand seems to represent much more than a logo on jersey. The Raptors emulate the Canadian flag colours of red and white, which can be seen in their branding of uniforms and merchandise. This reinforces a shared sense of Canadian patriotism and thus establishes meaning among Canadian fans

A separate study was conducted on how brand personalities, identification, and relationships drive loyalty in sports. Findings concluded that identification with a team mediates the effects of brand personality on attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty (Karjaluoto, et al., 2016). Results also show that consumers are more likely to identify with brands that have unique and strong personalities, which also promote an ideal self-image (Karjaluoto, et al., 2016). In our modern society, consumers want to be at the centre of a trending topic or associate themselves with social media buzz. Sports teams also have continuing growing fan support, as many consumers come from generations of fans in the same family that support a local team or nearby city. The strongest supporting factor of brand loyalty is the way consumers identify themselves with every critical move a team makes when it comes to the team's players, winning results, and historic success.

Sports teams are even more strongly linked to their brand personalities than other brands (Smith et al., 2006) because they are complex brands with unstable and intangible core products that can be described as emotionally charged, experiential, hedonic services. Research has found that the fans who perceive close connections with their self-identity and the team's identity are more loyal to their team than fans with lesser self-team identity congruence. (Karjaluoto, et al., 2016, pg. 54).

Although a team may not always be successful during the season, the support fans show by attending games and participating in online fandom proves there are mainly positive attitudinal behavior trends towards professional sports teams. Lastly, these social media relationships allow brands to engage and persuade prospective consumers to become avid fans and build trusted

relationships with them ((Nisar, et al., 2018). Overall, these findings reinforce the importance of brand building, fan loyalty, and fan identification represented by the #WeTheNorth campaign, which will be reflected in the results of both research questions.

One of the key indicators of successful sports marketing branding is the constant repetition of themes, slogans, and key words. The study of repetition can be explored based on Berlyne's two-factor theory, which represents repetition and elicits a specific response from the consumer (Campbell & Keller, 2003). In sports, most professional teams have a unique slogan that represents the team through various marketing tactics. In order for a brand to maintain loyal CRM (customer relationship management), a slogan must appeal and have reference to an emotional connection that reflects the team's community (Karjaluoto, et al., 2016). Toronto professional sports teams have several different slogans such as the Raptors: "We The North," the Maple Leafs' "Leaf Nation," and Toronto FC's "All For One." The first factor of Berlyne's theory is called "wearin," in which there is a certain unfamiliarity and uncertainty about a specific message that is released to the public from a brand (Campbell & Keller, 2003). When a slogan is drilled into the consumer's memory, it becomes likely that they will relate that slogan to the team any time they are viewing/engaging with the sport. "Initial levels of message repetition serve to increase positive habituation by reducing negative responses to the novel stimulus, thus increasing the effectiveness at lower levels of repetition" (Campbell & Keller, 2003, pg. 293). In many marketing strategies, regardless if the brand is related to sports or not, brands use every medium possible to reinforce something they are selling/providing to a consumer.

The second factor of Berlyne's theory, also known as "wearout," states that continuous repetition of a message may decrease the effectiveness to the targeted consumers over time

(Campbell & Keller, 2003). This experience can be seen in modern day marketing, where television advertisements are repeated for months on end to the point where consumers attribute negative emotions towards the brand. A brand name is another common phrase that is repeated throughout an audio or visual advertisement to ensure the consumer knows the source of the message. When consumers are exposed to an advertisement from a familiar brand and already have some background information about the brand, they are more likely to increase/update their existing knowledge about the source (Campbell & Keller, 2003). However, it is important for a brand to maintain its balance of both factors of Berlyne's theory without over-stimulating consumers with the same message repeatedly. This can prove to be troublesome for a brand, and having consumers associate a brand with negative connotations can be detrimental for a company.

Maintaining positive brand equity in today's interconnected globalized world can prove to be a difficult task for any brand. A study was conducted to determine if the social visibility of consumption of the airline industry affects the perceptions of consumer relationships with tourism (So, et al., 2018). Brand management is an essential part of maintaining positive brand equity, and one wrong mistake on the company's behalf can become viral on social media. Results from this study show that there are significant benefits of making a customers' travel experience visible online, which further extends positive word-of-mouth communication (So, et al., 2018). The study also suggests that consumers increased their cognitive, affective, and evaluative identification with the airline industry as a result of social visibility of consumption (So, et al., 2018). Social media formulates modern day news, and those who are active on social media have increased cognitive awareness of ongoing social events, especially ones that go viral. In addition, increased social visibility can have an emotional impact on consumers showing

affection, especially if there are positive connotations associated with the brand. Lastly, consumers can also make evaluative decisions about a brand based on the mass social media discussion about a specific topic. All of these identification factors are crucial in supporting the positive social visibility of a brand to enhance the company's brand management. Although this specific study relates to the travel industry, the importance of brand management is thoroughly explored, proving how negative brand identification can cause negative effects such as bankruptcy for a company.

Brand management is not only essential to a company based on consumer's visibility and reviews, but a brand must always sustain their relevance through their own social media tactics. In particular, social media applications such as Instagram have become an important tool in supporting professional sport team organizations (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2018). The importance of Instagram as a tool in professional sport directly relates to RQ2, which focuses on the interaction between the Raptors organization and their fan engagement levels on social media. In 2017, a study was conducted between two soccer teams from the English Premier League that examined the relationship between brand attributes and key fan engagement features from the team's official Instagram page (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2018, pg. 413). Some of the brand attributes that correlated to the team posting a picture on their official Instagram included team success, star players, team history, team traditions, sponsors, fans, and several others (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2018). It is important for a brand to be active on social media, but also find a balance where they are not posting too aggressively and lose followers because of it. "Teams using Instagram are able to produce and control their own news and stories and should recognize the importance of giving fans insights about their organizations, whether in the form of player/team news developments or information and activities beyond the playing field

(Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2018, pg. 432).” One of the major benefits of Instagram (and other social media applications) is that consumers not only view news updates and pictures, but can also interact with the posts by commenting/liking the respective post. Overall, Anagnostopoulos stresses the importance of social media and sports branding, and shows how integral fan engagement is to the success of a professional organization in any sport.

Methodology

To answer my research questions, I conducted a content analysis of the #WeTheNorth campaign. As defined by Davis, Lachlan, and Westerfelhaus, a content analysis allows researches to quantify content, including the content of participant response or the content of the media texts (Davis, Lachlan, & Westerfelhaus, 2017). Much of the focus of the first research question is based on the emotions fans feel in relation to the Raptors’ campaign. Gathering qualitative data that already exists surrounding the brand and their achievements over the past several years can be converted into quantitative data as an end result. Lastly, this quantitative data reveals the emotional connection and attachment levels Raptor fans have in relation to their brand, which can be represented in tables for each research question.

The most appropriate data collection method for a content analysis based on social media is to use a tool such as Sysomos. Sysomos is used to gather social media statistics over a selected time period to analyze re-occurring themes and topics. For these research questions, analyzing Twitter data gathered from the #WeTheNorth hashtag is the most efficient way to understand the impact the campaign has on nationalism and fan engagement. Twitter will also allow for a thorough analysis of the #WeTheNorth campaign coming not only from fans, but directly from the Raptors official Twitter account from the 2018-19 season. The data collected will be from

this past regular season only, which took place from October 17, 2018 to April 9, 2019 (Raptors, 2019). There are several important reasons for selecting this specific time range for the methodology. Sysomos is only able to track datasets from social media applications up until one full calendar year (Sysomos, 2019). In addition, the playoffs mark the start of an entirely new season that is separate from the regular season. Due to the uncertainty of the playoffs season and limitations of Sysomos, examining the regular season of the Raptors would better indicate the most accurate results for both research questions.

The final data collection will involve two separate samples of Tweets for each research question. The first sample will use Sysomos to gather Tweets from fans Tweeting and tagging the Raptors official account. The Tweet *must* also include the #WeTheNorth hashtag to measure the emotional impact between the brand and the fans. Using Sysomos to collect data also provides further insight into the analytics, insights, and sentiment behind the #WeTheNorth campaign to measure the connotative connection. Sysomos is able to narrow down the millions of Tweets targeted towards the Raptors official account to only those pertaining the #WeTheNorth hashtag. However, with the Raptors having over 1 million followers on Twitter, there are several thousand Tweets directed at them every day—especially on game days (Raptors, 2019). The Tweets collected will be exported into an excel document of 3000 Tweets, where 100 Tweets will be randomly selected to answer the question presented in research question #1. The data collection will be aimed to balance out evenly across the season, meaning the final sample will include roughly 14 Tweets per month from October 2018 to April 2019. The 100 Tweets from fans will then be coded based on key themes that arise throughout the Tweets. Words that will not be coded include the following: hyperlinks, tagged accounts, hash tags, and article words (the, to, and, how etc.). This will provide a fair indication of the connotative connection between

the #WeTheNorth campaign and the Raptors' fan base. Lastly, these coded themes will be plugged into a table that properly displays the numerical percentage of certain reoccurring themes that relate to RQ1.

The second research question will also use Sysomos to gather Tweets. However, this collection will only include Tweets from the Raptors' official Twitter account to gauge the team's social media efforts to support their fan engagement success. The Raptors online fan interaction has significantly increased since the campaign launched. As previously mentioned, the Raptors' social media growth rate in 2016 was among the top five in the National Basketball Association (De, 2016, pg. 1). The data collection method for RQ2 will be very similar to RQ1. Sysomos was used to collect all Tweets from the Raptors' official Twitter account (including ReTweets) between October 17, 2018 and April 9, 2019. Over 3000 Tweets were gathered from the Raptors Twitter account from the time span. Out of those 3000+ Tweets, 100 were randomly selected to provide the most accurate possible representation of the fan engagement levels for the Toronto Raptors. Words and elements excluded from analysis include: hyperlinks, tagged accounts, hashtags, and article words (the, to, and, how etc.). These Tweets will also be coded based on key themes that arise in relation to fan interaction success between the Raptors account and their fan base. Overall, the data collected from this content analysis will provide a sufficient overview of the Raptors' #WeTheNorth campaign to answer both research questions listed above.

Findings & Analysis

The following section will analyze the findings from the data collected to provide specific assumptions about the #WeTheNorth campaign for both RQ1 and RQ2. Results from the

first question can be seen in *Table A: Research Question #1 Coding Results*. Several themes became relevant in the small sample size of 100 Tweets that were gathered based on fans using the #WeTheNorth hashtag. It is also important to note that these 100 Tweets are a small sample size compared to the thousands of Tweets received from Raptors fans each day on Twitter, and results gathered from RQ1 make broad assumptions based on data collected. There were four emergent themes that directly relate to the connotative messages behind the #WeTheNorth campaign. The themes for RQ1 are as follows: Nationalism, Player Fandom, Winning Culture, and Sentiment.

Each theme had several code words that were directly associated to research question #1 to help identify the Raptors' brand influence to the mass population online. Nationalism was the first theme that was apparent from the findings, and included any code word that related to Benedict Anderson's theory of nations and imagined communities. Themes for nationalism appeared in 31 of the 100 Tweets, or 31% of the sample. Player fandom was the second theme for RQ1, and directly related to brand loyalty and support from the Raptors' fan base. Themes for player fandom occurred in 54 out of the 100 Tweets, equating to 54% of the entire sample collection. Winning culture was the third theme and included how fans reacted to the recent success of the Toronto Raptors during the 2018-19 regular season. Themes for winning culture appeared in 36 out of 100 Tweets, equating to 36% of the sample collection. Lastly, the sentiment of Tweets by fans was divided into positive and negative contexts based on key words that appeared most often. Positive sentiment appeared 36% of the time, with negative sentiment appearing 17% of the time. The other 47% of Tweets were either neutral or informative. Full results and examples can be seen in the RQ1 findings table below.

Table A: Research Question #1 Coding Results

Theme	Code	Instances	% Of Instances	Example
Nationalism	A1 – North (7) A2 – Canada (6) A3 – Toronto (10) A4 – Community (7)	31/100	31%	"RT @WheelerTSN: Do you want to see more Saturday Night Basketball at the Scotiabank Arena? Raptors Night in Canada? @TSN1050Radio #WeTheNorth"
Player Fandom	B1 - Kawhi (20) B2 – Lowry (10) B3 – Siakam (7) B4 – Miscellaneous (17)	54/100	54%	"RT @JFerraraF18: The Raptors rested Kawhi Leonard, because of the next game vs Celtics, but, the better move was to play Kawhi today vs Magic. #Raptors #RTZ #WeTheNorth"
Winning Culture	C1 – Win/won (12) C2 – Fan/fans (6) C4 – Game (14) C3 – Support (4)	36/100	36%	"That's a (w)Rap on an amazing night! @Raptors didn't play consistently well and were down at the half, but they persevered to get the win in front of the home crowd! Welcome to #Toronto @MarcGasol! #WeTheNorth #BeTheNorthEh @TDSB_North_A https://t.co/fMv1MuKj6Q "
Sentiment	D1 – Positive (36) D2 – Negative (17)	36/100 17/100	36% 17%	"Have anyone noticed that @OAnunoby has been fantastic at his free throw shooting as of lately. Let's give hi a shout out #WeTheNorth #Raptors"

Nationalism

These results provide several important indications relating to the RQ1 that identify the connotative messages incorporated into the Raptors' #WeTheNorth campaign to broaden the team's message and increase the brand's national identity. Beginning with the first theme of *nationalism*, there were several code words that were repeated throughout the 100 Tweet sample. 'North' (code A1) appeared seven times, indicating the Raptors fans' strong ties to the #WeTheNorth campaign. In addition, the Raptors also use the term "North" bolded front and centre on one of their alternate jerseys, further representing the team's strong relationship to their Canadian origins (Raptors, 2019). Being the only Canadian team, the commonly heard negative phrase "north of the border" by American sports analysts is now the strongest fueling point to one of the most successful sports marketing campaigns in Canadian history. These negative connotations used to fuel the campaign are perfectly portrayed through the first #WeTheNorth commercial launch in 2014.

With the campaign going viral on social media, #WeTheNorth has been the face of Raptors merchandising since the 2014 season. With this, fans around the NBA can automatically connect the phrase to Canadian basketball. Even though there are teams that are technically further "north" than Toronto geographically such as Minnesota, "the North" represents all of Canada instead of just the city the Raptors play in. The patriotism shown by Raptors' fans from the campaign promotes nationalism, and sport has the power to bring together consumers of all races, genders, and ages across the nation. The ability to provide individuals a platform to collaborate and celebrate online is something unique to sports, and is the primary reason sporting events remains one of the highest grossing platforms worldwide.

'Canada' (code A2) appeared in 6 out of the 100 Tweets, showing the direct relationship between the Raptors' national fan-base compared to the other 29 American teams. The Raptors

are the only team to inherit their team phrase “North” based on their national identity, which provides a more meaningful brand connection to teams across the country. As Anderson states, “Nations are imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members” (Anderson, 1983, pg. 49). Since the campaign was targeted for the public masses of Canada and not just Torontonians, fans that watch from Vancouver can now connect with Raptor season-ticket holders through social media without ever physically meeting. With #WeTheNorth becoming viral online, social media allows consumers to “imagine” the Raptors as Canada’s team regardless of where they live in the country. As a result of strong social media tactics and re-branding efforts by the Raptors, the team was able to successfully paint a story for fans across the nation. This may also incentivizes the buying behavior of fans across the country that may not have felt as deep as a connection to a professional basketball team before.

Apart from the Vancouver Grizzlies, which moved to Memphis more than a decade ago, the Raptors are Canada’s only NBA team. Lastly, with constant social media updates, online fans are able to actively participate and engage with the team throughout their 82-game regular season and into the playoffs. Overall, the strong passionate voice of these fans translate to the emotional connection the Raptors tried to capture with the #WeTheNorth campaign. This is exemplified through the use of codes A1 and A2 having a direct relationship to Anderson’s definition of nationalism (1983), further indicating the holistic support around the country of Canada for the Toronto Raptors.

The theme of nationalism is continued through the use of the word, ‘Toronto’ (code A3), as 10% of fans used the city’s name in relation to the #WeTheNorth campaign. While this may have been a predictable occurrence prior to data collection, the use of ‘Toronto’ is significant. Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world, and the roots of the city are reflected in the

team environment, as well as throughout their fan base. The Raptors team is made up of several different races, ethnicities, and religions. The Raptors' roster includes players from the United States, Spain, China, Cameroon, and Canada (Raptors, 2019). This further reflects the fan base around the country and especially in the city of Toronto, which is one of the highest immigration cities in the world. As of 2016, there were over 1.2 million visible minorities in Toronto, equating to almost half of the city's population (Statistics Canada, 2017). Sport is one of the world's greatest equalizers, and the #WeTheNorth campaign has the power to bring people of any ethnicity together to celebrate through a combined interest in Canadian basketball. 'Toronto' further reflects the Raptors' ability to improve brand management with the #WeTheNorth campaign. A common phrase in semiotics known as synecdoche is used to represent part of something as a whole, which can be seen in the approach the Raptors took in gaining national support originally rooted from the city of Toronto. It also proves that the word "Toronto" is interchangeable with Canada, as the die-hard support system comes from across the country, not just the city.

Finally, the theme of nationalism is concluded with 'community' (code A4), and appears 7 out of the 100 Tweets by fans using the #WeTheNorth hash-tag. This statistic relates back to Baym's theory of community, and how users are not tied to a specific geographical space, but rather involved in unique online discussion forums such as Twitter (Baym, 2015). The word community symbolizes what it means for a group of fans to represent and support a professional sports team and their brand. As mentioned for codes A1-A3, fans around Canada form a social bond over a shared goal and objective that stems from the #WeTheNorth campaign. The community supporting the Raptors has existed since the creation of the team in 1995, but has prospered exponentially since the 2014 #WeTheNorth campaign. Combined with the recent

success of the team, along with one of the most popular musicians in the world Drake being the team's global ambassador, the Toronto Raptors have formed a fan community unlike any other in the NBA since it is unique to the country of Canada. Lastly, the #WeTheNorth motto has become the supporting anchor that allows Raptors branding to prosper around the entire NBA.

The Raptors were also one of the first teams in the NBA to host live outdoor viewing parties for the playoffs in front of Scotiabank arena for fans that could not get tickets to the game. This trend quickly gained news traction around the NBA, and soon became known as "Jurassic Park," with thousands of fans filling up Maple Leaf Square every playoff run (Raptors, 2019). Lastly, collective identity theory is apparent throughout the #WeTheNorth fan base. Instead of just being a consumer of a service and attending games, #WeTheNorth members see themselves as part of the organization due to the emotional attachment they have with the team (Heere & James, 2007). Although other professional Torontonians teams have had equally moving slogans such as the Maple Leafs' #LeafsNation, their team success has not equated that of the Raptors in recent history. Even the Toronto Blue Jays, which are the only Canadian team in the MLB, could not match the fan engagement levels the Raptors received from the #WeTheNorth campaign. Overall, the #WeTheNorth community has transcended any other sports marketing slogan in Canadian history, and has shocked the entire NBA with their success.

The patriotic messages incorporated into the #WeTheNorth slogan is reflected in the passionate community seen from fans across the country. Based off this first theme alone, there are strong suggestions that this campaign contributed to a successful re-vamp of the Raptors' national identity from a brand management standpoint. The brand identity of the Raptors comes from national fandom, but that fandom would not exist without the contributing success on the court from the team/players.

Player Fandom

Player fandom was the second theme that appeared throughout the 100 Canadian fan Tweets that were randomly selected and analyzed if they included the #WeTheNorth hash tag. A staggering 54% of the sample Tweets included a current player, former player, or coaching staff member of the Toronto Raptors organization. The relevance of having over half these Tweets including some form of player fandom is critical to growing #WeTheNorth fan base. ‘Kawhi Leonard’ (code B1), who is a former NBA champion and one of the newest additions to the team, appeared in 20 out of the 100 Tweets. Although this may not come as a surprise being the Raptors’ star player, to appear in over 20% of Tweets along is a staggering number considering Kawhi is not personally active on any social media platform. ‘Kyle Lowry’ (code B2) and ‘Pascal Siakam’ (code B3) trailed behind ‘Kawhi’ appearing in 10% and 7% of the sample collection respectively. Lastly, the ‘miscellaneous Raptors members’ (code B4) included several other players on the team, head coach Nick Nurse, and president of basketball operations Masai Ujiri.

The overwhelming engagement by Raptors’ fans can be seen through their support for star players on the team, which is the driving factor behind the team’s recent success. In addition, the two players that were mentioned the most often on Twitter, ‘Kawhi Leonard’ and ‘Kyle Lowry’, were named All-Stars for the 2019 NBA-All Star game in Charlotte, North Carolina (NBA, 2019). The #WeTheNorth campaign was a central factor in supporting player fandom, as fans can talk to each other throughout each game discussing every on-court play. The sociological approach (Lund, et al., 2018) to social media marketing has paid dividends for the Raptors. The #WeTheNorth campaign is a localized phrase that users can search up on various social media applications to be apart of the generic space where socializing and connectivity occur for sport consumerism (Lund, et al., 2018). Social media acts a gateway for fans across the

country to feed off others' passion for the Raptors, and has proven to be the central reason for the success behind the #WeTheNorth campaign.

Player fandom also results in a unique parasocial relationship that is imperative for professional sports teams. These parasocial relationships cannot always be physically measured, but they are reflected in media headlines and in sales from player merchandise. The economic importance of sport nationalism is essential to the success of all professional sports teams, but has thrived with the #WeTheNorth campaign. The stories of each of these players are also shared through social media, as these “technologies of power” are able to bring them to life through pictures, videos, and interviews (Lund, et al., 2018). With the players' origins being just as diverse as the city, Marshall McLuhan's global village has an important impact on the fandom of the Raptors. With the world becoming more interconnected due to social media and seemingly shrinking in the process, fans from around the world can now connect with the Toronto Raptors unlike any other time in franchise history (Dixon, 2009). For example, the Raptors are planning on travelling to Japan for their training camp in Summer 2019 as part of the NBA global games initiative (NBA, 2019). In addition, the Raptors gained a significant Asian fan following when Jeremy Lin joined the Raptors during the March 2019 trade block. The stories, history, and success of the Raptors' players will continue to be shared through social media, proving why player fandom was the highest rated percentage theme based on results from RQ1. Lastly, the repetitive use of player names also reflects the supportive connotative messages fans receive from the #WeTheNorth campaign.

Winning Culture

Winning culture was the third theme selected out of the data gathered based on RQ1's sample collection. Results from this theme showed that 36% of all fan Tweets that included the #WeTheNorth hash tag had a direct relation to the winning culture of the Toronto Raptors.

‘Win/won’ (code C1) appeared in 12% of the Tweets for this theme, with most fans commenting on the success of the Raptors winning games throughout the season. ‘Fan/fans’ (code C2) appeared in 6% of Tweets, while ‘support’ (code C3) appeared in 4% of Tweets. As a result, a combined 10% of all Tweets from code C2/C3 suggest that the Raptors’ fans support their team success and strive to be loyal fans. The final code, ‘game’ (code C4), appears in 14% of all Tweets from the sample data collection. Several of these Tweets included references to Raptors game night, the scheduling of future games, or the final score of a game that just occurred (Sysomos, 2019). Overall, data from this theme indicates that 36% of fans engage positively with the Toronto Raptors, further enhancing the brand identity of the #WeTheNorth campaign.

In order to strengthen team identity and loyalty from a fan perspective, fans need to buy into the brand the organization represents. “One way to accomplish this goal is to recognize that a team identity is more than an association of a collection of athletes and coaches or an association with other fans” (Heere & James, 2007, pg. 319). Although part of this connection relates to semiotics and an analysis of #WeTheNorth symbolism, providing an experience that lives up to the brand expectations will continue to keep spectators returning to future games. This is contributed to the winning nature of a team, as the further along a team goes into the season/playoffs, the higher their ticket prices become. This sense of belonging and attachment to a large social structure, especially one that has a winning culture like the Raptors, reflects on the fans’ group identity and sport nationalism.

The social semiotics behind sports marketing has proven to have an immense effect on fans, and is only intensified if that team reflects a winning culture. The social movements and extensive fan groups that have been created from the #WeTheNorth campaign is unparalleled. There are several official social media discussion forums, talk shows, and public debates that

engulf the Raptors throughout the entire season. The social signs constructed through national community based on the #WeTheNorth campaign is apparent throughout the streets of Toronto. This is apparent through spray painted murals of the Raptors players at major intersections, as well as having several of their top jerseys being sold out for months at a time at the official Real Sports Apparel store beside Scotia Bank arena (Raptors, 2019). Just as the originator of the movement S. Hosford stated (personal communication, February 27, 2019), #WeTheNorth has become the battle cry for the Raptors, and the logo is the shield that unifies each and every fan across the country.

It is blatantly evident that sports teams not only serve as a source for group identity, but also provides a symbolic representation of other aspects of social or community life such as geography, ethnicity, and gender (Heere & James, 2007). The #WeTheNorth campaign provides the perfect example of this combination, as a simple image and phrase completely re-branded the surging Raptors team back in 2014. The relationship between the Raptors and their fans has been established for several years in Toronto, but the campaign allows those outside of the city to still identify with the #WeTheNorth group identity. In addition, the winning culture in recent years has only intensified the Raptors fandom. The online and offline fandom has made national headlines across the country and will continue to do so as long as the team stays successful under the #WeTheNorth campaign.

Sentiment I

The fourth and final theme present throughout the data collected from RQ1 was the overall *sentiment* of key words throughout fan Tweets. In total, 36% of Tweets included words that were defined as ‘positive’ sentiment such as: love, amazing, awesome, good, fantastic, and many more. In addition, 17% of Tweets included words that were defined as ‘negative’ sentiment such as: bad, stop, angry, horrible, and several others. In addition, the other 47% of

Tweets had ‘neutral’ sentiment, or they could not be classified otherwise. The fan Tweets and the sentiment they hold are an important aspect to the marketing tactics behind the Raptors and the #WeTheNorth campaign. Fans are responding to the campaign, which in turn creates a spectacle of online fandom that does not come from the Raptors team itself. However, the Raptors still influence what the fans discuss online based on the way the team performs or any internal moves the team makes such as trades and product releases. Although there are thousands of Tweets every day that relate to the campaign, an indication of having almost double the amount of positive words compared to negative words is outstanding for a sports marketing organization. In contradiction, when the trade occurred last summer to trade fan favorite DeMar DeRozan for Kawhi Leonard, there was initial panic and disbelief among the Raptors’ social media fan base. However, as the season progressed, evidence from RQ1 proved that more than one-third of Tweets from a small sample size contained positive sentiment.

As previously mentioned, the #WeTheNorth campaign has defined the culture in the city of Toronto that began with an aired television commercial that went viral during the 2014 playoffs. The powerful role social media has played in elevating the team’s success is unequivocal to any other marketing campaign in the NBA. Using social media as a space for storytelling, while also focusing on consumer generated stories and branding, fan culture behind the Toronto Raptors has grown across the country (Lund, et al., 2018). Identity salience is also prevalent throughout the season and intensifies further into the playoffs, as the emotional desire for the city to win its first ever championship increases for every round that the team advances (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). In addition, fandom can transcend winning since a loyal fan base can support even a losing team such as the Toronto Maple Leafs the past several years. Overall, the

emotional connection generated by fandom has proven to be reinforced by the winning culture of the team based on the data collected from RQ1.

Emotion plays an important role in any professional sporting environment; one that has been successful for a long period of time (e.g., five years) builds long-term connections. According to the findings from Stavros, social media is able to draw on four key motives that include passion and camaraderie (Stavros, et. al., 2013). The emotional energy created by this campaign and has created the ideal combination that allows Raptor fans to Tweet positive comments about the organization. Unless there is a trade or upsetting loss in the playoffs, this data proves that it is difficult to find negative sentiment rooted within the #WeTheNorth fan base. Overall, findings from RQ1 have proven there are four central themes from Raptors fans using the #WeTheNorth hash-tag. These themes include: nationalism, player fandom, winning culture, and sentiment value. Each theme has its own relation to re-vamping the team's national identity from a brand management standpoint. Lastly, although it may not be apparent from the slogan, the underlying messages of fan loyalty and Canadian diversity from #WeTheNorth has contributed to the Raptors' recent success.

Data collected from RQ2 was divided into four central themes based on common trends from the Raptors' official Twitter account. The first theme was *fan participation*, and included code words that related to the Raptors' account attempting to engage fans in numerous contests and NBA related activities throughout the season. The second theme was an *online recap*, which provided the best moments over the past several games (or singular game) so fans were up to date on the Raptors' actions. The third theme was *game updates*, which included in-game updates that also allowed fans to actively engage in open conversation on social media platforms. Finally, the last theme is the *sentiment* of words used throughout the Raptors' Tweets, which was

further divided into positive or negative sentiment. It is also important to note that these 100 Tweets are a small sample size compared to the thousands of Tweets received from the Raptors official Twitter account each day, and results gathered from RQ1 make broad assumptions based on the data collected. Overall, results from RQ2 reveal the outstanding social media efforts from the Raptors' Twitter account to support their fan engagement success. In addition, results also reveal their primary intentions of the #WeTheNorth campaign driven through sports nationalism and online marketing tactics. These findings are discussed below.

Table B: Research Question #2 Coding Samples

Theme	Code	Instances	% Of Instances	Example
Fan Participation	A1 – Vote/Voting (21) A2 – Win/Won (23) A3 – Contest (5) A4 – Mobile App (12)	61/100	61%	"Here's the situation, we've hidden Welcome Toronto tickets & OVO City Edition Jerseys in our Raptors Mobile App. You got from now till 1:00pm to find them & enter to win. App Store: https://t.co/hwqN6DSidO Google Play: https://t.co/wBVIyp77OA https://t.co/y8pv2cc9YR "
Online Recap	B1- Highlights (10) B2 – Rundown Crew (8) B3 – Watch (5) B4 – Tonight (11)	35/100	35%	"It's been a busy time of year but the Rundown Crew is here to keep you in the loop. #AndNowYouKnow □ https://t.co/5br0aCGPL9 https://t.co/Z8TjvUM4mb "
Game Updates	C1 – Game (24) C2 – Raptors (16) C3 – Score/Scores (3) C4 – Toronto (10)	53/100	53%	"RT @jkubatko: Kyle Lowry became the first player in @Raptors history to record at least 20 points, 10 rebounds, and 15 assists in a single game. Lowry now has 11 career triple-doubles as a Raptor, just one fewer than all other players in team history combined. https://t.co/jkmHu7x8Nd "
Sentiment	D1 – Positive D2 – Negative	17/100 6/100	17% 6%	"Good times tonight @TangerineHoops Game Highlights Watch: https://t.co/yut3bxJbbn https://t.co/kHXX423NG1 "

Fan Participation

The first theme, *fan participation*, contained four different codes that equated to the words appearing in 61% of the entire data sample. ‘Vote/voting’ (code A1) appeared in 21% of these Tweets alone. The majority of Tweets that included code A1 related to the 2019 All-Star game hosted in Charlotte, NC (NBA, 2019). The starting lineups for both teams are selected by a public voting system on the official NBA site, or on Twitter by Tweeting #NBAvote followed by a player’s name. Since voting is open to the public and is not limited to one vote per day, the Raptors’ Twitter account implored fans to vote for their star players using a link provided in their Tweets. In addition, the correlation of code A1 from RQ2 relates back to results from player fandom in RQ1. The top vote-getters were the players that fans Tweeted about the most in RQ1, which was ‘Kawhi Leonard’ (20%), ‘Kyle Lowry’ (10%), and ‘Pascal Siakam’ (7%). As a result, Kawhi Leonard was named as an NBA All-Star starter, while Kyle Lowry was named to the reserve team (Raptors, 2019). The marketing tactics used by the Raptors are conscious of who their star players are proving they are committed to providing superior fan engagement opportunities via social media. Lastly, the Raptors have one of the best chances to see their players voted into the All-Star game since all of Canada can vote for their players, compared to American teams which usually only have their city or state voting for them.

‘Won/winning’ (code A2) appeared in 23% of 100 random Tweets from the Raptors’ official account, while ‘contest’ (code A3) appeared in 5% of Tweets. Although parts of code A2 refer to the Raptors winning games, a vast majority of the 23% refers to fans’ chance to win contest/giveaways by the Raptors organization. One of the most common ways to keep fans engaged throughout the season is to provide them with a chance to win tickets, jerseys, and prize packs from the comfort of their homes. This allows fans who aren’t able to attend games in

Toronto the chance to be a part of the #WeTheNorth campaign anywhere in Canada, further adding to their unique sense of sport nationalism – this is unique in the NBA, whereas other teams have local, rather than national fan bases. Lastly, the co-words ‘mobile app’ (code A4) were used in 12% of all Tweets from the Raptors’ official Twitter account.

Further adding to the sport consumerism of the Raptors, several of the Tweets that include code A4 requested fans to download the free mobile application on their phone. The app is used for various giveaways such as McDonald’s “Beyond The Arc” challenge, where users get a free medium fries if the Raptors hit 12 or more three-pointers in a single game (Raptors, 2019). The app can also be used for fans attending the game to upgrade their seats, order in-seat food delivery, and purchase Raptors merchandise ahead of time to avoid lineups (Raptors, 2019). Overall, evidence from the fan participation theme for RQ2 proves that the Raptors are effective in using social media to drive their online fan engagement support. In addition, these results show that although the Raptors utilize social media tactics to engage with their fans, the technique is only successful if fans engage in response, supporting an ongoing conversation. This feedback loop of fan engagement between the Raptors’ official Twitter account and fans supporting the #WeTheNorth campaign allows the organization to be one of the most successful in the NBA.

One of the central reasons the Raptors have had success with their social media marketing tactics has been the use of repetition. Constant repetition of themes, slogans, and key words is a sign of successful sports marketing for a professional sports organization. As much as the Raptors utilize brand repetition for their #WeTheNorth slogan, they are just as clever using phrases referring to their fan engagement tactics. One important finding for RQ2 is that the Raptors utilize a perfect mix of Berlyne’s two-factor theory to maximize a positive response

from consumers (Campbell & Keller, 2003). According to the fan participation theme results, the Raptors utilize “wearin” in 61% of their Tweets to ensure fans are constantly involved in their social media efforts (Campbell & Keller, 2003). Whether that requires voting for favourite players, entering contests from anywhere across the country, or utilizing the mobile app when attending the game, the Raptors have ensured their fan engagement is relayed to every account follower based on data gathered for this paper.

The Raptors appear to have avoided Berlyne’s (1970) second factor known as “wearout,” where the continuous repetition of a message decreases the effectiveness to a fan over time (Campbell & Keller, 2003). Instead of offering the same contests and giveaways, the Raptors offer a variety of different fan engagement prizes throughout the year. This could range from winning a signed jersey, to being flown from anywhere in Canada to attend a home game at Scotia Bank Arena Toronto. Overall, the brand repetition and marketing tactics used by the Raptors social media team has been extremely successful. The Raptors currently rank in the top eleven in the NBA for most Twitter followers, which is extremely high for a team outside of the United States (Statista, 2018). This number will likely increase over time, as the team is poised to increase in the near future, given their 2019 playoff run.

Online Recap

The second theme, *online recap*, also contained four different code words that appeared in 35% of all Tweets from the collected data sample. ‘Highlights’ (code B1) appeared in 10% of Tweets, while ‘Rundown Crew’ (code B2) appeared in 8% of Tweets. In addition, ‘watch’ (code B3) appeared in 5% of Tweets, while ‘tonight’ (code B4) appeared in 11% of Tweets. Several of the Tweets that involved codes B1, B3, and B4 all included a link to highlight plays from the previous game, allowing fans to catch up on any missed action. Code B2 is unique to the Raptors, as the Rundown Crew is a team allocated specifically for fan engagement during games,

and then to summarize the game once it is concluded. The Rundown Crew features both of the Raptors in-game hosts, and includes several special features such as commentators Jack Armstrong, Leo Rautins, and Matt Develin (Raptors, 2019). In addition, the Rundown Crew will include behind the scenes interviews with Raptors players, allowing fans to hear their perspective on the outcome of the game.

Online recap reflects the commitment by the Raptors' marketing and social media teams to ensure fans are constantly reminded of previous games and statistics to prepare fans for the next game. In order for a brand to maintain loyal CRM (customer relationship management), a professional sports team must equip their consumers with appropriate knowledge to prepare them for future games (Karjaluoto, et al., 2016). Preparing fans for future games is critical in gaining customer loyalty, as fans may lose interest in upcoming games if they are not aware of previous matchups. This entails that if the Raptors have a nationally broadcasted game that gains media attention, it is important for them to also make fans aware of other upcoming games. Even if these games are not in as high demand versus lower tier teams in the NBA, it is important to market them broadly. The Raptors must constantly contribute content into their social networking world in order to maintain fan loyalty, and ensure there is always new information for them to absorb (Nisar, et al., 2018). In addition, the Rundown Crew remains one of the team's most important supporters of the #WeTheNorth campaign, as they constantly refer to the nation-wide support of fans across the country (Raptors, 2019). This further reinforces how the Raptors use sports nationalism in their social media efforts to reflect their fan engagement levels.

Although several fans across the country may never attend a game, they are still actively apart of the Raptors fandom by participating online. If fans are unable to watch games live on television due to time zone differences, they are still able to watch key highlights from the

previous night on any social media platform. The passionate support from these fans has influence on sporting event attendance, and if a fan has an emotional attachment to a professional sports team, the more likely they are to attend a game or participate during the game online in the future (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). As previously mentioned, the Raptors have had continued success with their social media following, as they ranked among the top five for social media growth for the entire NBA after Toronto hosted the All-Star game in 2016 (De, 2016, pg. 1). The Raptors' fan engagement levels are shown throughout their season highlights, and the Rundown Crew allows fans to stay updated with the team, regardless of their geographical location.

Game Updates

The third theme, *game updates*, contained four different code words that appeared in 53% of Tweets from the official sample collection. 'Game' (code C1) appeared in 24% of the Tweets, while 'Raptors' (code C2) appeared in 16% of the Tweets. In addition, 'score/scores' (code C3) appeared in 3% of the Tweets, while 'Toronto' (code C4) appeared in 10% of the Tweets. Similarly to the theme of online recap, the Raptors organization keeps fans updated during games. Code C1 appeared the most often for this theme, and typically related to the score of an occurring game, or concluding the score at the end of the game. Code words C2, C3, and C4 were complimentary words that appeared in vast majority of the Tweets, referring to the city of Toronto, the mascot represented by the Raptors, and the final score of the game. Game updates are essential to keeping those fans around the country engaged with the game throughout the night and provide fans with another verified source of information regarding important updates. Lastly, the Tweets posted by the Raptors' official account regarding game updates create a discussion space for fans to connect.

Both online and offline support has been critical in creating sport nationalism for the Raptors, but fans are able to form personal bonds based on their shared passion for the

#WeTheNorth campaign. Being the only Canadian team in the NBA, basketball activates ideas and memories of how these fans define themselves as citizens of a country, uniting and forming imagined communities wherever possible (Seippel, 2017). Having a few major social media applications provides fans with an open space for discussion. Results collected from the Raptors' official Twitter account has proven to support the team in various aspects of the organization, but providing regular score updates via social media remains to be an important aspect to maintaining positive brand management.

Relating back to the theme of fan participation, the Raptors organization has slowly increased their marketing efforts toward fans downloading the mobile application. From this app, fans can turn on notifications that immediately provide an updated final score, along with statistics from the top players of each game. In addition, the mobile app has direct links to the team's social media platforms such as their official website, Instagram, and Twitter. This allows the Raptors to bolster their marketing efforts by having one central location for all Raptors updates, including giveaways and contests. The benefits of making these fan experiences visible to others via social media is critical in maintaining brand loyalty and has been a crucial factor in the success of the #WeTheNorth campaign (So, et al., 2018). Overall, the relationship between the Raptors' marketing team and their fans has equated in combining the nationalistic efforts of the #WeTheNorth campaign with their real-time social media updates.

Sentiment II

The fourth and final theme based on the findings from RQ2 is Tweet *sentiment*, which can again be further divided into 'positive' and 'negative' sentiment. 'Positive' sentiment (code D1) attributed to 17% of total Tweets throughout the sample collection, and included words such as: good, great, and amazing. 'Negative' sentiment (code D2) equated to 6% of all Tweets, and included words such as: bad, lose, and no. As a result, codes D1/D2 combined represent 23% of

the Tweets, while the remaining 77% of Tweets were either labeled as neutral or inconclusive. Since the Raptors typically have fewer characters in their Tweets compared to fans, sentiment findings were not as conclusive as they were in RQ1. Many of the words in Tweets were used to explain or promote the team, and rarely included any negative sentiment. In addition, the Raptors' Twitter account typically posts short Tweets, allowing for fans to continue the discussion via Twitter threads. Although code D1 only included 17% of Tweets, it was still almost triple the amount of Tweets from code D2. Overall, the sentiment of Tweets from the Raptors resulted in 94% of Tweets being either positive or neutral, proving their efforts to reach fans across social media.

Tweet sentiment has an important impact on brand relations between consumers and the organization, and directly impacts the brand equity of the organization. It is always difficult to maintain positive brand equity surrounding a professional sports team, as the factors are not always controllable from an organization's standpoint. However, based on findings from RQ2, it is evident that the Raptors excel in allowing their consumer relationships to be socially visible via online applications such as Twitter (So, et al., 2018). The Raptors Tweet almost three times as often during game days compared to non-game days as evidence in the Sysomos analysis. Providing a steady balance of in-game updates, fan inclusion, and online recaps is crucial to increasing their online following each year, all while maintaining positive Tweet sentiment. If the Raptors uphold their positive sentiment on Twitter, it will later reflect Tweets from fans responding to them online. Lastly, the Raptors organization has a higher chance of increasing fans' cognitive, affective, and evaluative identification with the team if their social visibility efforts are available to everyone online (So, et al., 2018). As previously mentioned for RQ1, the #WeTheNorth campaign works in direct relation with their fans, and each party feeds off the

other to create the strong fandom supporting the Raptors team. Overall, positive Tweet sentiment is a step in the right direction to improve brand equity for the Raptors, and will directly correlate in fans expressing their happiness with the team online or through word-of-mouth communication.

Limitations and Considerations For Future Research

There are several relevant limitations and considerations that should be recognized, post-analysis. One of the most important considerations is that Sysomos is able to gather Tweets up to a one-year period prior to the data collection phase. Due to the resources and time span provided by this major research project, anything outside of the one-year time frame is beyond the scope of this paper. With both questions resulting in thousands of Tweets that fit the standards for each research question, coding every Tweet would not be realistic for one individual to complete in a short time span. As a result, the 100 Tweets per research question provided sufficient information to justify reasonable conclusions about the Raptors' marketing and branding tactics. Although data collected was scattered around the entire calendar year to provide relative accuracy, a larger scale of collected Tweets may have indicated different results from initial findings. Overall, the findings for both research questions were sufficient enough to make assumptions about both the Raptors' fan base in relation to the #WeTheNorth campaign, and how the organization maintained their brand identity online via their official Twitter account.

Another consideration that would require further research is to understand the development of #WeTheNorth campaign from the initial launch during the 2014 season. As previously mentioned, the campaign had several difficulties during the launch, but quickly became an overnight success throughout the course of the 2014 playoffs and into the 2015

season. Beyond the obvious increase in followers and Tweet mentions using the #WeTheNorth hash tag, further comparative research is needed to measure results effectively. Not only did the team have to keep their current fans interested, but they also had to adapt to a wider incoming fan-base that made the campaign such a national success. Lastly, a comparative analysis of the Raptors' social media efforts before the campaign during the 2013 season, to after the campaign launched in 2014/15 would provide interesting results on marketing metrics. Further comparisons could also include the first season of the #WeTheNorth campaign on various social media platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Instagram) to the current 2018/19 season. In addition, access to sales data of merchandising for comparisons is difficult to gather from MLSE, since most of their sales data aggregates all four major Toronto sports teams, making it difficult to tease out data specific to the Raptors.

The final consideration for future research would be to conduct a social media analysis of the Raptors' marketing efforts during the regular season compared to during the playoffs. As previously mentioned, data collected for this major research project were specific to the 2018/19 season between October and April. However, playoffs typically begin mid-April and run until mid-June where the two remaining teams compete for the NBA championship. Since 2014, the Raptors have been a competitive force in the NBA playoffs, but have yet to win the coveted NBA title that has eluded them the past several years. However, the team was finally able to be crowned NBA champions during the end of the 2019 playoffs, defeating the Golden State Warriors in a best-of-7 series.

The playoffs mark the start of a new season, as every game is priced significantly higher and gains much more media attention than a regular season game (Raptors, 2019). In addition, the deeper into the playoffs a team goes, the more attention they will get as the remaining teams

dwindle down from sixteen teams in April to two teams in June. Analyzing the increase of fan engagement and social media promotion from the Raptors organization compared to the regular season would provide interesting results for both research questions presented in this paper. Overall, results from this study have provided sufficient information about the Raptors marketing efforts, but further research is needed to understand the full scale effects the #WeTheNorth campaign has had on the country since the campaign launched during the 2014 season.

Conclusion

The Toronto Raptors have been the lone Canadian team out of the twenty-nine others in the National Basketball Association, which began without much promise to uphold a large marketplace based on their inaugural season in 1995. However, after several years of key draft picks, team development, and impressive marketing tactics, the Raptors have turned their brand into an international spectacle. The forefront of the Raptors success (along with several other contributing factors) has stemmed from their #WeTheNorth slogan that launched during the Raptors 2014 playoff run. Although the slogan has continued to represent the battle cry for the Raptors throughout the 2018/19 season, the Twitter interactions raise several questions about the branding tactics of the team.

RQ1 focused on the spectacle of Raptor fandom, and how fans engage with the #WeTheNorth hash tag on Twitter for the 2018/19 regular season. Results showed that themes of nationalism appeared in 31% of all Tweets, while player fandom appeared in 54% of Tweets. In addition, RQ1 proved that an overwhelming amount of fans included positive sentiment in their Tweets (36%), compared to negative sentiment (17%). Several of the findings from RQ1 also relate back to the use of branding and semiotics by the Raptors organization to enhance the

emotional interest of fans via the #WeTheNorth campaign. RQ2 focused on the engagement between the Raptors and the #WeTheNorth campaign, and analyzed how the organization interacts with their online audience. Results show that 61% of Tweets from the Raptors official Twitter account related to fan participation, with another 53% of Tweets relating to game updates. In addition, the Raptors' social media team ensured that fans were caught up with the Raptors, as 35% of Tweets included code words that related to online recap. Lastly, the Tweet sentiment for the Raptors' account contained many more neutral code words than fan Tweets from RQ1, but nonetheless still averaged more than double the amount of positive sentiment (17%) compared to negative sentiment (6%).

Data gathered from both research questions have a direct relationship with themes of nationalism, online communities, and semiotic branding. In addition, these results show that although the Raptors use brilliant social media tactics to engage with their fans, the campaign is only successful if fans engage back with them. This feedback loop of fan engagement between the Raptors' official Twitter account and fans supporting the #WeTheNorth campaign allows the organization to be one of the most successful teams in the NBA. Lastly, research beyond the scope of this paper is required for a greater analysis of data (1000+ Tweets) to capture a more holistic understanding of the Raptors social media marketing tactics. Overall, Shannon Hosford and the rest of the Raptors organization created one of the most successful and impactful marketing campaigns in Canadian sports history during the Raptors 2014 playoff run. As long as #WeTheNorth remains the Raptors' primary slogan the campaign should continue to invoke national fandom and uphold positive online fan engagement that equates to offline success, which includes Raptors merchandising, television broadcasting, and ticket sales.

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