

SKATING IN THE SUN:
EXAMINING IDENTITY FORMATION OF NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE FANS IN
SUNBELT STATES

by

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(Under the Direction of James J. Zhang)

ABSTRACT

The National Hockey League (NHL) is considering adding a team in Las Vegas, Nevada and understanding the development of fan identity in similar markets can aid in this expansion process. Las Vegas is located in the Sunbelt, which is a geographic region of the United States that is generally considered to stretch across the Southeastern and Southwestern U.S., currently home to nine NHL franchises. This study is exploratory qualitative research that used a case study method to gain familiarity with the phenomenon of NHL fandom in the Sunbelt region.

Results from this research discover the key trends and patterns that influenced individuals to become fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt region. A model of fandom was developed that suggests current fans are the driving factor of the league's growth. This research provides practical implications for NHL teams in the Sunbelt to build and expand their fan base, as well as lead to a quantitative investigation to narrow in on specific factors and differences among regions in future research.

INDEX WORDS: NHL, National Hockey League, Hockey, Sport Fandom, Socialization, Sport Fan Identity, Sunbelt, Las Vegas Hockey, Motivation to Consume Sport, Identity Formation, Sport Management, Sport Marketing

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my Mom and Dad –

Thank you for teaching me the importance of education and that learning is a lifelong process that extends beyond the classroom.

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This thesis couldn't have been completed without the countless number of people who supported me throughout the way and I have to thank you all! First, a big thank you to my advisor and committee chair Dr. James J. Zhang. Your guidance and support throughout my graduate school journey has been incredible and I can't thank you enough. I can't wait for the next step of the journey and work toward a PhD with you. As well, thank you to my other committee members Dr. Daniel L. Wann and Dr. Becca Leopkey. I really can't believe how lucky I got with this amazing committee for my first major project. To all my family and friends at home, your e-mails, text messages, skype sessions, and visits to Athens have meant the world to me. I took this unexpected journey down south but wouldn't have done it if I didn't think my support system at home would cheer me on along the way. To the friends I've made in Athens, thank you for all the great times over the last two years. There are ton of great people that I've gotten to meet and become friends with; my experience wouldn't have been the same without "y'all". Thank you to my friends in University Housing, specifically the SDSC Office. I wouldn't have had the opportunity to attend UGA if it wasn't for my assistantship, thank you for helping me get here and supporting my Master's journey for the past two years. Last but not least, I'd like to thank my wonderful girlfriend Allie for your support during this process. Your encouragement, positivity, and love have been there through the ups and downs of my grad school journey and I couldn't have done it without you. Thank you again to everyone who contributed!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Major professional sport leagues in North America are a multi-billion dollar industry. In the United States, the National Football League (NFL) is the most popular professional sport league in terms of revenue generated with an average of \$9.5 billion per year. Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Basketball Association (NBA), at \$8 billion and \$4.5 billion respectively, follow behind the NFL (Gaines, 2014). It is clear that North American professional sport is a big business, and there are more contributors than just those three leagues. In 1925, the National Hockey League (NHL) became the first international professional team sport league by having teams in both Canada and the United States (Sage, 2010). Although the NHL is one of the oldest leagues in North America, it is considered a fast growing major professional league in the United States. The business of the NHL is riding a wave of momentum in recent years as revenues have gone from \$2.2 billion in 2006 to approximately \$4 billion in 2014 (Thomas, 2014). Topics such as concussions, violence, and technology in the NHL are some of the most focused on issues over the last decade; yet, there remains a gap on how the league can better understand its fans and consumers. There have been some studies on fan behavior of minor league hockey teams (Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Mahar, 1996; Zhang *et al.*, 2001; Zhang, Lam, Connaughton, Bennet, & Smith, 2005) and these researchers have suggested further studies at the major league level. Understanding NHL fan behavior is important because the NHL has shown tremendous growth over the past 20 years and wants to bring the league to new areas of the country.

More specifically, the NHL is considering adding a team in Las Vegas, Nevada (Whyno, 2014), and understanding the consumer behaviors of fans in similar market places can make that move a success and lead to more growth in the United States. Las Vegas is considered to be a part of the Sunbelt region, which is a geographic region of the United States that is generally considered to stretch across the Southeastern and Southwestern U.S. Currently there are nine NHL teams in this region: Anaheim Ducks, Arizona Coyotes, Carolina Hurricanes, Dallas Stars, Florida Panthers, Los Angeles Kings, Nashville Predators, San Jose Sharks, and Tampa Bay Lightning. Despite having more teams than the entire country of Canada, where hockey is by far the most popular sport (Gruneau & Whitson, 2006), there is a gap in research about what motivates individuals to identify as fans in the Sunbelt states. In the early days of the NHL's move to the Sunbelt region, Smith (1995) asked important questions relating to attendance and marketing strategies attracting fans. The research findings revealed that entertainment tie-ins, giveaways, and individual star players attracted fans in Sunbelt states. This is important information on how to draw individuals to attend games, but how do these teams move beyond individual game attendance and build a long-standing fan base? Two decades have passed since this study and it would be advantageous to re-evaluate and investigate how fan bases have changed and develop an understanding of fans in these markets, especially with the changes in technology and the way sport is consumed. Research has shown that those who consider themselves highly identified fans are more likely to make purchases related to that organization (tickets, merchandise, media) than those who are casual fans who attend games once in a while (Wann, 2006). How does the NHL market their product to build a dedicated fan base in new and non-traditional markets? How and why do fans of teams in markets identify as a fan of these teams?

Among hockey fans, media, and researchers, there are conflicting opinions on if the NHL teams in the Sunbelt states are profitable and if they are helping or hurting the league and sport. Some believe these teams are hurting the league as a whole and need to be contracted or moved to Canada or the Northeast of the U.S. (Keller, 2011; Van Riper, 2014). Others believe the teams in the Sunbelt to be among the most important in the league and they are stronger than ever (Shoenfeld, 1993; Terlep, 2014). The reality is that these teams have had varying degrees of success on the ice and there are passionate fans in each market like any other team. The NHL continues to see the valuations of all their teams rising (Ozanian, 2014) and in 2011 the league agreed to their largest American national television deal in league history with NBC sport worth \$2 billion. Whether these teams in the Sunbelt region can remain in their markets long term is beyond the scope of this research, but better understanding the culture of these fan bases, large or small, is important in growing the game in this area of the country.

If these non-traditional hockey market environments can operate more NHL teams than all of Canada, there must be a reason that the teams still exist. Previous research has concluded that the location of a team can affect a team's survival (Jones & Fergusson 1988). Although the size of the fan base may be smaller than teams in Canada or the Northern U.S., there is still a fan base of these teams and there is something unique about their fan culture. For instance, the Sunbelt region is the fastest growing area of youth hockey players (Klein, 2011) and as such it is more important now than ever to evaluate fan culture of NHL teams in the Sunbelt states and how the NHL and game of hockey can continue to grow in that region.

The purpose of this research is to identify factors that led individuals to identify as fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt region. This information will allow for a greater insight on professional hockey in unconventional markets and the potential to grow the NHL in new areas.

In this thesis there will be an examination of the Southern NHL movement, a discussion on relevant research, an outline of the methods used to conduct this study, and results and discussion on the study. First, it is important to understand the growth of the NHL and the history behind expanding to the Sunbelt.

Relevant Theories and Previous Research

Growth of the NHL and Movement to the South

Opening up for business in 1917, the NHL started with four teams and grew to six in 1942, forming the ‘Original Six’ franchises. Teams were based in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Montreal, New York, and Toronto, and stayed that way for 25 years as the NHL grew in popularity across North America. These teams flourished and still have some of the most passionate and largest fan bases to date. The NHL expanded to 12 teams in 1967 and the game continued to grow in popularity and profitability for the team owners. However, until 1991, most of the NHL’s franchises were located in Canada and northern areas of the U.S. Although the Los Angeles Kings were the first team in the Sunbelt when they opened in 1967, they did not see a division championship until nearly 30 years later and remained without a Stanley Cup until 2012, their 44th season in the league. Other exceptions before 1991 include teams in Oakland and Atlanta who relocated after a few seasons, and the World Hockey Association (WHA)’s attempt to create a rival league with teams in Miami, Houston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco prior to folding most of the teams and merging others with the NHL. Although the LA Kings remained a main stay, most teams were unsuccessful in the south as it was a new cultural phenomenon, as well as a new sport product (Jenish, 2013). Both the NHL and WHA saw potential in the southern markets but early on were unable to maintain professional franchises in those areas. However, among a globally changing sport landscape, the NHL began to reconsider America’s

south in the early 90's and began expanding again – this time with more success. At the time, the NHL was far behind the other big professional team leagues in North America, the NFL, NBA, and MLB in terms of profitability and popularity. Although they are still behind those leagues, the gap has closed over the past 25 years and expansion in the south played a large roll in turning the game from a regional sport to a nationally followed one in the United States. This strategy was vital for the NHL to survive as television contracts became the lifeblood for professional sport and they needed to appeal to the whole country, not just the pockets in the north (Jenish, 2013). For the NHL to survive as a major league, they needed nontraditional markets. Fan bases in Minnesota and Winnipeg were as passionate as any other team and would fill up the building on a regular basis. However, these markets lacked corporate dollars in their community and made no difference on national television numbers. This resulted in both of these teams moving to less traditional hockey markets, namely Dallas and Phoenix respectively, although both places would see a NHL team return years later. In the early 90's, with an eye on a large national television contract, the NHL expanded for the first time since their merger with the WHA in 1979. San Jose entered the league in 1991, Tampa Bay in 1992, Anaheim and Florida in 1993, and Minnesota relocated to Dallas that same year. The NHL continued their southern expansion a few years later with Winnipeg relocating to Phoenix in 1996, Hartford relocating to Raleigh, North Carolina in 1997, and Nashville and Atlanta getting expansion teams in 1998 and 1999. In a span of 10 years, the NHL went from having one team in the Sunbelt region to 10 teams. These new locations were unconventional choices but were clearly intentional due to the size of the media reach in those markets. At the time of their expansions, Dallas had the fifth largest TV market in the U.S., Atlanta eighth largest, Phoenix 12th, Tampa Bay 13th, and Miami-Ft. Lauderdale 16th (De La Torre, 2011). As well, these are locations that had population growth and

attracted people to migrate from the north because of their warm climates and job opportunities. These are also common locations for northerners to vacation or retire and bring along their passion and knowledge for hockey.

Challenges facing the NHL in the Sunbelt

The teams in the Sunbelt states have experienced a moderate amount of success on the ice, some more than others. Since the southern movement began in 1992, teams in the Sunbelt region have won six Stanley Cups - Dallas in 1999, Tampa Bay in 2004, Carolina in 2006, Anaheim in 2007, and Los Angeles in 2012 and 2014. They have also combined for six other appearances in the Stanley Cup Finals. Only one Canadian team has won in this time period, Montreal in 1993, and Canadian teams have made six other appearances in the finals.

Off the ice, these teams have had varying levels of success and face challenges different from those in northern markets. Amidst poor management and low interest in the community, the Atlanta Thrashers were relocated to Winnipeg in 2011. This would be the second time Atlanta had lost an NHL franchise as the Atlanta Flames moved to Calgary in 1980. Despite the hockey market in Georgia being questionable, the impact of the NHL has been felt throughout the state. Prior to the Thrashers joining the NHL, there were 911 registered hockey players in Georgia but in 1999-2000, just one year after their entry in the NHL, membership increased by 40%. By 2011, just before their relocation, there were 2,142 registered players, 84.4% of which were children below the age of 18 (Peters, 2011). These figures could suggest that having an NHL team impacted hockey participation at the grass roots level and contributed to growing a fan base in a non-traditional region. The troubles in Phoenix, Arizona are also well documented and publicized (Burnside, 2008; Pettersson, 2015; Sunnucks, 2013). In addition to inconsistent management, legal battles with the city of Glendale over the arena and low attendance numbers,

the Coyotes have struggled in the desert. Their on ice performance has not helped attract fans as they have qualified for the playoffs in only eight of their 18 seasons and have advanced beyond the first round just once in 2012, when they advanced to the Western conference finals. To start the 2014-2015 season, the Phoenix Coyotes rebranded to the Arizona Coyotes as an attempt to appeal to the whole state and the southwestern region of the U.S. (McManaman, 2014). Even with all of the challenging issues, the NHL remains persistent that the Coyotes remain in Arizona. The league maintains that the Coyotes staying in Arizona is important for the league as a whole and are not in as much trouble as fans and media speculate (Gatehouse, 2012). Despite these challenges, some positivity has come from having a franchise in Arizona, in part due to the fact that Phoenix is the 14th largest media market in the United States (Station Index, 2015). As well, top young hockey prospect Auston Matthews is a native of Arizona and has said the Coyotes were his favorite team growing up. He is catching the attention of professional scouts and is projected to be the first overall pick in the 2016 NHL entry draft (Kennedy, 2014). This could suggest that with the large media reach and now a generation of fans growing up watching the Coyotes, an NHL team could work out in Arizona.

The NHL cannot simply rely on migrants from the north to support a team and must build up a fan base of their own in that community. With Las Vegas as a possible location for a new NHL franchise, the potential owners held a season ticket drive in order to gauge local interest. Despite Las Vegas being one of the top tourist destinations in the U.S., the league and owners understood that they could not rely on tourists or fans of other teams who live in the area that would come once or twice a year when their home-town team came to play. This is perhaps a lesson learned from poor attendance numbers in Fort Lauderdale, a location where the league banked on retirees from the north adopting the Panthers as their team. Potential Las Vegas owner

Bill Foley held a season ticket drive where individuals paid a deposit to confirm their interest in being season ticket holders. By June of 2015, the team had over 13,000 down payments and that does not take in to account potential interest by casinos or other entertainment businesses in the city (Burnside, 2015). The interest from the ticket drive accounts for 65% of the arena capacity and this is without a team officially announced yet. This ticket drive is modeled after Winnipeg who held a similar one to gauge local interest in having an NHL team return in 2011. This new strategy by the NHL shows that a local fan base is vital to a franchise's success and they cannot rely on occasional tourists or migrants from other markets.

Another challenge in the Sunbelt market is the competition from other professional sport teams. In Canada, there are no NFL teams and Toronto is the only city with an MLB or NBA team. There is little competition for NHL teams in Canadian markets, but the same cannot be said for teams in the Sunbelt states. Some of the nation's most popular teams reside in markets where NHL teams are trying to make an impact, the Dallas Cowboys and Los Angeles Lakers for example, as well as countless number of college and high school sports that captivate most communities in this region. In the nine NHL cities in the Sunbelt, there are eight MLB teams, six NBA teams, five NFL teams, and several dozens of NCAA Division I schools. Also, sport events such as NASCAR, the Professional Golfer's Association tour, and Ultimate Fighting Championship events have drawn larger interest than the NHL and have had a long history in the region. Most of these cities, especially Los Angeles, Nashville, and Miami-Ft. Lauderdale, are also known for their entertainment options such as beaches, art and music festivals, nightlife, and theme parks. It is a challenge for an NHL team to come in and ingrain themselves as part of the community while all these alternative sport and entertainment options have existed for decades.

The common perception for lack of success in the Sunbelt region is that children in the south do not grow up playing hockey on frozen ponds, watch the game on Saturday night's with their family, or play with the other children at school like their northern counterparts (Friedman, 2014). This could possibly be the case as the tradition of hockey in Canada and pockets of the northern U.S. are more passionate about hockey than any other sport and there, it is a way of life in many of those communities. Exposure to the sport of hockey is something fairly new in these areas. Local ice rinks in the Sunbelt states were few and far between 20 years ago, which made playing and learning about the game difficult. Even if there were local ice rinks, to pay for the cost of equipment, ice time rental, and travel to other community teams, it is a very expensive sport to enroll in. Since the NHL has moved south, local rinks have continued to pop up, and with programs such as the LA Kings' 'Kings Rink Alliance', local arenas have gotten support from NHL teams in order to help grow the game. Teams in the region have made efforts to have a presence in the community through community events, youth hockey camps, and grass roots promotions. Examples of this are the Carolina Hurricanes grassroots programs 'Learn to Play' and 'First Goal'. These are programs where children can learn how to play at a minimal cost, interact with Hurricanes players, and receive Hurricane merchandise to wear and support the team (Williams, 2014). These are types of promotions teams in the Sunbelt use in to enhance motivation for individuals to attend games and eventually identify as a fan of the team.

There is a good understanding of what motivates individuals to identify with a sport team in general, but there is a gap in research on how they became a fan in the first place, specifically pertaining to fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt region. In sport management research, the process of becoming a highly identified sport fan is often referred to as the 'socialization' process (McPherson, 1976; Wann, 2006). To better understand sport fan identity and the fan

socialization process, there are some relevant theories and previous research that needs to be discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Sport Fan Identification and Social Identity Theory

Identity origin is important because sport fans reinforce identification with the team by engaging in supportive and repetitive consumption behaviors. In research on sport marketing, Wakefield (2007) defines identification in sport as

When an individual reacts to events that occur to the team or player as if the events happened to him or her. Highly identified fans will internalize or adopt the team or player's attitudes and behaviors as their own. If you are highly identified with a team, you feel good when the team wins and bad when the team loses. You believe the team is a representation of who you are to yourself and to others. You practically feel as though you are part of the team. (p. 37)

Identification leads to an emotional attachment, which then leads to consumer behaviors and responses to team performance and marketing activities. Support behaviors include going to games and events, buying team related merchandise, and consuming team media, which are the primary sources of revenue for sport organizations. As there are varying levels of identification, various factors may influence how one identifies as a sport fan, especially a particular sport and team (Wann, 1995). The more identified fans are, the more they would consume, and consequently, the more the organization would profit.

Identity as a sport fan means being attached to a particular team, player, or some aspect of sport. This identity is often confirmed and showcased with an individual purchasing and wearing apparel of that team, consuming that team's media, and engaging others in conversation

about that team. In early social psychology, McCall and Simmons (1978) suggest identity derives from the idea that individuals will base their actions on how they would like to see themselves and how they would like to be seen by others. Their research, in combination with Social Identity Theory, gives a theoretical base for what it means to be a sport fan and why individuals engage in that culture. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) has been a widely accepted framework to guide studies on sport fan's identification with teams. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity is part of an individual's self-concept deriving from knowledge of his or her membership in a social group in addition to the emotional and value significance attached to the membership. Individuals create a shared social identity through membership in a social group (such as a sport team's fan base) and internalize the values and beliefs of the social group as their own. With a desire to develop and maintain a positive social identity, sport fans identify strongly with the team they support. Wann and Schrader (2000) suggest that positive social identity is usually derived in three ways. First through a strong association with the city, state, or college the team is based in, second through intergroup differentiation from rival teams, and third through becoming part of the team and sharing in victory and defeat. A spectator's perceived connection to a team and feeling with the team's success and failures is what it means to identify with a team (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Sport teams could benefit by determining the internal and external factors that cause one to form identification with a team. What these teams want to do is grow the numbers of the fan base and find out not *why* they identify as fans, but *how* they arrived at that identification to cater their strategies to attracting fans in the earliest stages of identification.

One of Wann's (1995)'s motivations to consume sport is the desire to be affiliated with a group of like-minded people. Early sport participation can begin one's affiliation with a sport

and can lead to a lifelong commitment to a sport, league, and/or team. One of the earliest studies on identification formation was McPherson's (1976) study on Canadian adolescents to find out the reasons they became sport fans, and found that there were four main factors that were responsible for teaching the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of sport fandom. These factors were the individual's family, peers, school, and community. The researcher followed up with a survey to determine the degree of importance each agent had, and developed measures to assess the participant's degree of sport consumption. This study discovered that males and females had different motivations for identifying with a sport or team. The four socialization agents continue to be prominent in more recent investigations (e.g., Frederiksen, 2003) and gender differences are commonly identified in sport fandom research (e.g., Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000; End, Kretschmar, & Dietz-Uhler, 2004). However, in the Sunbelt states, it is possible that that hockey did not hold large presence within a household, peers, schools, and communities. This could suggest that fans of NHL hockey in these regions had a different socialization process than those in the North and this information could be used to grow the game in unconventional regions.

Funk and James (2001) suggest that sport fans form a social identity by going through stages of their Psychological Continuum Model, the first stage being awareness. This stage is often brought about through the influence of the significant people in one's life. At a young age, often the most significant people in one's life are his/her parents and can make a large impact in forming one's social interests, including sport fandom. Research by McPherson (1976); Parry, Jones, and Wann (2011); and Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996) all show how influential parents are when it comes to their children's sport fandom choices and behaviors. Parents influence their children through having games on television at home, purchasing merchandise, or

enrolling their children to participate in that sport. One of the earliest studies that examined the effects of motivations of sport participation and level of sport spectatorship was Shamir and Ruskin (1984). They identified similarities and differences for motivation in participation and spectatorship, but did not examine the influence of sport participation on spectatorship and fan behaviors. Other examples of the relationship between past playing experience and consumption of that sport as a fan are found in: Greenwell, Fink, and Pastor (2002); Gwinner and Swanson (2003); Tokuyama and Greenwell (2011); and Wann *et al.* (1999). This previous research provides a solid understanding of the socialization process and sport fan identity, but there still remains a gap in research that this study aims to fill.

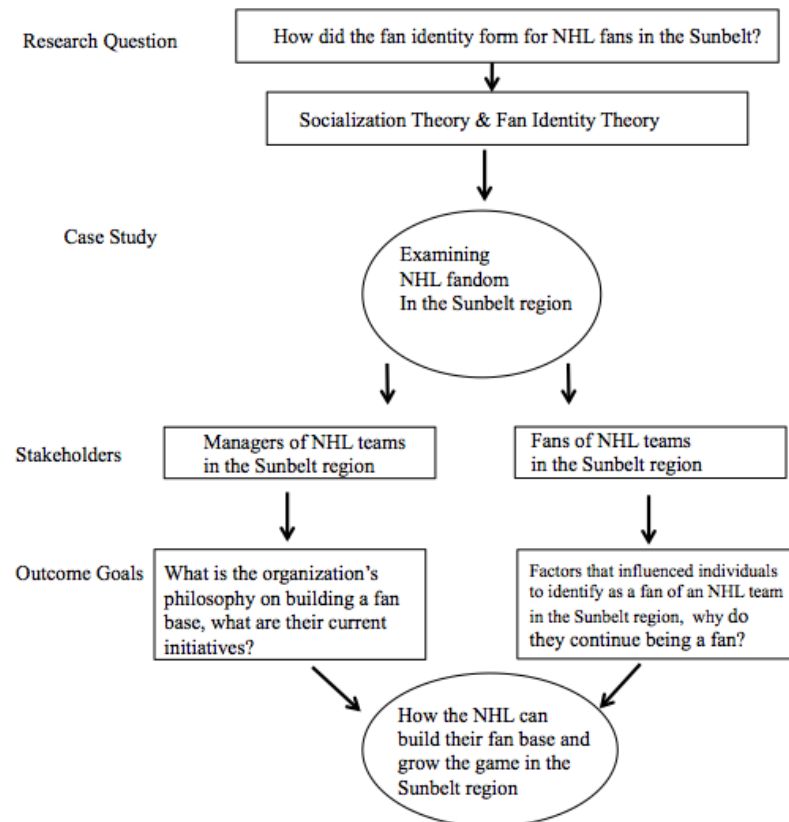
Statement of Problem

Previous researchers have identified theoretical frameworks addressing sport fan identification and have also shown that identification predicts motivations to attend games and consume team related products. While many studies have been conducted to examine the motivations of individuals to consume sport, it is less known about how self and social identity forms in a spectator sport, particularly when considering the unique dynamic of the National Hockey League in new and non-traditional markets. Sport fans in markets like Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Miami have rich sport histories dominated by NFL, NASCAR, NBA, MLB, and college sports; even so, there are still large fan bases for their NHL teams (Statistica, 2015). Why are these individuals choosing to identify themselves as NHL fans despite the many sport competitors in their market? What leads to these identifications? Why do they continue being fans? By learning about what factors contributed to an individual becoming a fan of a team in this region, it will allow the team and NHL to create a larger fan base, and build the traditions and cultures that are associated with being fans of teams like Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

This research is an exploratory qualitative study with the purpose to gain familiarity with this phenomenon and acquire new insight in order to formulate a more precise hypothesis in future research. This study is in line with Schutt (2012) who said social exploratory research “seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn ‘what is going on here?’ and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations” (Schutt, 2012, p. 14). This study aims to find out ‘what is going on’ when it comes to highly identified hockey fans in the Sunbelt states.

Specifically, the research question in this study is: How did the fan identity form for NHL fans in the sunbelt? Through interviewing managers of these teams and learning about their successes and failures in building a fan base, and fans sharing their stories of how they became a fan, we will be able to identify major themes in the fan socialization process of these sport fans and be able to answer the main research question. Figure 1.1 provides a visual overview of how this research question will be examined.

Figure 1.1. Research Proposal Flow Chart



Significance of Study

On June 24, 2015 the NHL announced they will begin the expansion process and will accept bids from potential owners who want to open a new NHL franchise. There is big money at stake as the expansion fee will be around \$500 million and will go straight to the 30 current owner's pockets. Although they have not committed to a specific number of franchises, it is reported at least two teams will be added, with Las Vegas a strong chance to be one of them (Johnston, 2015). In August of 2015 it was announced Las Vegas and Quebec City submitted applications for NHL expansion franchises and both were invited to phase two of the NHL expansion process (Cooper, 2015). In March of 2016, NHL began designing the process of an expansion draft if they were to expand the league for the 2017-2018 season (LeBrun, 2016).

With adding at least one more team in the Sunbelt region, the NHL fan identity process will allow the team and league to develop marketing strategies in order to build a dedicated long-term fan base and continue to grow the game on a national level. The NHL is on their way to moving from a regional sport to a fully national sport in the United States, however they are still behind the NFL, NBA, and MLB when it comes to their national footprint. There is little research about NHL fandom in the United States, and even less on fans of teams in the Sunbelt States. As of 2008, the population in this region is estimated to be around 100 million people and the US Census Bureau projected that approximately 88% of the U.S. population growth between 2000 and 2030 will occur in this region (Census Data, 2015). As well, The Sunbelt region is the fastest growing area of youth hockey players (Klein, 2011). Finding out what leads individuals in the Sunbelt to identify as an NHL fan will be instrumental in growing the game in this new frontier of hockey in the United States. Understanding the reasons that cause and lead to sport identification would provide solid evidence for practical applications by the NHL and their teams to expand their league in new areas.

Operational Definitions and Explanation of Terms

Fan vs. Spectator

For the purpose of this research, it is especially important to define the difference between sport fan and sport spectator. Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) describe sport fans as “individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete. Sport spectators (also called sport consumers) are those individuals who actively witness a sporting event in person or through some form of media” (Wann *et al.*, 2001, p. 2). Often in research, the terms sport fan and sport spectator are used interchangeably when they should not be. They should not be confused because some sport fans rarely witness sporting events in person, while

some spectators don't have any interest in identifying with one specific team. The researchers use the example of a person who receives a free ticket to go to a basketball game. This person may attend the game even though they have no interest in the event itself; they are just going along with friends. As is Wann *et al.*'s (2001)'s suggestion, this research will use 'sport fans' as a generic term to describe individuals with an abiding interest in sport. The terms 'fan' and 'spectator' are not mutually exclusive as the majority of people who witness a sporting event are also fans of that sport or team involved, while most fans do, at least occasionally, attend sporting events as spectators. This research is concerned with sport fans and the long-term lifelong commitment that can be developed.

Socialization

Wann *et al.* (2001) explained that identification formation starts with socialization and the factors that contribute to identity formation are called socialization agents. Socialization is the process of learning to live in and understand a culture or subculture by internalizing its values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms. With sport fandom, this study is specifically concerned with the process by which fans learn and accept the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of the sport fan and team culture. This culture includes learning the jargon, the history, player statistics, and the history of the team.

Sunbelt

The Sunbelt is a geographic region of the United States that is generally considered to stretch across the Southeastern and Southwestern U.S. The defining feature of this region is an almost year round warm climate with brief and mild winters. There has been a significant and steady population growth in this region since 1960 due to people seeking warmer climates and growing economic opportunities. In the map below (Figure 1.2), the dark shaded area is

generally considered to represent this region. This research will focus on the nine NHL teams currently in this region, which can be seen in the table below (Figure 1.3): Although Northern California and Nashville are not always considered part of the Sunbelt, the Sharks and Predators are included in this as they often get lumped in discussion about hockey in unconventional markets and are in relative close proximity to the other Sunbelt teams. As well, this research will make reference to defunct NHL teams previously in the Sunbelt: Atlanta Flames, Atlanta Thrashers, and California Seals.

Figure 1.2 – Map of the United States – Dark shaded area represents the Sunbelt region

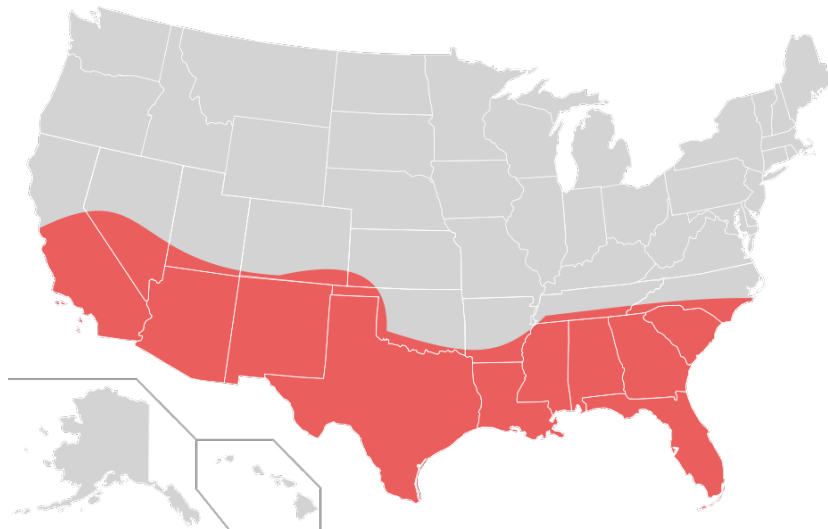


Figure 1.3– NHL teams in the Sunbelt region

| Team | Location | Inaugural Season |
|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Anaheim Ducks | Anaheim, California | 1993-94 |
| Arizona Coyotes | Glendale, Arizona | 1996-97 |
| Carolina Hurricanes | Raleigh, North Carolina | 1997-98 |
| Dallas Stars | Dallas, Texas | 1993-94 |
| Florida Panthers | Fort Lauderdale, Florida | 1993-94 |
| Los Angeles Kings | Los Angeles, California | 1967-68 |
| Nashville Predators | Nashville, Tennessee | 1998-99 |
| San Jose Sharks | San Jose, California | 1991-92 |
| Tampa Bay Lightning | Tampa Bay, Florida | 1992-93 |

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

This study will not be able to compare the identification process of fans in the Sunbelt states to those in northern regions. The larger population of all NHL fans is too broad to consider in one study and while the study will learn about the socialization process for fans in the Sunbelt region, it won't be able to compare and contrast to those in other areas. Another delimitation is the scope of organizational knowledge from the sport managers interviewed. They all have very specific roles within their organization and may not be able to accurately represent all departments of the team and can't represent the team as a whole, much like one fan can't represent the fan base as a whole. As well, since this is a qualitative study, data from only a small number of the population can be collected. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) note: "you

cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything. Your choices –whom to look at or talk with, where, when, about what, and why – place limits on the conclusions you can draw and how confident you and others feel about them” (Miles *et al.*, 2014, p. 31).

Limitations

One limitation is the self-reporting nature of this study. Ideally, the study would like to analyze highly identified fans but participants have to self-report as highly identified. This level of identification could mean different things to different people but the study has to assume that all participants are highly identified fans. As well, the study was conducted during the beginning of the NHL season. Results could be different during peak times of the NHL season such as the start of training camp, Stanley Cup playoffs, or the entry draft. However, it could also be an advantageous time to conduct the study since there is a fresh season and fans can analyze their fandom in an unbiased manner without the team’s current performance clouding any judgment. Lastly, these results may not be applicable to the larger population of all sport fans in the Sunbelt states. This is a niche target group and the sport fandom landscape is broad with different variables that cannot be conducted in one study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This specific topic has not been studied before. However, there is a wealth of previous research and theories that contribute to the development of this study. Specifically, previous research on the origin and growth of hockey, social motivation to consume sport, the socialization process, and identity formation are all important in understanding consumer behavior and fan development of NHL fans in the Sunbelt region.

Origin, Development, and Growth of Hockey

Timelines of the exact origins of the sport of ice hockey are not always clear and the Society for International Ice Hockey Research acknowledges that it is a question that may never be conclusively answered. However, there are many ideas and suggestions on when and where the game started. The general belief is that hockey as it's known now stemmed from a game played in 1860 by English soldiers on the frozen ponds in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. However, according to Birthplace of Hockey (2015), the sport originated around 1800 in Windsor, Nova Scotia where students at Canada's first college, King's College School, adapted a version of field hockey called Hurley onto the ice of frozen ponds.

Students at McGill University were the first to have organized groups play hockey in indoor rinks (Zukerman, 2006). This signified a move from recreation and leisure on the frozen ponds of Canada to the organized competition inside stadiums and a move to hockey becoming a spectator sport. In addition to the indoor rink being a more comfortable way to view hockey, Mason and Schrodtt (1996) cite industrialization, urbanization developments, increased leisure

time, and a desire to escape cold Canadian winters as reasons for the sport becoming a popular spectator sport across the entire country. A few years later, the first hockey tournament was played at the annual Montreal Winter Carnival in 1883. This tournament led to the creation of the Montreal City Hockey League, which is generally viewed as the first organized league of ice hockey in the world (Zukerman, 2006).

Through the early 1880s, hockey was primarily an amateur sport and participants and spectators were almost exclusively upper class individuals (Metcalf, 1995). According to Gruneau and Whitson (2006), professional hockey in Canada started with low attendance and low-ticket admission, resulting in low profits for teams. By 1900, promoters began working on marketing the games in a way that would be attractive to all classes and increase gate profits. This would result in teams being able to pay star players some form of salary.

According to Metcalfe (1995), the importance of winning began to have an impact on the actions of the amateur teams by the mid-1890s. Conflicts arose from teams using 'ringer' players who were professionals elsewhere. Metcalfe believes this intrusion of professional players led to the development of hockey as a commercial and spectator sport. Just a short amount of time passed in between teams marketing their team in order to increase gate revenue that players expected a share of the profits (Gruneau & Whitson, 2006). In 1904 the Sault Ste. Marie team had become Canada's first professional team when they joined the International Hockey League. In the last years of the 19th century, many team sports became successful spectator sports. Mason and Schrodt (1996) point to the emerging sport of roller skating which led to roller polo – close to what hockey on roller skates would look like.

By the 1870s, semi-professional athletes were touring various Canadian cities to participate in events that would result in cash prizes. Sports such as running, biking, and rowing

would hold competitions across the country and have events where spectators could purchase tickets to view. Toronto and Montreal became regular destinations for athletes from the United States to stop and would begin to bridge the gap between the Canadian and American sport landscape. This circuit professionalism led to the idea that team sport could operate the same way and travel from city to city to engage in competition with teams from other cities. Hockey was immediately brought into this circuit because of the number of rinks already built. The ability to add hockey games on the schedule was very lucrative for arena owners as they already had bands, carnivals, and boxing renting their venue, but a hockey event would add more revenue when the arena might otherwise be empty (Metcalf, 1995).

It was in March of 1892 when Lord Stanley, Canada's Governor General, introduced Lord Stanley's Cup, a championship trophy to be presented to Canada's best team and to highlight the importance of having games played fairly under universally accepted rules. The trophy would not be controlled by one league, but rather an independently challenged cup awarded by a committee of trustees. The introduction of Lord Stanley's cup is significant because it represented the first national hockey championship in Canada and still remains as the ultimate professional hockey prize. Although just the NHL now controls the trophy, the Stanley Cup is the oldest and longest standing championship trophy in all North American professional sport. The introduction of this trophy also sparked regional rivalries, which led to further coverage by the press and increasing amounts of spectators at games. Additionally, the Stanley Cup could be awarded to any team, amateur or professional, further fuelling incentive for teams to abandon amateur ideals and pay for the best players in order to have a chance at winning the cup.

Although it is argued hockey originated in Canada, the United States was quick to adopt it. In his research, Mason (1998) cites advances in transportation as opportunities for development in sport in the United States. In 1865, the United States had 35,000 miles of railway track and by 1900 this had grown to more than 242,000 miles. The U.S. already had a national affinity for sporting events and with a cold winter climate, and the new opportunities via travel to organize and compete in sport made the northern United States a potential location for ice hockey to be popular.

According to Mason and Shrodt (1996) the first hockey team in the United States was in Houghton, Michigan, located in the Upper Peninsula and in the infamous Cooper Country of Michigan. The town was incorporated in 1861 with a small population of 854 but the next 40 years saw wealth and prosperity come to the town due to large amounts of copper discovered. It was a working class mining region and sport participation was a diversion from harsh winters and tough days in the mine. The success of hockey as a spectator event led to the development of the Portage Lakes Hockey Club. They would play against other teams from the Upper Peninsula area and against the team from Sault Ste. Marie, Canada. It was games against Canadian teams that were highly anticipated and attended by locals and would often exceed the arena's seating capacity (Mason & Schrodt, 1996).

The Portage Lake Hockey Club took steps that would mark them as the first official professional team in North America. Even though Houghton was highly successful on the ice, fans demanded higher caliber games and closer competition. Most Canadian teams could not compete against them due to their anti-professional rules and fear they would be banned if they played with professional American teams. James R. Dee, president of the Houghton Amphidrome Company, wrote to other individual clubs in hopes of setting up an organized

league. Word spread, plans were made, and by 1904 the International Hockey League (IHL) was open and included the Portage Lake Hockey Club along with teams from Calumet, Pittsburgh, Sault Ste Marie, Michigan, and Sault Ste Marie, Ontario. Canadian players began to flock to the IHL and it forced Canadian leagues to pay their players to remain. By 1907 most Canadian hockey leagues paid their players and led to the creation of a professional organization, the National Hockey Association in 1910 that would eventually evolve in to the National Hockey League in 1917. The period between 1900 and 1910 was a critical growth period for the sport and the IHL was a significant catalyst for the rapid transformation of the sport (Metcalf, 1995). They provided a model of how an elite professional hockey league could be operated and forced the top Canadian amateur hockey associations to change their ways and move to professionalizing the sport.

Various leagues opened and closed in the first decade of the twentieth century but the National Hockey Association became the premiere league due to mismanagement in other leagues, having clubs in big cities that would attract the best players, and wealthy owners with money to spend on top talent. The league began with five teams in Ontario and Quebec and one of those teams – the Montreal Canadiens, is still a part of the National Hockey League and is recognized as the oldest and most successful club in professional hockey. In 1917, team owners met to discuss the future of their league. In this meeting, the owners decided to abandon the NHA and form a new league, the National Hockey League (NHL). The main reason for this decision was that Toronto owner Eddie Livingston consistently clashed with the other owners, making it hard for them to grow their league. They would bring their current teams over to the new league and start fresh, and most importantly not invite disgruntled owner Eddie Livingstone

to be a part of the new league. The NHL, and a new era of professional hockey, began on December 19, 1917 (Jenish, 2013). According to Jenish:

[The NHL] began its life with four teams clustered in three cities – Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto – has survived two world wars, a great depression and multiple recessions, the advent of radio, television and the Internet, not to mention the shysters and charlatans who have occasionally gotten hold of franchises. The NHL has endured nothing less than ten decades of turmoil, crises, setbacks and occasional triumphs, all which surely makes it one of the most remarkable stories in all of professional sport. (p. 385)

Over the course of this period, many developments contributed to the game growing across the United States and specifically in the Sunbelt region. Some examples include competition from the rival World Hockey Association, the rise of the violent 1970's Philadelphia Flyers, the trade of Wayne Gretzky to Los Angeles, and multiple labor dispute causing major changes in the economics of the game. A more detailed examination and timeline of the important developments can be found in Appendix A.

Despite all the growth and positive direction the league is headed in, they still face troubled franchises as in the past. In 2011 the Atlanta Thrashers were relocated back to Winnipeg and the Phoenix Coyotes have been struggling for many years. Jenish (2013) uses the Coyotes as an example to display Canadian's general attitude toward NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and the NHL movement:

It reaffirmed what many Canadians have long felt: that their game didn't belong in the U.S. Sunbelt. The sport they held sacred had been commoditized and treated as just another entertainment product to be packaged, branded, marketed, and sold to people who had no authentic connection to it or inherent interest in it. (p. 380)

However, the researcher cites experiences at a Carolina Hurricanes game as the contrary where people interviewed said they loved hockey as much as anyone in Canada and despite not growing up with the game, had become rabid fans. To better understand NHL fans and why they contribute to the growth of the NHL, an examination of the social motivation to consume sport must be considered.

Theory and Research on Social Motivation to Consume Sport

As noted, professional hockey has endured over a hundred years of highs and lows, yet it has remained a popular sport for public consumption. Why do individuals continue to support the sport? Spectator motivation and satisfaction theories and practices can give large insight into fan culture and help sport marketers develop a better relationship with their fans. One of North America's leading researchers in fan behavior and psychology, Wann (1995) developed the Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS). Through a series of questions, this scale determines the level of investment an individual has in a team and what specifically motivates an individual to consume that sport. The scale identified eight motivational factors for individuals to participate in spectator sport: eustress (feeling of excitement), benefits to self-esteem, diversion from everyday life, entertainment, aesthetics, economic value (gambling), need for affiliation, and family needs. In the original study it was noted that motivations could vary by sociodemographic status and by sport or activity. The SFMS shows that by understanding the various motivations for individuals to identify with teams, organizations can better understand their consumers and focus on those to attract new fans and maintain current ones.

Cunningham (2003) used the theory of planned behavior to better understand consumer's intentions to attend a Division 1 college hockey game. Through questionnaires to students who attended that college, Cunningham assessed previous behavior, attitudes, subjective norms,

perceived behavioral control, and intentions. His findings found some practical implications for sport marketers, especially for this hockey team. With the influence of subjective norms, the social aspect of the sport event is important in attracting people to attend. As well, a positive relationship between attitudes toward a team and intention to attend a game was revealed. Ideas such as creating a more social atmosphere at sporting events, group ticket sale specials, and customer loyalty programs, came from the study, as it's believed it could increase one's intention of attending the hockey game. Although there is significant research to show intent is a strong predictor of behavior (Ajzen, 1991) it is not known if those who intended to go to a game actually went.

The National Hockey League is interesting in getting more information on what motivates their fans to attend and has taken steps to do so. Levey (2008) developed a case study on the NHL's digital strategy to target fans that live outside their favorite team's city. The NHL's senior vice president of digital/direct marketing and fan strategy, Perry Cooper, estimated that half of NHL fans live far from the team they follow. He cited there are 20 million avid hockey followers in North America – 13 million in the USA and 7 million in Canada. Previous to this strategy, NHL teams maintained customer data individually and did not share it with other teams or the league. This generated a large amount of fan data that the NHL is using to create 'avidity scores' for every fan – a score to measure how passionate a fan is. They develop the score through a variety of consumer behaviors such as participation in fantasy hockey, merchandise sales, and subscriptions to online video streams. Through this they are still only able to generally divide between casual and avid fans, but their long-term goal is to design more specific fan cohorts and create marketing programs accordingly.

Zhang *et al.* (1996) analyzed a spectator's previous knowledge and how it was a predictor in attendance at an International Hockey League hockey game. They found that there was a positive relationship between a spectator's previous knowledge of hockey and their behavior and intention to attend the games. However, they noticed that spectator knowledge was affected by sociodemographic variables such as age, sex, race, income, education, and marital status. Participants who identified in different sociodemographs were found to respond differently in how they learn about the game of hockey. The researchers suggested that education of the game of hockey could be accomplished during the in-game program by holding a knowledge contest, a video show on hockey knowledge, public address announcer's comments before games and/or during the intermission of games. As well, they suggested that the improvement of spectator knowledge of hockey should be a large part of a marketing plan for professional hockey teams. They said it is especially relevant for people who are making decisions about a new product for the first time. In addition to this analysis, the researchers discovered differences between sociodemographic variables. They found that these variables affected the exposure and understanding of spectators to hockey games. For example, older male spectators who were Caucasian, married, with higher education and middle to high income tended to be more knowledgeable about hockey than other spectators. This led them to suggest that women and ethnic minorities could be a good demographic to educate about hockey and increase the motivation to attend games. This can be applicable to Sunbelt markets as there are large Hispanic populations in states such as Texas and California.

With a focus on the South East region, Zhang *et al.* (2001) examined the decision making of spectators who attended a minor hockey game in that area. They built on Smith (1995) who first identified differences between hockey fans in various regions, but since that study just

interviewed hockey executives, the researchers thought it would be important to get data from the spectators themselves. In this study, the researcher found that variables falling under categories of game attributes, game convenience, and home team were the most influential in motivating spectators to attend the games. These results suggested fans were motivated by the entertainment and game experience factor as opposed to actual on ice content. The researchers acknowledge that the amusement and enjoyability of the experience is probably more important to the spectator at a minor league game than winning, game result uncertainty, and opposing team which could be more influential for major league sport.

Wakefield and Sloan (1995) acknowledged that while strong team loyalty affects attendance; stadium design and stadium services also directly influence spectator's desire to stay and attend more games in the future. Through various factors such as crowding, food service, quality, fan behavior control, stadium parking, and stadium cleanliness, a sport organization can improve fan attendance regardless of how successful a team is when it comes to wins and losses. They also concluded that these results could be especially important for teams in small markets, as stadium factors are something within their control. Factors such as market size, competitors, and team performance are out of control of the sport marketer, but enhancing the stadium experience is important to building a loyal fan base that keeps coming back. However, they acknowledged that in order to get them into the stadium in the first place, building team loyalty is crucial. They cited promotions that reinforce spectator's involvement in the team, making team members accessible to the general public, and discounted first time tickets as ways to begin that loyal relationship.

Limited research has been done on motivation factors of attending NHL games, and very little on building a long term relationship with a fan beyond a single game. Some examples of

individual game attendance studies include Bae (2003), Coates and Humphreys (2012), Nadeau and O'Reilly (2006), Teed, Deply-Neirott, Johnson, and Seguin (2009), and Paul (2003). What leads to those motivations to attend individual games is how an individual identifies with the product, or team. A better understanding of self and social identity can help bridge the gap between an individual attending one game and developing a long-term identity as a fan of a team.

Self and Social Identity as a Sport Fan

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) can be considered when examining sport fan's identification with teams. Social identity is part of an individual's concept of their own self. It comes from memberships in social groups and the value associated with being a part of this group membership. Individuals create a shared social identity through membership in a social group, such as a sport team's fan base, and internalize the values and beliefs of the social group as their own.

There is a wide spectrum on how strongly an individual can identify with a sport team. Those low on involvement have a passive relationship with a sport team and are likely attracted to the entertainment value, social interaction opportunities, or stress-relieving qualities (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Those on the higher end of the involvement scale can be extremely loyal, holding that team's success and failures as part of their central identity. Most of the time this loyalty is long term and is supported by significant time and financial commitments (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). Gwinner and Swanson (2003) examine three areas in which to predict team identification from: prestige, fan associations, and domain involvement. Participating in spectator sport can create a sense of community. Perceived prestige involves one's need to belong to a collective identity, which is made up of community pride by linking a

team to the community via history, symbols, and shared goals. The researches related perceived prestige of a community to how one enhances self-esteem by identifying with their University based on how prestigious it is. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) say identifying with a team in your home community that has a history of excellence can create stronger identity because it can be considered prestigious.

Fan associations covers the idea that the more contact a person has with an organization, they will identify with that team stronger. They are more likely to define themselves as a member of that team and the longer they identify with that team, the identity will become stronger. Domain involvement is the idea that an individual can also show interest in a particular sport genre, or league, in addition to their specific team. Gwinner and Swanson (2003)'s study illustrates that one's team identification is stronger when the individual is more highly involved with the domain of the sport.

According to Wann and Branscombe (1993) in order to maintain self-esteem, highly identified individuals are consistently evaluating in-group members more positively than out of group members. This highlights the importance of these influences of identification as it pertains to consumer behaviors and corporate sponsorship. If corporate sponsors associate themselves with an individual's group, or team, that individual could associate that sponsor as one of their group members and be more willing to consider a sponsor's product (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Amoit, Sansfacon, and Louis (2014) conducted a study on how the normative and social identification process affects hockey fans in their behavior toward members outside of their group, or fans of other teams. They assessed fans that identified with the NHL's Montreal Canadiens and found a strong positive relationship between the perceived norm in favor of out-group derogation and motivation to engage in derogatory behaviors against fans of other teams.

This is in line with Social Identity theory, however it may not be as extreme in samples from other NHL teams. The Montreal Canadiens are one of the longest and storied franchises that have a reputation for passionate and rambunctious fans. With stronger levels of team identification, it could be expected these results would emerge but it could differ in lesser-established markets.

Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) developed a framework for different levels of fan identification and the motivations and benefits of such identification. They divided fans into three groups with key characteristics associated with each level: Low, Medium, and High identification. Low identification is for social fans that are low on emotion, financial commitment, and involvement, but a relationship does exist. These fans may be more attracted to sport entertainment than the sport or team itself. Medium identification is a fan's association based on some attributes or elements found to be attractive. They have some achievement developing desires and may be mostly attracted to the 'big event' which can sometimes lead to higher levels of identification but could also fade away if there is poor team performance or a star player is traded. The high identification are vested fans who have the strongest, most loyal and long term relationship a fan can have with their team. The success of the team reflects personally upon these fans as well as on the collective identity of the community. Their study concluded that community affiliation is the most significant correlate of fan identification. It is potentially the most important factor in building fan identification and can have the strongest long term effects.

The community affiliation is derived from friendship and bonding motivations and is highlighted in the Cialdini *et al.* (1976) study of college students and the phenomenon of "BIRG" (Basking in Reflective Glory). In this study, respondents used the term "we" to describe a team

victory but would use the term “they” to describe their team’s loss. Also, it was revealed there was an increase in students wearing school-related apparel after team victories. Sutton *et al.* (1997) identified four ways in which teams could fans who would BIRG. They suggested increasing team/player accessibility to the public, increase community involvement activities, reinforce the team’s history and tradition, and create opportunities for group affiliation and participation.

Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2001) believed that sport marketers do not maximize customer identification strategies to fully grow their brand. Their research highlighted areas in which sport franchises could build brand awareness, image, and loyalty to have financial success regardless of the team’s win-loss record. They use Rifkin’s (1999) example of how the Boston Red Sox were an enduring brand for decades without winning a championship. They identify the group experience, history and tradition, the role of the physical facility, and ritual as the four characteristics the sport environment promotes social identity. The group experience in sport can be a unique experience characterized by a sense of belonging that spectators feel and an inherent bias against out-group members. As it relates to building a brand, being a season ticket holder, a member of the booster club, and a participant in other scheduled events develops strong consumer relationships. Many organizations integrate the team’s history into their core branding strategies. These teams have unique traditions and play on the nostalgia of days past to promote the current team. Typically this is associated with teams who have long established roots and have celebrated championships making it challenging for NHL teams in the Sunbelt states to play into this way of identity. According to the research of Fisher and Wakefield (1998), newer franchises could attain that sense of tradition by linking their team to the history of that sport.

Underwood *et al.* (2001) also believe the physical space (ballpark, arena, field) serves as a tangible and visual representation of the team's brand. Its function is to foster an atmosphere that is aligned with the group identity. They use the example of sitting in Wrigley Field, home of baseball's Chicago Cubs, as more than a seat located in the sun; it is a summer ritual, a way of life. In this, it also relates to their fourth characteristic of ritual. These are patterns of behavior that are social in nature and where things can be shared together. In order to be most effective, rituals must be different than one's every day routine in order to invoke past experiences, be automatic behavior but have the awareness it is meaningful behavior, and have a strong sense of community as a foundation. Combining these characteristics, sport organizations can build strong fan communities leading to more brand awareness and loyalty from consumers.

After the lockout and lost season in 2004-05, the NHL went through a large re-branding process. The NHL had a reputation for poor marketing campaigns in the past and the league faced the challenge of winning back disgruntled fans and re-building their brand. The Sunbelt teams faced even more challenges as they were still fairly new and hadn't built the tradition and expectation of having NHL hockey every winter like other markets. High priorities were developing innovative initiatives that created awareness and a renewed sense of excitement. An analysis was done on elements of the marketing campaign – 'My NHL' by Batchelor and Formentin (2008). A main part of the strategy was having the fan feel like they were part of the league or a team. An example, the Ottawa Senators used 'My Sens' as a slogan and other teams joined in using it as an opportunity to have a cohesive league wide image of unity.

Building, or re-building, a brand and 'fan nation' is essential in the long-term success of a sport franchise. Foster and Hyatt (2008) believe that the building of a fan base shouldn't be limited to just within the city where the team is based. They argue that with today's growing

technology, sport franchises should target a more global audience and build a fan community of both local and distant loyal fans. The researchers point to the example of Real Madrid of the Spanish Primera Division in European football who has an estimated 150 million supporters worldwide. Developing these ‘fan nations’ is more important than selling out one game, or maximizing concession stand purchases. The unpredictability of sport will often lead to peaks and valleys in team revenue, but it is those who remain strongly connected to a team that generates the most revenue in the long run

Potential members of Foster and Hyatt (2008)’s fan nations are individuals in the first three stages of Funk and James’ (2001) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). They believe the key to building a fan base from a distance is to invent tradition. The researchers cite a case study of the Edmonton Oilers NHL team in the 2006 playoffs as an example of how to build a distant fan base. The Oilers deliberately aligned their hockey club with other Canadian symbols in order to appeal to the entire country. They created a tradition of the crowd singing the national anthem instead of the usual anthem singer and soon videos of that scene were being spread across the country online and on sports clip shows. It’s elaborated that this is a good example of supporting local fans and provided all Canadians who were not aware of the team to experience these traditions and be a part of the Oiler’s fan base. In the next season, all three Canadian teams that made the playoffs also adopted this practice.

Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) concept of brand community can apply to sport fans and ‘fan nations’. Brand communities are a community of individuals that are formed on the basis of attachment to a product. In the case of sport, it’s a particular sport, team, and/or athlete. The researchers identified three key elements of brand communities: 1) consciousness of kind, 2) shared rituals and traditions, and 3) moral responsibility to the brand. This concept suggests that

a company's brand can grow stronger based on interactions consumers have with each other and the community they build within themselves that is centered on their common identification of a company or product. Research on the effectiveness of brand communities has shown that strong brand communities positively led to increased consumer-brand identification (Cova & Pace, 2006; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). In a study on sport fans specifically, Yoshida, Heere, and Gordon (2015) found that attachment to the fan community explained the largest amount of variance within team identity. As well, the research highlighted that fan community attachment was the only significant predictor of continued attendance throughout the year. This theory and research on brand communities show that how fans build a community amongst themselves is just as important as actions taken by the organization when it comes to having a strong fan base.

With this understanding of self and social identity as a sport fan, we must then consider the socialization process and how that identity is formed in the first place.

The Socialization Process and Identity Formation

What this research is concerned with is how the fan's identity originated and the factors that contribute to that process. Sport fans in the southern United States have a long history of sport such as baseball, football, and motor sports, so how do hockey fans find hockey and choose to identify with a hockey team despite all the sport history and competition surrounding that team? Most NHL teams in the Sunbelt states are no older than 20 years old and fans may not have been 'born into' being a hockey fan like fans in other regions. Identity origin is important because sport fans reinforce identification with the team by engaging in supportive consumption behaviors.

Wann *et al.* (2001) state that identification formation starts with socialization and the factors that contribute to identity formation are called socialization agents. Socialization is the process of learning to live in and understand a culture or subculture by internalizing its values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms. With sport fandom, we are specifically concerned with the process by which fans learn and accept the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of the sport fan and team culture. This culture includes learning the jargon, the history, player statistics and the history of the team. According to the researchers, there are two main factors to consider before beginning research and reaching conclusions on fan identity formation. First is that the socialization process differs from one sport to another and among different demographics. The researcher believes that since the sport fan socialization process is related to culture, class, and ethnicity it has three important implications for future research. First is in order to determine how the sport fan socialization process differs across various sociocultural contexts, cross-cultural research should be conducted. Second, components of the socialization process need to be documented as either universal or situation specific. Third, researchers must be careful not to generalize their findings to groups that were not represented in their sample. The second factor to consider is that much of sport fan socialization studies are several years old and maybe out of date. The patterns and observations in some of the earlier research may not reflect the attitudes of current sport fans. There have been many changes in the demographics among sport fans that there is not one particular study that can be generalized and still be fully relevant today.

As mentioned in the introduction, McPherson (1976) conducted one of the earliest studies on sport fan socialization and concluded that an individual's family, peers, school and community were the main influences in his participant's sport socialization process. This research also found there were different factors and responses between male and female

participants. This study is an important base for future research on sport fandom and the socialization process.

Jacobson (2003) created a three-tier model where fandom is created and maintained. The study collected quantitative surveys and followed up with qualitative interviews to examine participant's reasons for following the NFL's Washington Redskins and grouped responses into the three tier model. The first tier is the socialization stage where the researcher believes is the traditional way individuals become fans of a team. This includes influence from parents at an early age and peers at school or in the community. However, not every individual may have socialization experiences so they fit into the second tier – the socio-cultural tier where they become fans because of influences such as media, mass merchandising, or marketing. For those that don't fit into either tier fall into the third tier, the symbolic tier. This is where individuals may become fans because of specific factors to the team, such as team colors, logo, name, or personnel. The researcher notes that these tiers are not independent of each other and they aren't progressive in nature. The tiers follow a circular nature where individuals will create a fan identity beginning in one tier but use the remaining two to enhance and maintain their fandom.

Wakefield (2007) cites involvement, performance, attractiveness, social prestige, and distinctiveness as the five factors that are influential in the formation of a sport fan's identity. Each of these five elements are cognitive in nature, they are what the individual thinks about related to the sport and team. Involvement speaks to how familiar the individual is with the sport or organization. Without participating in or having any previous knowledge about that particular sport, one cannot identify with a team. There are two types of involvement – enduring and situational. Enduring is an ongoing interest with the sport on a day-to-day basis where the fan

will follow the league closely and consume media related to it. Situational is based on the circumstances of the event itself.

Performance is the next factor in what leads someone to identify with a team. Winning and losing streaks can affect day-to-day attendance at sporting events, but it is perceived performance that can influence someone's identity as a fan. The perceived performance is often close to actual performance, but it is contingent upon the reference point of the fans. Teams with a long history of success such as the New York Yankees or Manchester United may be viewed as a failure if they don't win the championship that season. On the other hand, traditionally underperforming teams may be viewed as a success if they put a winning record together and just make the playoffs one year. The team's history plays a role in this relationship and for teams without long histories or winning traditions, fans have to overlook objective performance records and focus on either relative performance or other identification factors.

Attractiveness refers to the overall perceived social value of being associated with the team or individual. Attractiveness is an overall combination of all the attributes one associates with a team and it matters what others important to the individual think about that group of fans. It is difficult to remain closely identified with something or someone that others find unattractive. Previous research has shown that we find those who are similar to us as attractive and individuals choose friends based on these similarities (Bryne & Nelson, 1965). The types of similarities that can be attractive are many, but among them include values, personality, and demographics. This comes into play for sport marketers when it comes to positioning and personnel. Wakefield cites the San Antonio Spurs and their fan base that care about the values of the organization and their players. The Spurs recognize this and have guidelines regarding the type of players they acquire and make sure they fit into the team's philosophy and will not embarrass the team or city with

any off the court incidents. Some teams such as the Pittsburgh Steelers or Cleveland Indians work to acquire players who fit in with the hard working blue collar identity of their respective cities. The level of contact a fan has with a player on the team can influence the perceived attractiveness of the organization and lead to a stronger identification. The more familiar one becomes with a player, the higher is the likelihood they will want to watch the player on TV or attend a game. The longer one is exposed to the team and the players; there will be more opportunities to interact and be tied closed to the organization. Players who make themselves available above from the typical interviews and public appearances can have an even larger impact than what they accomplish in an actual game. With the popularity of social media, athletes can connect with fans in a more personal level and influence the fan to identify more closely with the organization.

Social prestige and acceptance originates from three main sources: family, peers, and community (including the city, state, and national level). Some fans choose to identify with a team because of their reputation from outside of that fan base. Even though one may not be a fan of a team like the Los Angeles Lakers or New England Patriots, they are often viewed as prestigious fan bases to be a part of due to consistent and sustained success with large and passionate fan bases. Teams of other fans such as the Chicago Cubs or Toronto Maple Leafs accept to be followers of losing teams but it doesn't provide much social prestige outside of those groups of fans. Perceptions of social acceptance are connected to the extent to which individuals in the community feel as though they have ownership of the team. In the literal sense, community members of Green Bay own a portion of the team, and the Dallas Mavericks encourage fans to have direct contact with the team owner Mark Cuban by advertising his personal e-mail address to allow their voice heard directly by ownership. Teams who are new to

the community could struggle to increase the social prestige of their team in the community. Wakefield suggests ideas such as encouraging players to move into the community, acquiring players with local connections, and deploying marketing strategies around the idea that it's 'your team'.

Distinctiveness is the degree to which one differs from others in ways that provide social status and that enhance self-esteem. According to Festinger (1954), we instinctively compare ourselves to others and look for ways to distinguish ourselves in terms of power or success. Sport teams that do things differently from others will gain notice and could influence higher levels of identity. Wakefield uses the example of the Houston Texas who have had only had one winning season prior to 2011 but are still among the top 10 most valuable sport franchises in the world. They separated themselves from others by offering unique game day experiences and built relationships with fans that lead to higher levels of identity.

In research by Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996), dozens of reasons for identification emerge. However, there are a few reasons that stand out and are more common than others. They surveyed college students and asked them why they originally began and continued to follow their current favorite sport team. They were also asked to list the reasons why they stopped following a formerly favorite team. The four most common reasons for originally following their team were because their parents were supporters of the team, the talent and characteristics of the individual players, geographical reasons wanting to support the local team, and influence of one's friends and peers. Further down the list at fifth most common was the success of the team. However, the success of the team was the most common response when asked why they continue to support the team, and a lack of success was cited as the main reason for discontinuing one's identification with a formerly favorite team. Their study shows that team success is important in

maintaining one's identity, but it isn't necessarily important in gaining that identity in the first place.

Jones (1997) found a different pattern in identification origins when researching the motivations of English professional football fans. When asked why they continue to support their favorite team, success was not the primary reason. Instead it was geographic reasons and feeling the need to support the local team. Surprisingly, the success of the team was ranked as the fourteenth most common reason. A similar study by Uemukai, Takenouchi, Okuda, Matsumoto, and Yamanka (1995) also found geographic considerations as the main reason for continued identification in Japanese football.

In their study on the role of sport fandom as a determinant of male and female popularity, End, Kretschmar, and Dietz-Uhler (2004) found a major difference between male and female perspectives. They asked participants to rank certain personality traits in terms of what they felt would make a female and male well-liked by others. They included determinants such as physical attractiveness, taste in music, and wealth among others to take the focus off of the sport fan aspect. Their results showed that 'being a sport fan' was perceived to be a more important determinant of popularity for males than females. Participants ranked 'being a sport fan' as the third most important popularity determinant for males in comparison to the seventh, and least important popularity determinant for females. Being a sport fan was ranked as the most important popularity determinant for males more often than it was for females. The discussion that came from this study was that there can be differences in the socialization of males and females and the impact societal expectations may have on the development of one's sport fan identity.

Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, and Jacquemotte (2000) examined the differences in gender when it comes to sport fan behavior and reasons for being a sport fan. They conducted a study among college students and found that an equal number of male and female participants considered themselves to be sport fans but males identified more strongly with being a fan than females. They found that males engaged in more sport fan behavior such as discussion on sport and watching sport but when it came to attending actual events, females were fairly close to males in amount of sport events attended. When it came to why they identify as a sport fan, females were more likely to report being a fan because they attended and watching sporting events with friends and family, while males were more likely to consider themselves to be fans because they played sports and wanted to acquire sports information. The results reported that 10.1% of females reported they enjoy watching sports with friends and family as a reason they identify as a sport fan, while only 5% of males reported that reason. Overall, the study showed that males and females are equally likely to consider themselves to be sport fans, but females appear unlikely to engage in all of the behaviors that the researches used to describe a sport fan (engaging in discussion, consuming sport media, owning memorabilia, ect..). They generalized that for females in their study, being a sport fan means attending, watching, and cheering at sporting events, preferably in the company of family and friends. For males in their study, being a sport fan means playing sports and acquiring sports information.

Frederiksen (2003) expanded on McPherson (1976) and added a fifth socialization agent, mass media. The researcher included this due to the growth of the media since the original study and takes into account the creation of 24 hour sport cable channels such as ESPN and the Fox Sports Network and how this has dramatically increased the influence of the media as an agent of socialization into sport. This study took a different spin on identity formation and was

retrospective in nature. The researcher notes that socialization experiences occur before the development of sport fandom and team identification, but the intent of this study was to predict people's past socialization experience from their current levels of sport fandom and team identification. In this study, levels of sport fandom and team identification were the independent variables while the socialization measures were the dependent variables. The study also took a look at the difference between male and female participants. The findings of the study suggested that participants with higher levels of sport fandom typically reported having more socialization experiences related to sport than participants with lower levels. It also showed that it was more likely that people with family and friends who are fans of a particular team also become fans of that team more often than people without that exposure. The participants with higher levels of identification with a specific team generally had more socialization experiences pertaining to that team than participants with lower levels of team identification. When it came to differences among genders, the results indicated a main effect for gender on the sport socialization measure, but not on the team socialization measure. The results suggested that the more socialization experiences related to sport participants received, both men and women, the more likely both men and women to become sport fans and to identify strongly with one particular team. But the main difference was found in that men tended to have higher levels of sport socialization overall than women. The researcher pointed to the common perception that in American culture, there is more pressure placed on young boys to develop and display masculinity than is placed on young girls as a possible reason for the difference. "The cultural emphasis placed on masculinity among young boys is likely to be influential in the tendency for men to report having more sport socialization experiences overall than women" (Frederiksen, 2003, p.22).

Koch and Wann (2013) hypothesized that fans who self-selected their favorite team would report higher levels of team identification in personal identity, affective commitment, and calculative commitment. For fans that were socialized to prefer a team were expected to report higher levels of team commitment in the areas of social obligation and regional tribalism. In general, the research supported this hypothesis and showed differences between male and female participants as well. Their investigation found female fans reported significantly more socialization than male fans, which goes against the results found in Frederiksen (2003). The study references Seeley, Gardner, Pennington, and Gabriel (2003) who found that women value groups for the relationships built with others while men also value that in addition to being a part of the collective identity of the group. The researchers suggest that women may often become fans as a way to bond with their socialization agents and men may become fans both to bond with their socializing agents and to be a member of the group of fans. This aligns with Dietz-Uhler *et al.* (2000)'s findings that sharing the sport fan experience with friends and family is a major reason for females identifying as a sport fan. As well, the study identified differences in identification depending on the age of the participant. The study found that older participants tended to actively choose their favorite team while younger participants reported more socialization. This could also be applied to fans of new or expansion teams so there are fewer socializing agents for older fans and would need to actively self select that team to identify with. Their study did not try to find out why some fans who self-select their favorite team were less likely to report being socialized. The researchers speculate that some fans might gain initial awareness from a socializing agent, but later actively choose to identity as a fan of that team. The example they use is of an individual choosing to attend a college where her parents both attended and support that college's sport teams. The individual was aware of these teams, but her identity

as a fan was cemented by her own decision to attend the school and consider herself a self-selected fan.

Parry, Jones, and Wann (2014) examined how sport fans in the United Kingdom developed as a sport fan and the socialization agents that were powerful in their formation to a fan of a specific team. The researchers identified parents, friends, school, and community as the four greatest factors as potential socializing agents and asked participants to rank their impact on a Likert scale to see which ones had the greatest influence. They also included an open ended question to allow participants to identify the most influential person or entity in their decision to be a sport fan. The study found that family members, in particular fathers, were most often listed as the primary socialization agent. They also found that males were more highly identified as sport fans and were more engaged in fan related behavior, in line with Dietz-Uhler *et al.* (2000). With similar findings, de Groot and Robinson (2010) conducted a case study on the development and growth of an Australian football (soccer) fan and found themes of family and peers to be very influential in this fan's socialization.

Keaton, Watanabe, and Gearhart (2015) compared the identification factors between sports with team as a point of attachment (college football) and sports with an individual athlete as a point of attachment (NASCAR). In general, geography and family were found to be important antecedents of college football team identification while media influence was the highest reported consumer identification with NASCAR drivers. The researchers suggest that geography may not influence identification with a NASCAR driver because there is not necessarily a "home field" for their drivers and their home town. These geographic connections are replaced by loyalty to sponsors and products because the driver's uniforms and cars draw attention to beer brands and car manufacturers instead of cities. Since NASCAR is a prominent

sport in the Sunbelt states, this sponsorship identification may be more of a factor for hockey fans in this area as opposed to fans from other regions. The study conclusion suggested that in order to encourage identity with a team, sport managers could expose one particular star of the team and tie in sponsor endorsements to attract those who identify with products and sponsors to identify with that team.

There is a gap in the literature on how the socialization process occurs for NHL fans specifically. Hyatt and Foster (2015) conducted a study on the opposite end of the socialization spectrum and examined the factors that contributed to NHL fans deciding to un-identify with their team and become a non-fan. However, there needs to be more about how NHL fans, especially in a growing area like the Sunbelt, socialized into being a fan of a team in the first place. Wann *et al.* (2001) say that although socialization has a large role in fan identification, one still needs some motivation to identify as a sport fan. The researchers use the example that often in households there can be one sibling who is highly identified as a sport fan but another one does not care about sport. They both went through a similar socialization process, but the results were different. However, as Wann *et al.* (2001) notes, there is a large amount of research on those motivations but a large gap in research on the socialization process and why that identity is formed.

Summary: What is Missing and Next Steps

Wann *et al.* (2001) suggests three paths that could be especially helpful in furthering our understanding of why people become sport fans. First is the “data on the sport fan socialization process and the relative importance of various socialization agents are almost nonexistent” (p.50). At the time of publication, Wann *et al.* (2001) noted all but one study of the socialization process studies were conducted before 1981. Second, the possibility of group-level difference in

sport fan socialization should be explored. Since members of various racial, ethnic, and class groups often experience different socialization processes there may be different identity formation patterns. An understanding of fans across multiple groups could help discover fan motives not previously identified. Third is finding ways to improve and expand the motivational scale. Wann *et al.* notes that most studies use the Sport Fan Motivational Scale and while it has been an effective tool, relying so much on just one tool could hinder in future discoverers. Wann *et al.* encourages researchers to continue to refine and build on the tool while using new methods as well. The research expanded on further areas for research and says more theoretical models need to be developed. Specifically to this study, understanding the impact of unique factors contributing to the formation of NHL fan identification leading to fandom and consumer behavior needs to be better understood. The next step to get there is a grounded inquiry approach to study tangible factors that are unique for NHL fans in the Sunbelt region. This could be initiated with a qualitative investigation to identify themes and trends and followed up by quantitative studies to narrow in on specific factors and differences among regions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methods that were used to investigate how fans of NHL teams in Sunbelt states formed an identity as a fan of their team. This is a qualitative study as the topic has an emphasis on an individual's 'lived experience' as a sport fan. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) note that qualitative data is "fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them (p. 11). This research philosophy could be considered interpretive constructionism within the naturalist paradigm, as there is an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The goal of this research was to learn about NHL fans in the Sunbelt region and how they make meaning of their fandom in the non-traditional hockey setting they live in. The 'lived experience' in this case is the socialization process the individual went through and time spent as a fan that lead to their strong identity. To make sense of their lived experience, the study examined what the NHL as a league has done to attract fans and learned about what factors contributed to the formation of that identity for the fan.

Case Study

In order to achieve these goals, a case study was conducted (Yin, 2013). The case study method was implemented because it allows for the researcher to narrow in on a specific issue and gain insight on a specific topic (Yin, 2013). The first part focused on analyzing sport managers who work with an NHL team in the Sunbelt region in order to better understand strategies teams

are using to build a fan base. Moreover, it will provide insight on fan culture in their area because of their unique perspective as an insider of the organization. The second part delves deeper into understanding the fans themselves and examined their process into NHL fandom. The case study method was the most effective for gaining this understanding because a case study “is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and contexts are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2013, p. 13). The examination of a specific region such as the Sunbelt warrants a case study because the context for the NHL building a fan base is very different than in other regions of North America. This research investigated the contemporary phenomenon of NHL fandom in the specific context of the Sunbelt region. Although the nature of the research involves a small sample size, case study research has been proven to be a suitable method for theory building (Siggelkow, 2007). Since it is a newer region for NHL hockey, the context of fan identification is not clearly evident and a case study approach can help define the boundaries between the phenomenon of NHL hockey and the identity formation process their fans go through in the Sunbelt region specifically.

Data Collection

A combination of interviews and archival documents provided the foundation of the case study on fans of NHL Sunbelt teams. Interviews were the primary source of data for this research project. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), qualitative interviewing produces highly credible results: “Every conclusion is tightly linked to solid evidence, all embedded in a context” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 64). Semistructured interviews with sport managers and fans of the teams were used to collect data for this research. This approach featured an extended conversation between the researcher and interviewee where the researcher prepared a limited number of

questions in advance and asked follow up questions. It allowed for a more narrow focus on the planned items that speak to the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This study interviewed five managers who are currently working with NHL teams in the Sunbelt region and 20 individuals who identify as fans of NHL teams in the same region. These numbers were chosen after research reached saturation. Saturation occurred when the researcher was no longer hearing or seeing new information. (Miles *et al.*, 2014). The data from the interviews were supplemented by available literature and theories about motivation to consume sport, self and social identity, and the socialization and identity formation process. Some interviews were conducted in person, however, due to geographical limitations some were conducted via telephone or online video conference. Like de Groot and Robinson's (2010) study on the socialization process of an Australian football fan, this study relied on conversations and open-ended questions. The next section provides a break down of the interview process.

This study had interviews with five managers who work for NHL teams in the Sunbelt States and 20 fans of teams. The sport managers in this sample were recruited via e-mail with information found on team websites. The letter asking managers to participate in the study can be found in Appendix B. Phua (2010) conducted a study with the goal of finding a relationship between highly identified sport fans and how much sport media they consume, and if so, which medium is the most used. The research concluded that the stronger one identifies with a sport team, they are more likely to consume sport media and online media was found to have the greatest impact on fan identification. From Phua's study, it could be suggested that online communities of NHL teams in the Sunbelt would be a good place to find highly identified fans willing to participate in the study. Fans were recruited to participate via postings on popular hockey fan online communities within reddit.com. Reddit was chosen because it is the ninth

most visited website in the United States on a daily basis (Alexa Rankings, 2016) and each NHL team has a subsection of the website, known as a ‘subreddit’, dedicated to discussion around that team. Each team’s subreddit has 1,700-10,000 subscribers, and the general hockey subreddit has over 240,000 subscribers. The large number of visitors and subscribers in the reddit online community provided an acceptable venue to attract a diverse sample for this research. The letter asking fans to participate can be found in Appendix C.

Once participants agreed to participate, a time and date was arranged to conduct the interview and the participant was provided with the research information and consent forms found in Appendix D and Appendix E. The interview was recorded with an audio recording device and upon completion of the interview; the audio file was uploaded to the researcher’s computer for transcription and analysis. The questions and format of the interview was designed and conducted using guides from Rubin and Rubin (2012). Questions started out specific to get information about the demographic and background of the participant and eventually moved to a more open ended conversation.

For managers, the following information about that person was asked: age, ethnicity, gender, education level, country, state, city of origin, job level/title, years working in sports, years working at the NHL level, other positions held. After gaining general information, the interview turned to open ended questions on how the manager thinks people become fans of NHL teams in general, what the organization is currently doing to attract new fans, what the organization is doing to maintain current fans, and what he or she thinks the next steps are to grow the NHL fan base in unconventional markets. Appendix F shows a full list of questions for NHL managers.

For fans, the following information about that person was asked: age, ethnicity, gender, education level, country, state, city of origin, marital status, children, occupation, years as a sport fan, years as a hockey fan, years as an NHL fan, previous favorite teams, years as a fan of their current favorite team. The interview then turned into more in-depth open-ended questions about their fandom. Appendix G shows a full list of questions for fans.

There were standard questions that were asked of everyone, however individual anecdotes volunteered by participants were included and not replicated by every participant. As well, there were follow up questions depending on one's answer that were different for each participant.

Data Analysis

Analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. This allowed the researcher to cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for new and possibly better data. It also allowed for the possibility to collect new data to fill in gaps found in the emerging data (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Interviews were transcribed from the audio recording after the interview using transcription guidelines and techniques from Miles *et al.* (2014) and Rubin and Rubin (2012). For example, one technique that was used as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2012) was to eliminate filler words such as 'umm' or 'uhh' and focus just on the words spoken. For this study, speech mannerisms are not relevant to the research so the transcription focused on just the words spoken. However, nonverbal events that might influence the interpretation, such as laughs or shrugs, were included in the transcript. To protect their identity, participants were assigned a pseudonym. Computer software ExpressScribe and ExpressDictate was used to assist with the transcription of the interviews in to a Microsoft Word document and the transcript was then sent to each participant to confirm its accuracy. Then, information was

uploaded into Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software ATLAS.ti to organize data and help identify key themes and patterns. Using Miles *et al.* (2014) as a guide, an inductive two-level open coding process was used in order to create overarching themes without a predetermined list of themes. The first cycle of coding consisted of writing words and phrases that identify with specific categories or descriptions of the data such as ‘socialization process’ or ‘fan activities’. The second cycle focused more on narrowing down the first codes into more specific codes. For example, under ‘socialization process’ some more specific codes such as ‘parent influence’ or ‘media influence’ were illustrated and then reflected in the paper. Since this topic had never been researched before, inductive coding was the primary method of coding, using some other codes from established studies as supports. For example, codes from origin factors found in Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996) were used. In this study, researchers examined the reasons individuals originally, continue to, or stopped identifying as a fan of a sport team. The methods and findings of Wann *et al.* (1996) had shown to be a study that is high in reliability and validity and has been used in other prominent fan identification related studies (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Funk & James, 2006; Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wann *et al.*, 2001). Examples of identification factors that were used as codes include: ‘Liked a player’, ‘Proud of community’, ‘Played the sport’. To ensure accuracy of the analysis, triangulation techniques such as double-checking interviews, integrating previous research and theories, and an examination of promotional materials was used. As well, I attended four live games and visited the city and arena of two others during this period of research and was able to cross reference data collected with personal experience.

Format and Timeline

Information gathered was grouped together to identify themes and patterns in fan development for these NHL teams. An individual examination of the manager's responses and the fan's responses occurred. A case study was created following a linear-analytical format as outlined by Yin (2003). Each participant group is separately presented in the results section, followed by a cross analysis between the manager's results and the fan's results in the discussion section. The discussion chapter identifies key points that were common themes in both groups as well as identifying any disconnects between each group. The information was compared with existing literature and used to formulate a fandom model these fans go through and suggestions on how teams can use this model to grow their fan base. This information could also be used as a precursor to a quantitative study where a larger sample of fans are asked questions based on patterns and themes found in this study. Interviews took place through November 2015 – January 2016 and data analysis from January 2016 – April 2016.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The data collection process and triangulating of the multiple data sources led to many relevant themes and patterns. Results from the NHL manager participants highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their respective marketplace, their organization's general philosophy on building a fan base, and specific initiatives their team is overseeing to attract and maintain fans. Results from the NHL fan participants focus on their fan activities, factors that contribute to their enjoyment of hockey as a sport, their socialization into fandom, and reasons they maintain their fandom.

NHL Sport Managers Results

About the Participants

Interviews were conducted with five sport managers from the nine teams in the region. Teams represented were the Arizona Coyotes, Carolina Hurricanes, Dallas Stars, Florida Panthers, and Tampa Bay Lightning. Participant's age ranged from 27 to 47 years old with an average age of 33.0. All participants have at least a bachelor's degree, and one has an MBA. Four participants identified as male, and one as female. Their experience working in sports ranged from 3 to 25 years and 1 to 9 years at the NHL level specifically. Four of the five participants only have sport work experience with the NHL, and one has an extensive resume beyond the NHL including working with the United States Olympic Committee and Major League Baseball. Although all participants didn't originally set out to have a career in hockey, all grew up as hockey fans. Coyotes' executive Alan grew up a Devils fan in New Jersey, Hurricanes' middle manager Toby grew up in North Carolina cheering for the team he now

works for, and Lightning front line manager Claire began watching hockey in Sweden as a child rooting for players such as Peter Forsberg and Mats Sundin. All participants are directly involved in the marketing, community relations, and/or fan development of their organization. A full chart on the demographic information from this group can be found in Appendix H. Their responsibilities are diverse and include amongst many things: organizing community events, crafting the game day experience, and mapping out the long term marketing plan and vision for the team. Some key themes that emerged from these participants that will be discussed are strengths and weaknesses of their market, general philosophies on building a fan base, and initiatives to attract new fans and maintain current ones.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Market

Strengths and weaknesses of each market influenced each organization's philosophy on building a fan base. Some common themes in participant's market weaknesses were the other competition in the market, a lack of history or tradition, and lack of playing experience amongst their city's population. For strengths of the market, participants often spoke about the transient population, market size, and their unique game experiences.

For market competition as a weakness, football was one major competitor that often came up. Stars' executive Stuart pointed out: "the south is all about football, football, football pretty much all the time". Thomas, mid level manager for the Florida Panthers, also highlighted non-sports related competition in his market:

There's so much to do. You're in competition not just against the Heat, Dolphins, and Marlins; you're competing against the Heat, Dolphins, Marlins, the beach, South Beach, Ft. Lauderdale, all the different shows that come down here, concerts. I think we have that battle where our competition isn't just another team in the market, it's the culture, and it's the life out here.

Lack of history and tradition of the sport of hockey is also a challenge in these markets. Claire from the Lightning compared Tampa's situation to a more established hockey market like New York: "The Islanders won four Stanley Cups, they are very well known. The Rangers were an Original Six team, so they were really well known. Hockey has had all these years there, whereas here [Tampa Bay] we're kind of playing catch up". Toby from the Hurricanes spoke about how hockey is part of the every day culture in more established markets:

You grew up and you kind of had those memories of either going with your parents or out on a date or something and you went to the Sabres game, the Penguins game, and you had a great time. You can't remember the score to save your life but you remember you had a great time.

The general theme that came from participants was that in more established hockey markets, hockey is more than a sport, hockey is just part of every day life. As part of that, sport managers noted that most of their potential new fans haven't had experience actually playing the sport. Thomas from the Panthers pointed to the accessibility of other sports like baseball or soccer which are cheaper to play than hockey, and Alan from the Coyotes said that since their fans may lack playing experience, they see the game in a different way:

Here, there are some people that played and certainly there's a lot of people who have moved here who have played, but by and large people know the game as an entertainment vehicle, less a game that they intimately know the rules and the context of it.

For positives, most participants felt that their organization could benefit from the fast growing population of individuals relocating to their market from northern areas. These individuals may already be fans of hockey as a sport and they could use this as a good starting point. Toby from the Hurricanes touched on that idea:

Wake County is growing tremendously. I think it's around 64 individuals who move to Wake County each day and so you have a lot of people that are familiar with hockey and they are fans of Buffalo, or Pittsburgh, or Detroit, and it's hard to break those but ideally we want them to become season ticket holders.

These transient hockey fans played a role in the fan building strategy of most organizations in this study.

As well, most of these markets have a large media reach, perhaps larger than some of the more traditional hockey markets. Alan dismissed the idea of the Coyotes being a 'small market' team: "[Phoenix] is the 11th biggest market in the United States and I believe it's the 8th biggest market in the NHL. So it's not a small market, there are 4.1 million people that live just in the metro area". Stuart from the Stars said their reach goes beyond just downtown Dallas and stretches through 7 cities and 20-30 towns.

Lastly, unique game experience was a variable that often came up as an advantage for these markets. Stuart from the Stars noted that since fans weren't caught up in tradition or history, their in game experience could take more risks and try new things that have worked to successfully build the team's voice and identity in the market. These strengths and weaknesses shaped the general philosophy for building a fan base.

General Philosophy on Building a Fan Base

Although all of the participant's organizations differ in specifics, there were some common themes in how these organizations aim to build a fan base. Specifically, these themes are a grassroots focus on young children, developing a personal relationship between the team and fans, and to become ingrained in the local community.

A target group of young children who are still forming impressions was something all organizations shared. Thomas from the Panthers compared building a fan base to building a house:

It's a lot easier to build a house on just a piece of land than it is to tear down a house and build it up. So if you're a fan of the Bruins, it's a lot harder for me to make you a Panthers fan, however if you have no prior affinity to a team at all, it's very easy or blank slate.

Alan from the Coyotes shared a similar viewpoint and discussed how important it is to gain young fans, even if their parents are fans of another team:

The natural thing for parents to want to do and what we try to do is teach parents how misguided that is and instead offer them the opportunity to have their kids rooting for the hometown team, the kid's hometown team, the same way that the parents had the opportunity to root for their hometown team growing up. And so that's been the basic premise we chose. If we don't do that, if we allow these kids of transplants to grow up rooting for their parent's favorite team, then we'll have lost an entire generation of fans that really perpetuates the challenges that we would face now because we're a newer team.

As well, these organizations look to build a personal relationship with fans, something that might not be as easy to do in larger, more traditional markets. Thomas from the Panthers described the philosophy as “one fan at a time, it's building a face-to-face relationship with someone”. Toby from the Hurricanes mentioned that it is important in Carolina to make being a Hurricanes fan feel like you're part of a family. They even make it a priority to treat non-Hurricane fans at games like a guest in their family. Claire from the Lightning spoke about how their fan motto of “Be the Thunder” reflects how they push for a more personal and intimate relationship with fans. They want fans to feel like they a part of something special, which is also reflected in their recent change of calling season ticket holders, season ticket *members* instead.

The importance of community was another key theme in the general philosophies, often stemming from ownership. Toby from the Hurricanes spoke about how community impact has been a priority for owner Peter Karmonos since the Hurricanes came to Carolina. The Hurricanes make it a point to get local businesses involved, as do the Dallas Stars. Claire from the Lightning often brought up owner Jeff Vinik and how he stresses the importance of a community impact that goes beyond just hockey: “Our owner here is so passionate about how fortunate we are to be

where we are, not to take things for granted, to spread the love of hockey, but also just the love of doing good”. Beyond hockey, all of these teams are involved in community events that relate to anything from art, charities, schools, hospitals, and other sports. Being a part of the local community was very important to these teams in building a fan base.

Although these teams have been around for almost 20 years, all participants said their general philosophy and marketing direction is relatively new. The length of their current direction ranged from 1 to 6 years, with the average being around 3 years. These results can suggest that the way fans in this region consume sport have changed over the years and the sport is viewed differently now than it has in the past. Thomas from the Panthers highlighted that point:

Three years ago we just kind of became an expansion franchise in a lot of ways and it’s a rebrand on the company. And it’s not a slight at old ownerships and its not a slight at old people who did the job, it’s a different culture; it’s a different lifestyle.

Current Initiatives to Build the Fan Base

Executing on their general philosophies, these organizations have various initiatives to attract new fans to their team. Like their marketing philosophies, some specifics differ but key trends emerged. These common initiatives usually surrounded education of the sport through school programs, supporting ice and ball hockey participation, and unique promotions and contests.

Participants spoke about the importance of having a presence in schools and educating children about the rules and culture of the sport. They have various programs in schools to accomplish that; the Hurricanes will even travel to schools in any county in the state that requests them to. Beyond just teaching them about hockey, these teams often have partnerships with schools to help support educational initiatives. For example, the Panthers support a healthy

eating habits program in south Florida schools by bringing in their mascot for presentations and fun games that help educate kids about healthy food choices. Also, the Lightning and Hurricanes support a reading program in local schools where students earn rewards for reading books such as team merchandise and game tickets. Thomas from the Panthers highlighted the importance of having a presence in schools:

It's getting these kids at the age of 5, having Stanley [team mascot] high fiving them on their first day of school – to like second and third grade they're getting healthy habits, to our STEM education program future goals hitting them in middle school, to the ball hockey hitting them at the end of elementary school. To high school getting involved in DECA and different things, getting tours of the arena, understanding what we do, understand the jobs they want to pursue and they may want to work in sports if they want to work in sports – letting them know, so all of a sudden part of your life is the Florida Panthers. From the time you were five until you're 18 the Panthers have always been involved in your school, you learned how to play hockey because of the Florida Panthers, you learned about exercising and you learned if tomato is a fruit or vegetable from the Florida Panthers.

Hockey participation was also a major initiative participants spoke about. Stuart from the Stars noted that playing the sport contributes to individuals becoming fans: "Getting people to play the sport of hockey, it's a really good way to be truly connected with the team." The Stars own seven rinks in the area and offering services such as figure skating, youth hockey, adult hockey, and free learn to play programs for kids. As well, some organizations promote youth hockey teams such as the travel team the Hurricanes support and the youth league the Coyotes sponsor. Part of that is teaching kids to play, but part of it is also growing the brand of the team. Alan from the Coyotes described how his organization accomplishes that:

We have programs we established this year with all of the local rinks where every house league team gets Coyotes jerseys to wear and they are in different colors. So it's the red Coyotes vs the black Coyotes, green Coyotes vs orange Coyotes, so every kid in that house league gets to wear and keep their Coyotes jersey. So we are constantly putting jerseys on the backs of kids.

Increasing hockey participation goes beyond just the traditional ice hockey. Most of these organizations have hosted ball hockey tournaments, sledge hockey, and had an increased focus on youth girl's hockey. These organizations realized the limitations their market provides in terms of access to ice and have looked for other ways to increase participation in the sport. Claire from the Lightning described it as a "stick in hands motto" which highlights their eagerness to have individuals try the sport in some capacity.

Unique promotions and game experiences are also a large part of participant's organizational initiatives to attract new fans. All of the participants spoke to the idea that they didn't need or want to conform to traditional hockey marketing and had opportunities to think outside the box and try new things to attract fans. One example is the 'Bolts for Life' program in Tampa where a contest winner will receive a new Lightning jersey every year for 30 years. The Hurricanes tailor their promotions to build a more personal relationship with the fan where they offer prizes that include meet and greet with players, behind the scenes arena tours, and personalized memorabilia. The Coyotes started a jersey exchange program this year where parents can trade in a NHL jersey from any other team and receive authentic kids Coyotes jerseys for every child they bring with them. This promotion fits into the general philosophy Alan from the Coyotes spoke about for his organization:

Certainly parents have an influence on that [sport fandom] but also it's inherent that since the dawn of time where kids are looking for an opportunity to rebel against their parents. We feel like we're perfectly positioned to say "hey, I can tell you this over here, if you're rooting for the Coyotes, you're not rooting for your dad's team, your dad's original six team".

The idea of pushing fresh and exciting experiences is also reflected in the unique game experience from the Dallas Stars. At their home games, they take risks that don't fit in the mold

of traditional hockey game experiences to create a unique experience only found at their games which focus on comedy and popular culture:

He [In-Game Director] is really good at going across the full spectrum of different types of comedy, different types of editing, using Star Wars references, or Breaking Bad references, very fun popular culture and making sure to do things that are going to hit a maximum possible number of people during each game to make them want to come back and think, man even though maybe the Stars lost 3-2, but there was like 6 really funny things that happened during the game. So we're focused on doing that. Part of that is because we're in a non-traditional market and also we've had a bit of a struggle on the ice for the past 6 or 7 years. This year we're doing really well so we don't have to kind of play that part up as much but when you're struggling on the ice you have to do things that are a bit out of character for a traditional hockey team to try to get people to still come back even though maybe the product on the ice isn't exactly what they want to see.

Maintaining a Fan Base

Although most of the focus on fan development was focused on new fans, these organizations also spoke to maintaining and solidifying a long-term fan base beyond their initial socialization into fandom. Results on what the organization is doing to maintain people who are already fans showed a heavy focus on season ticket holders. The organizations offer perks for individuals to continue being a season ticket holder or to upgrade to more expensive packages. Such perks include access to private practices, meet and greet sessions with players, and discounts on merchandise and concessions. There was rarely a mention of initiatives to maintain current fans who aren't season ticket holders or who are distant fans.

Future Outlook

As mentioned earlier, each organization's marketing direction is fairly new and most participants spoke to how they are constantly looking to refine their strategy. Claire spoke about how that is important to the Lightning:

I think our team does a really good job of being innovative and listening to fans because we get a lot of feedback because we encourage it. That's all we want is feedback because if you have an idea where you think we can improve, we want to hear it. But our

organization has from since I've been here, been incredible at adjusting and seeing and things like that and progressing.

For a general outlook on the future, all participants shared an optimistic view of a growing fan base in the future. Many felt confident in the direction coming directly from ownership and that a strong owner is crucial for their future success. As well, most participants noted that the on ice product for their team is very strong and will remain so for the near future. Most said that it's important to capitalize on current success to attract new fans, as it's easier to do so when the team is doing well. They shared a common view in that the future looks bright for their team and they think they are on their way to growing an even stronger fan base. Most future initiatives were specific to each organization without an overlying theme across all the teams, but they included ideas such as loyalty programs, an increased focus on data analysis, and using technology more effectively and efficiently. The next section will discuss data collected from the NHL fans.

NHL Fan Results

About the Participants

Interviews were conducted with 20 fans of the nine teams in the Sunbelt region. Each team was represented by at least one participant. Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 39 years old and the average age was 26.0. Six participants identified as female and 14 as male. Of them, 18 participants are currently in college or hold a college degree, two have Master's degrees, and two reported high school as their highest level of education. Occupations of the participants were diverse and included such professions as teacher, engineer, photographer, web developer, and students. The majority of participants reported they were single with no children while a few were married with children. There was a divide between local fans and distant fans as 12 participants currently live in the market their team is located while eight would be considered

distant fans who live 100 miles or more from their team's home arena. A full chart on the demographic information from this group can be found in Appendix I.

Fan Activities

All of the participants self-identified as highly identified fans of their NHL team and spoke about many different ways they engage in their fandom. The most common response was attending home games. However, to highlight their high identification levels, participants noted they engage in online social activities, watching almost every game on TV or through online streaming, going to away games, purchasing team merchandise, attending team community events, attending team's minor league games, listening to the game on the radio, attending season ticket holder special events, collecting memorabilia, and one participant even has a tattoo of the San Jose Sharks logo on their arm.

After attending home games, online involvement was the second most common response for participants when speaking about how they engage in their fandom. Predators fan Amy writes for a fan blog. She takes screenshots from the game and writes frame-by-frame analysis of important plays for other fans to better understand what is happening in the game. Mark is a co-host of a Sharks podcast that discusses each Sharks game and takes questions from listeners via Twitter on topics they want to hear more about. Lightning fan Elizabeth has a Tumblr page where she posts interesting photos and insights on her team, and Andrew is a moderator on an online discussion forum for the Dallas Stars. In addition to these, most participants mentioned they enjoy being a part of the Reddit online community where they can discuss the NHL and most are active on Twitter to follow team reporters, league and team news, and their favorite players.

Reasons for Liking Hockey as a Sport

Using variables from Wann (1995)'s Sport Fan Motivation Scale, participants leaned heavily toward aesthetics, entertainment, eustress, and benefits to self-esteem as reasons they enjoyed hockey as a sport, beyond just their own team. Aesthetics was the most common response and Panthers fan James described the sport of hockey as "poetry for my eyes". A major contributor to participants enjoying the aesthetics of the sport was the speed of the game. Participants would often compare hockey to other sports such as football and baseball where there are many stoppages in the play, claiming hockey has a better flow to the game. Coyotes fan Paige explained that comparison:

When I would compare it to football, football being my second favorite sport, football is a 60 minute game too but if you pay attention during the game and if you kind of take note of it, you're really only watching 5-10 seconds of play for every 40 or so seconds of time in between plays that they are lining up, discussing the play in the huddle. Whereas hockey the full 60 minutes that's on that clock, hockey is being played. There are breaks in hockey, but you're getting 60 minutes of play but with football realistically you're getting just 6-10 minutes of actual football.

This was a sentiment shared by many participants. As with the entertainment factor, it was star players that would often come up as a reason participants felt the sport of hockey is entertaining. Jeff mentioned the Wayne Gretzky years in Los Angeles as particularly influential to him being drawn to hockey, and Stephanie mentioned being inspired by Teemu Selanne as a major reason she fell in love with the sport. Goal scoring contributed to the reason for eustress among participants, some noting that a goal in hockey changes the game more so than in other sports. As well, Cialdini *et al.* (1976)'s theory of BIRGing and CORFing was prevalent among participants who enjoyed hockey because of self-esteem benefits. Panthers fan James noted "When the Panthers lose, it kind of ruins my day" and Coyotes fan Paige said "watching them lose gets you down, watching us win is like the best feeling in the world". All of the participants

considered hockey their favorite sport and had various factors that contribute to that. They also spoke to the factors that led them to identify with their favorite NHL team.

Socialization into Fandom

The most common socialization agents participants cited were community, first experience at a game, team success, media exposure, influence from parents, and influence from friends. None of these factors stood out more than any other one and were fairly evenly represented.

Many participants who live local to their team felt pride for their city and were influenced to become a fan of the hockey team because of its association with the city. Lightning fan Owen said: “It’s like a real civic pride, proud of my area and all that. That’s what being a fan of the Lightning is for me”. Mark, who is a Sharks fan, especially felt civic pride since the Sharks were San Jose’s first and only major professional sport team. They didn’t have to be lumped in with Oakland or San Francisco and finally had a team to call their own:

It’s a source of civic pride for San Jose because I guess we kind of have that chip on our shoulder that we’re the little brother to Oakland and San Francisco and so it’s like San Francisco has the Giants and the 49ers and Oakland has the Raiders and the A’s and San Jose, south bay wasn’t really known for a lot of sports because we didn’t really have any. Then when the Sharks came we really attached to that. That’s why if you ever make it out there you can understand why hockey works there – it’s because they did a great job with taking root on the civic level.

Some others were hockey fans in general before picking an NHL team to root for and decided on their NHL team because they were local. An example is Jane who attended an East Coast Hockey League game in Fort Wayne, Indiana, found she enjoyed the sport of hockey and wanted to follow it at the major league level. So she picked the Kings because she is from Los Angeles. As well, Paige was a casual hockey fan when she lived in New York but when she moved to

Arizona she wanted to follow the NHL more and decided to become a Coyotes fan because they were local.

Often the participant's first game experience was because a parent or friend took them to a game, but is its own distinction because those influenced by family or friends could have happened in the household outside the control of the organization, whereas sport managers can control the game experience. It is the parent or friend who may have brought the new fan into the door, but it was the game experience itself that was cited as a major factor in becoming a life long fan of that team. Noah mentioned the party atmosphere at the American Airlines Center as a reason for his fandom: "I went to one game and the arena was like a party. The music selection was off the wall, the DJ was a really cool guy, he takes pictures with everybody". Amy attended the first game in Nashville and Austin was at the first game in Carolina. Both felt that they were a part of something special by being at one of the very first games in the organization's history.

Team success was another common theme in why individuals originally became a fan of their favorite team. It didn't necessarily have to be a Stanley Cup victory, but many participants noted key playoff victories or consistent regular season success as what caught their attention about their team. Oliver and Jeff both spoke about the LA Kings playoff run in 2001 when they upset the favored Detroit Red Wings as when they started to become highly identified Kings fans. Alex mentioned that living in Nashville, he decided to become a Predators fan because the alternative professional sport in Nashville is the NFL's Tennessee Titans who have had a long history of poor results, where the Predators have made the playoffs consistently.

Along the lines of Frederiksen (2003), media exposure was found to be a common socialization agent among participants in this study. Frederksen (2003) cited factors such as 24 hour sport programming as a reason media exposure was becoming a prominent socialization

agent. However, it was found that participants rarely spoke about media exposure via television. Most of it was through online sources, mainly social media. Elizabeth noted that the Lightning's twitter account caught her attention and Paige spoke about the videos the Coyotes share through their social media as what endeared her to the team. Noah mentioned that when he subscribed to the NHL's online game streaming service NHL Game Center (now NHL.tv), his interest in the Stars began to rise and solidified him as a hardcore fan. Other forms of socialization media exposure included films and video games. Stephanie said she loved the Disney Mighty Duck film series, influencing her to become a Ducks fan, and Sharks fan Paul and Stars fan Noah said their earliest exposure to the NHL was through the EA Sports NHL video game series.

There were various fan backgrounds of the parents of participants, but many cited their parents as individuals who influenced them to become a fan of their team. Parents of participants can be described as either originally from the Sunbelt region, originally from a more traditional hockey region (Northeast or Midwest region) and relocated to the Sunbelt, or never lived in the Sunbelt region. From there, parents either kept their allegiance to their old team after relocation, adopted the new team after relocation, became a fan of hockey along with or because of their child, or are not a fan of hockey at all. It was also fairly common to see parents of participants keep their allegiance to their original team while adopting the new local team as a secondary team, keep their original team as a secondary team, or claim they support both teams equally. Some like Amy, Daniel, and Austin had parents who were originally from other regions of the country and had NHL allegiances before the Sunbelt teams existed but switched allegiances when the new team came to existence. Others such as parents of James, Andrew, and Jeff are from the Sunbelt region and they didn't have a favorite team previous to the Sunbelt team existing. As well, there are some such as parents of Paige who maintain their fandom of a team

from outside the region. Either way, all those individuals cited their parent's fandom as a factor that led them to becoming an NHL fan. They recalled watching games on television or attending games in person as early memories with their parent that influenced their fandom.

For some fans who didn't have parents as an influence, they had siblings or friends that contributed to their socialization. Stephanie said her brother took her to her first Ducks game and she enjoys talking about the Ducks with him. Emily is a Sharks fan because her friends are season ticket holders and they started bringing her to games. Lightning fan Daniel noted his friends he grew up with as influential, similar to Kings fan Oliver who said:

I went to a bunch of different schools during that time and the school I settled in I made friends who was playing hockey and was interested in hockey so I started playing roller when I was about 12. Then one of my best friends came to the school in fifth grade and it seemed like me and him were both Kings fans and there was some other people and then we started a roller hockey team at my school. So I guess that's kinda why I became interested in hockey more so than any other sport because I associated with guys who liked hockey.

The most common socialization factors for participants were civic pride, first experience at a game, team success, media exposure, influence from parents, and influence from friends. These factors led participants to identify with their team in the first place, but various other factors contributed to their long-standing fandom and life long commitment to the team.

Maintaining and Solidifying Fandom

Some factors from the socialization process, such as civic pride, were factors that led to continued fandom for participants, but there were new factors such as an attachment to the players, new friends made through fandom, being a part of the NHL fan community, and introducing others to the sport that were influential in the participant's continuing fandom.

Civic pride, particularly for long distance fans, was a common response as to what contributed to fan's continuing fandom. For example, Mark is a Sharks fan who lived overseas

for a number of years and said through his fandom, he was able to feel closer to home by discussing the team with family and friends over the phone. Upon returning to the United States, Mark relocated to San Diego and enjoyed representing the Sharks in a different city:

I'll go out on the town and I'll wear my Sharks jersey or I'll wear a Sharks sweater or a ball cap or something like that just because I'm proud of being from the Bay area and it's a piece of me. So really I identify with it from being from home.

Another example is Amy, who is originally from Nashville and is a Predators fan, but now lives in Connecticut:

I think honestly the fact that I've been a fan outside of the region has really been a part of that. I mean outside of the fact that I just enjoy the sport in general, but like being able to say that I'm a fan of a relatively unusual team in places like Chicago and Boston and Connecticut, and having people be like "Really? Why are you a Predators fan?" There's sort of a little level of pride there and kind of being unusual, I do kind of enjoy that conversation its always fun to have.

These experiences allowed Mark and Amy to solidify their fandom and led them to stronger levels of identity.

An attachment to individual players was a common response for participants when asked about what keeps them identified as a fan of the team. Panthers fan James described it as an "emotional attachment to the players themselves". Lightning fan Daniel mentioned that over the past 15 years, the Lightning have continuously had marquee players such as Vincent Lecavalier, Martin St. Louis, and Steven Stamkos who he could identify with and gave him reason to continue being a Lightning fan. Kings fan Jane is a particularly big fan of defenseman Alec Martinez and she even purchased a jersey with his name on the back. He's not an all-star player or a household name, but Jane identified with him strongly because he's an underdog and felt that he deserved some fans as opposed to Dustin Brown or Jonathan Quick who are more common jerseys among LA Kings fans. She said she really enjoyed getting to know the players on a more personal level through their reality TV show that featured a behind the scenes look at

the players lives, something that Predators fan Amy and Ducks fan Stephanie also said they enjoyed about their team. It is not just star players who have endeared themselves to participants, but also it is players who fans have felt they have gotten to know on a personal level through reality TV shows or social media that have led to the attachment that contributed to participants continuing to identify with the team.

Creating new friendships through team fandom was another common factor that carried fans from their original socialization to solidifying them as a lifelong fan. Predators fan Henry went out of state for college and met one of his best friends because of a mutual love of the Predators:

Up here at school actually, the reason I found one of the other kids at college whose from Nashville is because I was wearing my Preds jersey one day and he was wearing his and we spotted each other on campus and I went up and met him and talked to him and now we're pretty good friends, it was pretty cool.

Hurricanes fan Joseph met new friends at games and tailgates, and now meets up with them regularly to watch Hurricanes games at bars when they are playing on the road. Another Hurricanes fan, Austin, bought a single season ticket but said he doesn't feel like he's going to the games alone because he's met a lot of new friends who are also season ticket holders there. It's not only at games that participants met new friends through their fandom. Many of them commented on friends they've made online whose relationship helped them solidify their fandom. Kings fan Jane said she first visited the online community Reddit to read articles and get news. Eventually she started posting her own comments and building relationships with other posters who she now considers friends. Sharks fan Paul made friends through conversations about the Sharks on Twitter and his friendship with them now extends beyond just talking about hockey. These new friendships led to a sense of community, which was another common reason participants maintained their fandom, they enjoy being an NHL fan and part of that fan culture.

The culture of being an NHL fan often came up in conversation with participants and was a point of pride for most of them. Most participants felt proud that they were an NHL fan because they felt like it was a secret, exclusive club and that the NHL fan community is a very welcoming, inclusive, and exciting environment for them. NHL fans in the Sunbelt also experienced a feeling of distinctness since it is less common to be a fan of the NHL as opposed to more popular leagues such as the NFL, NASCAR, MLB, NBA, and NCAA. This was a factor for participants that stretched beyond the fandom for just their own team. Sharks fan Mark said:

So really as far as the NHL on the whole I'd say it's a big camaraderie thing and as far as your local team or your team that you're attached to whether it be the Sharks or if you're a Kings fan or a Ducks fan, it's just being part of a smaller family, a more tight knit community.

Coyotes fan Paige noted that sense of camaraderie which Mark mentioned is unique to hockey: "I love hockey communities because it seems like no matter what team you follow you can connect with hockey fans everywhere; whereas with football you don't really get that". This type of common ground that NHL fans shared is built on a welcoming and inclusive environment that is touched on by Lightning fan Elizabeth:

The community just for hockey as a whole has been very inclusive and very educational which is really nice. I know certain [groups], no matter what it is, whether it's a sport or like a game, or like a craft or a hobby, sometimes when you're new to something the community that surrounds that thing could either be very inclusive and welcoming, or they could be like oh you don't know what you're doing, you don't know what you're talking about and it kind of excludes someone or makes them feel unwanted – so that's been really wonderful.

Most participants pointed to the sense of belonging they get from the online community of NHL fans as being particularly influential in leading them to become more strongly identified as a fan. Reddit, Twitter, and Tumblr were online venues that stood out the most among participants. A major reason most participants turned to online communities was because their real life local community lacked people who were as knowledgeable about the team as they were. Predators

fan Amy highlighted the importance of her involvement in the NHL online fan communities, especially Reddit:

For a long time I was just involved with the Predators fanbase online which was – I really liked being able to kind of have that discussion about anything, whether you think this is good or that's bad or whatever and different line combinations and that was something that I had always felt like I bored other people with, where I was like oh this is so interesting and they were like "I don't really want to talk about it this in-depth". So finding that community where I could do that was really exciting. And then when I discovered Reddit, I was like "Oh my God", with especially on /r/hockey – there's 200,000 other people who are also interested in having that same level of discourse. And it's more or less in an intelligent way haha! But yeah, that was, I really liked being able to kind of expand that to the entire league. I feel like I'm much more informed about a lot of other teams now, just even if it's knowing little tidbits here and there but I feel like I have a better grasp of the game, I have a better understanding of which teams are doing well and why or why not. That's due to that large community.

Hurricanes fan Joseph has been involved in the NHL online community for a number of years and felt that this culture is very unique to the NHL when compared to other sport leagues:

I think very early on, so going back to kind of when I first got involved. I think it was the first league of the major four or five, depending how you view it, that really gravitated toward an online culture. There was a very early message board presence back in the late 90s that kind of shifted over, they became early adopters of all the social media and when you see that they and all the sports I think really hockey was the first ones to really latch on to it. So there were relationships with people I know that, hockey writers that started as message board posters 15 years ago that are working for major media outlets now.

Through these online communities, participants were able to develop a sense of belonging that they could not find in their community in reality. This sense of belonging was a very common sentiment shared by most participants and being a part of this unique fan culture was a prevalent theme in what has helped participants maintain their fandom.

A large part of this culture is the pleasure and excitement participants got in inviting new people into this fan community with them. Almost every participant mentioned that they have influenced friends or family to become fans, most intentionally and some unintentionally. Hurricanes fan Austin described how he has influenced others: "I feel like people have no choice

but to feel it when they're around me I guess. I feel like its pretty infectious. It [Fandom of Hurricanes] is probably one of the most important things in my life". Jeff, Mark, and William mentioned they influenced significant others to become fans, Elizabeth and Andrew got roommates into the sport, and Paige led the way for her grandfather to be a hockey fan. Stars fan Noah described how that idea is ingrained in the culture of being an NHL fan: "Every good hockey fan evangelizes others to come". Not only did participants enjoy getting others to be fans of the team as well, many felt that it was their responsibility as an NHL fan to be a gatekeeper of the game and socialize others into fandom as well.

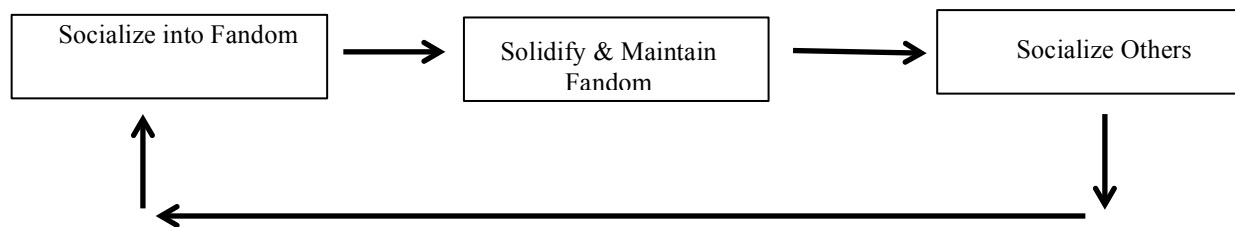
The results from NHL fans studied showed that these participants were drawn to the sport of hockey based on factors of aesthetics, entertainment, eustress, and benefits to self-esteem. Most were socialized into the sport through community, first experience at a game, team success, media exposure, and influence from parents or friends. Common themes that were factors in participants solidifying and maintaining their fandom were civic pride, team success, attachment to the players, new friends made through fandom, being a part of the NHL fan community, and introducing others to the sport.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Before a full discussion of these results can occur, it must be noted that these results are culturally specific. Although it contains comparisons to previous studies, the population examined is unique and may not be applicable to other sports or other NHL markets. Also, even though the teams examined are all lumped into one group as ‘Sunbelt teams’, each market within it contains their own cultural uniqueness and specifics can differ from city to city. Although the specific context is unique, general themes and key trends emerged in this study. In this section, a discussion of the research results will take place followed by an analysis of practical implications for sport managers and the theoretical contribution of this study. Based on the results of this study, a model of fandom for NHL fans in the Sunbelt is proposed, shown in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5. 1 –Model of Fandom Identity Formation for NHL Fans in the Sunbelt



Although results of the fan identity formation process are in line with previous studies (McPherson, 1976; Wann *et al.*, 1996; Wann, 2001), it is the emphasis of those concepts that makes this study unique. Previous literature focuses on the socialization and maintaining fandom, but this study takes the next step in discovering how current fans can be an important piece in socializing a new group of fans. Various influences contribute to the socialization of the fan,

followed by different factors that solidify and maintain the fandom. Those factors build up to the individual being a member of the NHL fan community and a large part of that is influencing others to become a fan. This model follows a circular nature where individuals will create a fan identity in the first stage, but the next two enhance and maintain their fandom while acting as socialization agents for others. Following this model could allow for NHL teams in this region to grow a larger fan base, or build a new fan base from scratch, utilizing their own fans as marketing vehicles.

Participants had various influences that contributed to their socialization but common factors included civic pride, first experience at a game, team success, media exposure, influence from parents, and influence from friends. They shared some common factors from McPherson (1976) such as influence from family, friends, and community, but rarely did participants in this study have exposure to the NHL at school. Interestingly, most sport manager participants mentioned that having a presence in local schools is a large priority for them. As well, media exposure was a common theme, which is consistent with the findings of Frederiksen (2003), although the type of media that influenced participants was different. New factors were also influential for study participants, which included team success and experience at their first game. Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996) found that team success is important in maintaining one's identity, but not necessarily important in gaining the identity in the first place, but in this study the opposite appears to be the case. The NHL seems to have acknowledged this and have begun outlining the expansion draft process for a potential Las Vegas team that will allow them to have a more competitive team right away, unlike previous expansion teams (Lebrun, 2016). After their initial socialization, key themes and patterns emerged in how they solidified and maintained their fandom and team success wasn't as important as other factors.

The factors that were important in solidifying and maintaining identity for these fans included attachment to the players, new friends made through fandom, being a part of the NHL fan community, and enjoyment from socializing others into NHL fandom. These factors could be considered part of the attachment and allegiance stage of Funk and James' (2001) Psychological Continuum Model. These factors led the individuals to recognize the benefits of being a fan and understanding the collective, functional, and symbolic meaning. According to their research, this is where the influence of socialization agents decreases and the internal process of their fandom becomes more important. This internal process leads to a larger impact in the decisions and behaviors of their fandom. The key factor in maintaining fandom, that is important to the proposed model, is the enjoyment participants get in socializing others. The idea that not only do they enjoy it, but they felt a responsibility to introduce others to the game is a unique element of NHL fans in the Sunbelt region. It creates an opportunity for this model to exist and loop continuously in order to attract new fans and build a bigger fan base for these markets. A more in depth discussion on each stage of this model follows.

Socialization into Fandom

Organizational Priorities

Appealing to young children was a common theme in results from sport managers. Specifically, they place importance in having a presence at local schools, getting children involved in playing the sport, and making their game experiences a family oriented event. However, it was rare that influence from school was important in socialization for fan participants. Most mentioned they didn't know anyone else at school that was also an NHL fan or it was just a small group of people. Ice hockey experience was not very common, but when combined with other forms of hockey, half of the participants had some experience, although

some began to play because of their already established identity as a fan, not necessarily contributing to the socialization process. Some had ice hockey playing experience such as Amy who played in Nashville, Jeff, William, and Oliver in Los Angeles, Joseph in North Carolina, and Daniel in Tampa Bay. The rest who cited playing experience played either ball hockey or roller hockey such as Austin in North Carolina, James in Miami, and Andrew in Dallas. As mentioned in the results, most of these organizations have a relatively new marketing direction with a focus on presence in schools and playing experience, so these participants may have already been too old to be impacted by the efforts of these organizations. As well, a general theme among sport managers was that they aim to make their game experiences oriented to family and want a family friendly image for their team. There may be a disconnect here as the average age of study participants was 26 and the large majority were single with no children. The reasons commonly cited for enjoying the game experience included an energetic crowds, loud and exciting music, and making new friends at the game. The argument could be made that these individuals are already fans and don't need to be targeted to become new fans, but if so many currently highly identified NHL fans in the region are mid 20s with no children, maybe this is the type of demographic that is more likely to attach themselves to an NHL team and continue to consume the product long term. Some teams such as the Hurricanes and Lightning offer occasional college student ticket discount programs, but there are not many other initiatives geared to the age demographic that match those of the study. This isn't to say that appealing to young children isn't an effective strategy, as many participants became socialized as children, and some did have playing experience, but it could be suggested that teams should diversify their target market focus and find ways to attract new fans who are in their mid 20's and are looking for a 'party' atmosphere at games.

Media Exposure

Media exposure, as noted by Frederiksen (2003), has been an emerging socialization agent for sport fans over the past couple of decades. The researcher focused on the growing popularity of 24-hour sport television as a main factor, but the type of media exposure for participants in this study was almost always online. Influence from newspapers was a non-factor as very few participants could comment on the team presence in print media citing that they don't read newspapers. Most distant fans subscribe to the NHL's online streaming service, and many local fans also subscribed because they do not have cable television at home. As well, some mention that their team's social media caught their attention in their socialization process and played a role in them becoming a fan. Ducks fan Stephanie and Kings fan Jane highlighted reality television shows about their team as an early influence in them becoming an NHL fan. Individuals in this study seek out specific media content they want instead of watching whatever is being broadcasted in their local television region or what appears in the local newspaper. Customized and interactive media content is essential for NHL teams in this region to be able to socialize new fans with a media influence. Some have begun doing this, and Alan from the Coyotes discussed the importance of fans being able to interact with the team:

It's really important. It's not just the numbers of followers, I mean certainly we want to grow that but only authentically. For us, we're measuring and gauging our success on the degree to which people are engaged in active engagement, which we define as commenting, sharing, and retweeting. Not just liking or anything like that, which is more passive engagement. But people are actually taking our content and sharing it across their platforms with comments is what we measure. That's a big part of it – a big part of how important social media is for us.

In order to continue growing the sport in the Sunbelt region, interactive and customizable media is essential in an organization's long-term plan.

Secondary Teams

Influence from parents was a common socialization agent among participants in the study. It's in line with previous research (McPherson, 1976; Parry, Jones, and Wann, 2014; Wann, Tucker, and Schrader, 1996). However, as mentioned in the results, there were various types of parent fandom, unique to this study. Although the parent influenced the socialization of the child, some remained fans of a different team, and some switched allegiances along with the child. Most of the sport manager participants acknowledged that adults who are already fans of other teams would be unlikely to switch to their team if they move to the area. However, they did push the idea of a 'secondary' team for these individuals. The majority of sport managers mentioned that they will accept the fact an individual may cheer for the visiting team once or twice a year, but they still want them as a season ticket holder and cheer for the home team the other 40 times. Having a secondary team is fairly common amongst the parents of participants, and some participants said that if they ever moved to another NHL market they would probably adopt that team as a second team. When participants were asked if they could ever change their favorite team, some gave considerable thought to it and not very often was that question answered with a resounding no. This idea of a secondary team may be unique to NHL fans in this region and could be an opportunity for organizations to grow their fan base. Further research on individuals who switched allegiances or those who have a Sunbelt team as a secondary team could be beneficial for organizations in order to cater to those individuals. Organizations could find ways to appeal to and monetize more fans that would consider the team a 'secondary' team and grow that into their primary team.

Maintaining and Solidifying Fandom

Long Distance Fans

Long distance fans, also referred to as displaced fans, made up almost half of the participants in the study. Civic pride was a common theme in what maintained their fandom, even though they now live outside of the market. This is a common factor for displaced fans and can be described achieving a need to belong (Theodorakis, Wann, Nassis, & Luellen, 2012). As well, it could be considered perceived prestige as discussed in Gwinner and Swanson (2003). Those participants said they felt proud to wear their team's merchandise in other hockey markets and represent their city. It gives them a sense of pride, as well makes them feel closer to their hometown. According to Levy (2008), the NHL has acknowledged that many of their fans live far from the team they root for and have done research on how 'avid' these fans are using factors such as fantasy hockey participation, merchandise sales, and subscriptions to social media. However, at the team level and on building a fan base for a specific team, more can be done to focus on displaced fans and how they can be potential members of a larger fan base. From a sport manager perspective, some teams from this study outlined that their strategy was to appeal to children at a young age, have them grow up as a fan of their local team, move away to college, and come back to be their season ticket holder base when they begin their career. However, there is a gap and little done by these organizations in between the time they move away for college and when they come back to be the season ticket holder base. Maybe these fans lose interest during those college years, or maybe they never move back to that home market. Linking a team to a community "is potentially the most instrumental in building fan identification and, consequently, has the strongest long-term effects" (Sutton *et al.*, 1997, p.19). If these teams can continue to maintain the fandom of fans who move away through helping them achieve the need

to belong and need to be distinct, they can continue the momentum they build during the fan's childhood and grow the global brand of the team, resulting in new sources of revenue.

Season Ticket Holders vs. Non Season Ticket Holders

When sport manager participants were asked to discuss what their organization does to maintain their current fan base, most of the discussion centered around benefits to season ticket holders only. Most of the organizations have flexible season ticket packages that don't require a full 41 game package in order to qualify for benefits, but little is being done for highly identified fans that are not able to attend games in person. Common factors in why fan participants maintained their fan identity, even those who are season ticket holders, including online fan activities and bonding with their friends and family. It's talking about the team and making memories with other fans that keep them going in terms of their fandom. Fans are going outside the organization to maintain their fandom with things such as podcasts, discussion boards, and conversations with family and friends. Although these individuals are growing a stronger identity on their own anyway, these are variables that are out of the control of the organization. Organizations should consider promotions and events for non-season ticket holders that allow fans to be with family and friends and make memories that center around the team. Some teams do things like this such as the Lightning opening up their arena and surrounding area to show the team's road playoff games and the Hurricanes organize a monthly viewing party at a local restaurant for a road game, but more effort on a consistent basis could lead to more strongly identified fans. As well, teams could take a stronger hold on being a part of the online community these fans enjoy so much. They have started by having engaging social media followings, but creating their own content could help have a stronger foothold in the online community. Things to consider could be having players do regular question and answer sessions

online, having an official team podcast, or creating a service where fans can subscribe to exclusive video and access to the team. Currently, the Coyotes send exclusive online content to just season ticket holders, but it should be a consideration to open it up to all fans. Even if they do not purchase season tickets, highly identified fans still purchase other team related items and more importantly, influence others to become fans who could potentially be coveted season ticket holders.

Clearly much effort has been put in socializing fans, but more needs to be done in the crucial maintaining stage. Foster and Hyatt (2008) discuss this idea and how building a fan base shouldn't be limited to just within the city where the team is based. Especially in this day and age with instant communication and information sharing, the organizations can focus on building a fan base beyond just season ticket holders from their local community and can work on building a successful global brand.

Socializing Others into Fandom

NHL Fan Culture

Most fans felt pride in being an NHL fan in general, the fan community beyond just their specific team. This is in line with Gwinner and Swanson's (2003) discussion on domain involvement and how individuals who identify with the league as a whole can strengthen their identity to their specific team. Involvement with the sport or professional league as a whole could be of particular interest for fans of less successful or newer teams because by associating their team with that domain, it allows them to keep a positive status as a member of the group without being solely associated with the team's poor win/loss record (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Many fans felt that being an NHL fan was like being a part of an exclusive and secret club. They are often in the minority in their community, as being a fan of other sports such as football and

baseball is much more common. This could be described as a need to be distinct (Andrijew & Hyatt, 2009). Being an NHL fan feels like being a part of a small club that doesn't allow just anybody in. Many cited that they felt like underdogs when compared to other sport leagues in North America, but that was something that made them like being a fan even more. Claire from the Lightning noted that appeal is similar to discovering a new band when they are small and watching them grow to become a popular, mainstream group. These fans feel like they are a part of the NHL's growth in the region and that is special to them. In fact, many felt protective of the sport and that it is their responsibility to play their part in growing the league. Part of growing the league's popularity, is building a positive NHL fan community. This is one of the three key factors of Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) branding community concept: moral responsibility to the brand. According to their research, this involves both integrating and retaining community members in addition to assisting other members in the use of the brand. The data found in this research suggests that brand community is very important for fans of the NHL in the Sunbelt. Many participants spoke to how much they enjoy just being an NHL fan in general because of the unique culture of it. Common factors that contributed to that include the inclusive community, personable fans, and a common camaraderie with others from being part of the unique, underdog, exclusive club of being an NHL fan.

Almost every participant said they have had an influence on someone else becoming a fan, and most participants list a friend or family member as a major influence to them becoming a fan in this first place. This stage is the key to the cycle because once an individual has been socialized and then maintain their fandom, they can now begin to socialize others. Some teams have begun initiatives around this, such as the Florida Panther's development of a street team where volunteers represent the team at local events. Alan from the Coyotes understands how

important introducing others to the game is to the fans and how the Coyotes can help them do that:

With these fans, they want to advocate on behalf of us, they want to be ring leaders so we try to throw as much red meat their way as we can. So we give them videos to share, we give them information to share that they wouldn't have otherwise so that they can go out and advocate on our behalf.

This is a good start from the Coyotes, and according to this study, is the type of relationship individuals want with their team. NHL teams in this region can make current fans happier and create a larger fan base at the same time by finding ways to get current fans involved with the team and give them the tools and access they need to socialize their friends and family into fandom of the team. Schau *et al.* (2009) discussed this concept where consumers become co-producers of the brand through their own behavior and become part of the brand community. However, some research on brand communities and social network theory suggests that it's not necessarily about how many fans an organization can empower; it's *who* they empower. Kilduff and Tsai (2003) introduced the concept of social network analysis that has been adopted in many fields including biology, physics, sociology, and sport management. Social network analysis focuses on social structures through the use of network and graph theories. It defines the network structure in terms of nodes (key people or things within the network) and the interactions between them identifying how they all tie together. Katz and Heere (2013) used social network analysis among fans of a newly formed sports team and found that the leader of each group of fans was crucial in the long term attachment other fans developed toward the team. Their research noted, "The findings signify that not all members are created equal. A newly formed community is not a homogenous or random network of individuals but rather a network where a

select few persons have many more connections, and thus a heightened importance, than the average consumer” (p. 283). This suggests that in a sport fan context, ‘fan nations’ are not a collection of hundreds of thousands of individuals, they are made up of a few thousand highly invested individuals that have many connections to others whom they bring along to consume the team’s product. In a follow up study, Katz and Heere (2015) found that the leaders who empowered other members of their group led to a stronger and more well balanced fan group, leading to stronger team identification. These two studies provide a developmental outline for organizations to follow:

The initial stage of development was marked by the presence of a select few highly identified individuals whereby marketers could best approach new consumer groups by targeting centralized leaders. The current research proposes that in the second phase of development marketers need to develop specific tactics towards the leaders that assist them in empowering other brand followers (Katz & Heere, 2015, p. 381).

As noted, some NHL teams have begun doing this, but the next step would be to identify the leaders, or key nodes, in the social network of their fan base and find ways to incorporate them in the brand development.

Although specific results from this case study cannot be generalized, there are some practical implications and theoretical contributions this study makes for sport leagues outside of the NHL. They are especially applicable for leagues that are regionally popular but are still developing a national footprint in the United States. Leagues such as the NHL, Major League Soccer (MLS), and the National Lacrosse League (NLL) have rabid fan bases in certain pockets of the country, but still fall in the shadow of the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NCAA. With the growth

of these smaller leagues in mind, some practical implications for sport managers can be drawn and theoretical contributions to the sport management field are made.

Practical Implications

For sport managers, some suggestions to grow a fan base in new or non-traditional markets can be made from this study. Specifically, when developing a fan base for sports that are less popular or new in a market, sport manager practitioners should consider an increased community presence to build face-to-face relationships, utilizing technology to remain connected with fans after socialization, and identify key individuals who can advocate on the team's behalf and be co-producers of the brand.

First is the organization's need to be more hands on than managers of more established teams. One participant was previously employed by an NHL team in the northeast region and said being hands on was the biggest difference between their previous employer and their current one in the sunbelt. Organization members need to be on the ground and in the community at local events such as charity races, town festivals, and other special events. These organizations cannot rely simply on the tradition and history of a team if there isn't one and instead should focus on face-to-face relationships with fans in the community. This would allow sport managers to represent their team in the community and grow recognition of their brand. This type of personal connection may not be possible with teams that are already popular with large fan bases and a large demand for fan engagement. From this, it could be suggested that the organization has a greater direct influence on the development of their fan base and to be on the front lines of building that base when compared to organizations of established teams.

Utilizing technology is extremely important in nurturing fans after their original socialization. In this research, the organizations had a clear priority on appealing to young

children and potential and existing season ticket holders. There was very little focus on individuals who were in between those stages but still consumed products such as merchandise, online streaming services, and engaging with social media. For these individuals, season tickets may not be geographically or financially feasible but it is crucial these organizations pay closer attention to non season ticket holders and distant fans because there are still many other sources of revenue besides game tickets. Through the results of this study, it was found that those who were non season ticket holders or distant fans solidified and maintained their fandom through online engagement, specifically because it allowed them to connect with other people that are part of the NHL community. For smaller sports leagues that don't have extensive coverage on mainstream media, engaging fans online is a way to use technology to bring those people together and give them a platform to express their fandom. Many participants in this study said the online community of NHL fans was important to them because there weren't many people that were also NHL fans in their friend or family group so going online was a way to be affiliated with like-minded people. The NHL online community, which could share similarities to other niche sports, is like an island of misfit toys; bringing people together that are anomalies in their local community. These individuals chose to be diehard fans of a lesser known league, partly because they enjoy the sport itself, but also because they felt like they didn't fit in with the fandom culture of mainstream sports and were looking for something different. Without their engagement with other fans and being able to express their fandom, these fans could lose interest in their fandom and move on to other sports or forms of entertainment. In more established markets this may be less of a problem since hockey is an established part of the mainstream culture and there are many venues for individuals to participate in fan related activities. But in regions where a sport is new, sport manager practitioners need to make sure they continue to

keep their fans engaged after initial socialization or else they could become disinterested in their fandom. Utilizing current technology is the best way to achieve this connection, as it is interactive, accessible, and relatively inexpensive. Teams can interact with their fans in fun and engaging ways that can stretch across any geographic space for little cost to the team and fan. Ideas to accomplish this connection include frequent question and answer sessions from players through social media or online forums, podcasts that feature discussion with team players, management, and alumni where fans can get to know them on a more personal level, and contests that involve fans sending in pictures of them representing their team in areas outside the home city. Although some of these initiatives do not result in direct revenue, they contribute to the maintenance of the fans that organizations expended many resources on socializing. In turn, it creates more individuals that are able to advocate on behalf of the brand and recruit other fans who are potential season ticket holders or corporate sponsors.

The third practical implication for organizations is to identify key individuals who are leaders and influencers among their social circles and empowering them to be co-producers of the team brand. When making purchase and consuming products, individuals are more likely to trust someone they know than a corporation, or in this case, sports team (Schau *et al.* (2009). When considering the literature mentioned in the discussion, this study shows that the influence of trusted individuals was a key pattern in the socialization process, much of it out of the control of the organization. Sport organizations should identify leaders in the fan community through market research, online data collection, and social network analysis and delegate responsibilities to them to grow the brand. This could include promotions targeted toward these leaders to bring friends to games, give them opportunities to represent the team at league wide events, and create opportunities for them to be the voice of official team media such as blogs and podcasts. These

initiatives allow the organization to speak through an individual that is a trusted leader amongst various groups of potential new fans. From there, those leaders can nurture new fans into potential leadership roles, creating a cycle that will continue to grow.

These practical implications can be applied for NHL teams in the sunbelt region, but they could also be considered for new or growing leagues such as MLS and NLL that are trying to build a larger fan base in the shadow of the NFL, MLB, NBA, and NCAA. These suggestions could be applied to leagues whose fan bases have strong followings in specific regions but are looking to grow their league on a national scale. In addition to the practical implications, results from this study also contribute to sport management theory.

Theoretical Contributions

Although results of the fan identity formation process are in line with previous studies (McPherson, 1976; Wann *et al.*, 1996; Wann, 2001), there is a unique theoretical contribution made from this study. The findings of the research led to the development of a model of fandom that could be applicable to lesser-known professional leagues for niche sports, not just the NHL in the sunbelt. For future research on individuals who are fans of teams that are new or still developing in their region, this study suggests they will fall into this model and follow a similar cycle. This model combines methods of traditional sports marketing research on socialization and identity but includes new elements, which focuses more on cultural movement marketing.

Traditional elements of sport fan identify formation was found in this study where parents, community, and friends played a large role in socialization; and team success and player attachment were common ways individuals maintained their fandom. However, what this study adds to the theory is that organizations that are new or unconventional in their marketplace, such as the NHL in the sunbelt, have to put in more of an effort at the grassroots level than established

teams. In these new markets, parents may be unfamiliar with the new team and are likely to influence their children to socialize with teams that they were socialized into as a child, before this new team existed. As well, new teams lack a long history and the list of important players in franchise history may be short, giving limited options for fans to become attached to. Niche sport organizations attempting to grow their fan base can't rely on just those traditional formation processes and need to play a hands-on role in the socialization process and find unique ways to maintain that fandom. From this study, it could be theorized that marketing strategies utilized, or not utilized, by the organization have a larger influence on fan identity formation for growing leagues in new markets as opposed to more established teams with a longer history.

In addition to context specific understanding of fan identification, the model from this study considers cultural shifts in consumption behavior. Previous research showed that individuals desire to be affiliated with like-minded people and align themselves with people and organizations that share similar values and beliefs (Wann, 2001). This model takes this to the next step and incorporates a modern consideration of how individuals foster those values and beliefs. Individuals attach themselves to a cause they believe in and want to advocate on behalf of it, standard practice in research on social and political movements, but as suggested in this study, it is now becoming a larger part of sport fan identity. Not only is it important a sports team match the values and beliefs of the individual, the individual wants to advocate on behalf of those values and beliefs and be a part of something bigger than traditional fandom. They want to be part of a movement to grow the brand of their favorite team and league, which in turn makes their fandom more meaningful. This is especially the case for those who are fans of nontraditional teams since they have to work harder to maintain their fandom if that sport is outside the realm of mainstream sports discourse. If fans of these teams feel their team, a

representation of their values and beliefs, is in danger due to lack of popularity, they will go out of their way to influence others to become fans. Worrying about their sport being in danger is something fans of established and popular leagues don't have to worry about. With increasing communication technology, individual sport fans can have a voice they have never had before, leading to cultural movements and changing the landscape of fandom in North American professional sports.

Conclusion

The results from this study suggest fandom of NHL teams in the Sunbelt region can be broken down to a three-stage cycle. First, fans become socialized into fandom. Results from this study suggest that fans in this region are attracted to the sport of hockey because of aesthetics, entertainment, eustress, and benefits to self-esteem. They become socialized into fandom of a particular team through the influence of community, first experience at a game, team success, media exposure, influence from parents, and influence from friends. The second stage sees the fans maintain and solidify their fandom, often going outside the organization to do so. Factors that contribute to individuals maintaining their fandom include civic pride, attachment to players, new friends made through fandom, being a part of the NHL fan community, and introducing others to the sport. It was also found that fans mostly maintain their fandom by participating in online communities and by bonding with their family and friends. Being a part of the NHL fan community was a large positive for participants, citing that they felt like it was a secret and exclusive club for the underdogs of the professional sport world. Since introducing others to the sport is such a large part of NHL fan culture, it fits in as the third stage of the model and circles back to the first stage of socialization for new fans.

The challenging part of this cycle for NHL teams in the region will be finding the balance between keeping it that secret exclusive club and growing the fan base. A strength of this market is the solid brand community built by it's fans, but too much interference from teams to build the fan community could be perceived as artificial or forced and be met with resistance from fans (Katz & Heere, 2013). If the team's popularity grows, it may lose some of that underdog appeal, however it's in the best interest of the organization to grow their fan base. Either way, the NHL is on the rise in this region and there are highly identified fans in these untraditional markets (Klein, 2011; Ozanian, 2014; Terlep, 2014). This study shows examples of those highly identified fans and how passionate they are through their involved fandom activities, stretching beyond just catching the occasional game. Current NHL teams in this region can use this study to build their current fan base, or if a new expansion team were to open in this region, this model could be helpful in growing that fan base from scratch. Although the secret club appeal of NHL fandom is important to fans, it will be something organizations need to find a balance for. As Alan from the Coyotes said: "The problem is that it can't stay a secret club for very long".

Future Research

As mentioned, this study is culturally specific and may not be applicable to other regions where the NHL exists, thus further research in this topic can be considered. First, it could be beneficial to conduct further quantitative research to confirm the general themes and trends found in this study. As well, a further investigation of each individual market in this study could be beneficial in order to compare and contrast cities within the region and identify different ways in which fans operate depending on which specific team they cheer for. Because NHL fandom is not a widely researched topic, it could also be beneficial to conduct research on the identity

formation of fans in every market and region. This could provide insight to the league as a whole and give further insight to this study as it would have other regions to compare the Sunbelt to.

Stemming from this study specifically, further research could be conducted on fans who decided to change allegiances from a previous team to a Sunbelt team when they relocated. This wasn't the case for any participants involved and organizations interviewed have accepted the idea that people usually won't change teams. Instead, they have decided to pitch the idea of a secondary team to these individuals. But what if there were some people who have switched allegiances? What are the common trends and themes amongst them and how could organizations play a role in this process for those individuals? Since the Sunbelt is the fastest growing population in the country (Census Data, 2015), a further examination of these people could provide a new demographic that teams could pull from in addition to socializing young children in the local area.

As well, further research on the different types of parent fandom and their influence on fans in this region could be conducted. There were various fan backgrounds of the parents of participants, such as parents originally from the Sunbelt region, originally from a more traditional hockey region (Northeast or Midwest region) and relocated to the Sunbelt, or never lived in the Sunbelt region. From there, parents either kept their allegiance to their old team after relocation, adopted the new team after relocation, became a fan of hockey along with or because of their child, or are not a fan of hockey at all. There could also be other ways to define parents fandom and further examination into this could allow organizations to have a better understanding of the role parents play in socialization and how they could work with the parent in getting their child to become a fan. The Coyotes have begun doing this with their jersey exchange program.

A key theme from this study was the strong brand community and fan nation of NHL fans in this region. Further investigating the concept of brand community for the league as a whole would be beneficial as well as comparing the brand community of other professional sport leagues in North America.

Further research dividing fans up in this region into different degrees of fandom could also give greater insight to this study. This could relate to Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) who developed a framework for different levels of fan identification and the motivations and benefits of such identification. Understanding the different types of fandom within this region could help teams develop fan profiles and better cater to different types of fans.

Future research in the topic of NHL fandom is plentiful and with the popularity of the sport growing, and the potential for an expansion team in Las Vegas, there is much research to be done in the coming years. Future research should be done to gain a better understanding and insight to NHL fans in order to help the league and teams continue to grow the game and their global brand.

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Appendix A

Important Developments in the NHL related to the growth of the NHL in the United States

(Jenish, 2013)

| Year(s) | Event | Importance |
|-----------|--|---|
| 1927 | Added teams in Detroit, Chicago, and New York | The new American teams were a hit on and off the ice. They were competitive on the ice, fans filled the stadiums, and committed owners were providing assurance the NHL would continue to succeed and grow |
| 1942 | The Great Depression and World War Two left the NHL with just six franchises. Montreal, Toronto, Boston, New York, Chicago, and Detroit. | Began a stable period for the NHL. These teams remained the only six teams in the league until 1967. These teams are commonly referred to as the 'Original Six'. |
| 1946 | NHL received multiple applications for a team in Los Angeles. | First interest for hockey in the Sun Belt region. The NHL cited long travel distance and cost for the other teams as why hockey would not work on the west coast and ultimately rejected their application. |
| 1967 | Added expansion teams in Los Angeles, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and St. Louis. | The NHL wanted to expand their national footprint and keep up with other major sport leagues |
| 1972 | Rival league World Hockey Association (WHA) was launched | Challenged the NHL as a legitimate professional hockey league. |
| 1973-74 | The rise of the Philadelphia Flyers 'Broad Street Bullies' | Hockey began to gain a reputation as a barbaric and violent sport. However, this led to NHL TV ratings rising all through the country |
| 1979 | WHA closes operations | The NHL was once again the only major professional hockey league in North America |
| 1988 | Edmonton Oilers trade Wayne Gretzky to the Los Angeles Kings | At the time, Gretzky was the best player in the league, and is now generally considered the greatest player to ever play. This spiked interest in hockey in California and the rest of the USA. |
| 1991-1993 | NHL adds expansion teams in San Jose, Tampa Bay, Florida, and Anaheim | The NHL begins a conscious movement to expand their league into the Sun Belt region. |

| | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| 1993 | Gary Bettman hired as first NHL commissioner | Bettman was brought in to help grow the national footprint of the NHL like he did as a member of the NBA's leadership group in the 1980s. |
| 1994 | Labor dispute between players and owners cause a half season lock out. | Part of the agreement was that player salaries would now become public information. This led to player salaries rising exponentially and caused financial issues for smaller market teams. |
| 1994 - 1998 | Minnesota relocates to Dallas, Winnipeg relocates to Phoenix, and Hartford relocates to North Carolina. Nashville and Atlanta are awarded expansion franchises. | Traditional hockey markets in cold climates move to warm southern climates in the United States and two new expansion teams are added in the Sun Belt. |
| 2004-05 | Entire season canceled due to labor dispute between players and owners | Hockey changed after the canceled season. New rules made the game faster, cleaner, and more exciting than ever. Fans came back in large numbers and forgave the league quicker than most expected. Attendance, TV viewers, and merchandise sales steadily rose along with league revenue. A hard salary cap and revenue sharing amongst all teams made even the small market teams financially viable and flourished in the post-lockout years |
| 2008 | NHL launches new initiatives for fan development | The Winter Classic, an annual game played on an outdoor rink was introduced. Also, the development of their digital streaming service, NHL Game Center, allows users to purchase a package to stream all NHL games on their laptop, tablet, and smart phone from wherever they are. This digital media has allowed the league to target users who may not be getting NHL coverage on their local television and consume the game. |
| 2011 | NHL agrees to a 10 year, \$2 billion deal with NBC to broadcast games nationally in the United States | Largest television contract in the United States in NHL history. |

Appendix B - Information Letter to Recruit Sport Manager Participants

Skating in the Sun – Examining the Formation of Identity of National Hockey League Fans in the Sunbelt Region

Dear,

My name is Brandon Mastromartino and I'm a graduate student at the University of Georgia conducting a study about fandom of NHL teams in the Sunbelt States. I really think you'd be a good fit as a participant in my study and hope you can participate. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study, which examines the socialization process of highly identified fans of National Hockey League teams in the Sunbelt states. We are specifically looking for participants who are sport managers involved in the marketing and/or community development of the Anaheim Ducks, Arizona/Phoenix Coyotes, Carolina Hurricanes, Dallas Stars, Florida Panthers, Los Angeles Kings, Nashville Predators, San Jose Sharks, and Tampa Bay Lightning. You were selected as a possible subject because you are involved with one of those teams.

The study is being conducted by Brandon Mastromartino under the guidance of Dr. James Zhang of the Department of Sport Management at the University of Georgia.

STUDY PURPOSE

While many studies have been conducted to examine the motivations of individuals to consume sport, it is less known about how self and social identity forms in a spectator sport, particularly when considering the unique dynamic of the National Hockey League in new and non-traditional markets. Despite being newer hockey market, these cities still have a sizeable fan base that is made up of highly identified fans. What leads to these identifications? As these teams are relatively new compared to some markets in Canada and the Northern USA, it is possible fans of these teams experienced a different socialization process than fans of older teams. It is important to understand what leads to these identifications for these teams to connect with fans and build an even stronger fan base and grow the game of hockey to new areas. The purpose of this research is to find out why fans of NHL Sunbelt teams identify as a fan of that team, but more importantly, what lead to that identification.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

This research will study the culture of highly identified NHL fans in the Sunbelt and the formation of that identity. Primary research will be conducted through interviewing sport managers and fans of the teams and analyzing their responses. This will be supplemented by secondary research on the available literature about motivation to consume sport, self and social identity, and the socialization and identity formation process. These interviews will be conducted through a combination of means including e-mail, telephone, online video conversation (e.g. Skype, Google On Air, ect..) and in person. Interviews will be conducted between October 2015 – January of 2016.

CONFIDENTIALITY

You will be asked for your name and which team you work with or identify as a fan of. If requested, your real name can be changed and a pseudonym can be used. Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) who may need to access your research records.

PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study, contact the researcher Brandon Mastromartino at bmastro@uga.edu or 706-461-8388.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the UGA Human Subjects Office at 706-542-3199 or visit research.uga.edu/hso

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Georgia.

Appendix C - Information Letter to Recruit Fan Participants

Skating in the Sun – Examining the Formation of Identity of National Hockey League Fans in the Sunbelt Region

Dear,

My name is Brandon Mastromartino and I'm a graduate student at the University of Georgia conducting a study about fandom of NHL teams in the Sunbelt States. I really think you'd be a good fit as a participant in my study and hope you can participate. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study, which examines the socialization process of highly identified fans of National Hockey League teams in the Sunbelt states. We are specifically looking for participants who are passionate fans of the Anaheim Ducks, Arizona/Phoenix Coyotes, Carolina Hurricanes, Dallas Stars, Florida Panthers, Los Angeles Kings, Nashville Predators, San Jose Sharks, and Tampa Bay Lightning.

The study is being conducted by Brandon Mastromartino under the guidance of Dr. James Zhang of the Department of Sport Management at the University of Georgia.

STUDY PURPOSE

While many studies have been conducted to examine the motivations of individuals to consume sport, it is less known about how self and social identity forms in a spectator sport, particularly

when considering the unique dynamic of the National Hockey League in new and non-traditional markets. Despite being newer hockey market, these cities still have a sizeable fan base that is made up of highly identified fans. What leads to these identifications? As these teams are relatively new compared to some markets in Canada and the Northern USA, it is possible fans of these teams experienced a different socialization process than fans of older teams. It is important to understand what leads to these identifications for these teams to connect with fans and build an even stronger fan base and grow the game of hockey to new areas. The purpose of this research is to find out why fans of NHL Sunbelt teams identify as a fan of that team, but more importantly, what lead to that identification.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

This research will study the culture of highly identified NHL fans in the Sunbelt and the formation of that identity. Primary research will be conducted through interviewing sport managers and fans of the teams and analyzing their responses. This will be supplemented by secondary research on the available literature about motivation to consume sport, self and social identity, and the socialization and identity formation process. These interviews will be conducted through a combination of means including e-mail, telephone, online video conversation (e.g. Skype, Google On Air, ect..) and in person. Interviews will be conducted between October – December of 2015.

CONFIDENTIALITY

You will be asked for your name and which team you work with or identify as a fan of. If requested, your real name can be changed and a pseudonym can be used. Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) who may need to access your research records.

PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study, contact the researcher Brandon Mastromartino at bmastro@uga.edu or 706-461-8388.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the UGA Human Subjects Office at 706-542-3199 or visit research.uga.edu/hso

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Georgia.

Appendix D – Research Participant Consent Form for Manager Participants

Date

Dear :

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. James Zhang in the Department of Sport Management at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Skating in the Sun. The purpose of this study is to find out how fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt States became a fan and why they chose to identify with that hockey team. In addition to interviewing fans, this study is looking to interview 4 – 8 individuals who currently are or previously were employed in a management role with an NHL team in the Sunbelt region.

Your participation will involve answer questions and participating in a conversation with the researcher and should only take about 30 minutes – 1 hour. General demographic such as age, ethnicity, gender, education level, country, state, city of origin, job level/title, years working in sports, years working at the NHL level, other positions held will be asked, as well as questions regarding the marketing of NHL hockey in the Sunbelt. Some sample questions include:

- Why do you think fans of your team's fan base chose to identify as a fan of that team?
- How do you think that identity process occurred for fans of your team?
- What is your organization's general philosophy on attracting new fans?
- What types of things is the organization doing now to build a larger fan base?
- How is the organization using media to reach and connect with the fans?
- For current fans, what is the organization doing to maintain the fan's high level of identity?

You will be asked for your name and which team you work with. If requested, your real name can be changed and a pseudonym can be used in the published study. As well, if requested the team you work for can be generalized to “a team in the region” so not to make your participation identified. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. The study may be published in an academic journal or presented at academic conferences. The interview will be recorded via an audio recording device for the purposes of analyzing the data once all interviews are complete, but the researcher is the only individual who will have access to the audio file and it will not be released with the study. It will be deleted once the research project is complete.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this research. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The findings from this project may provide information on the culture of NHL fandom in non traditional markets and how to grow the game in new areas of the United States. Your participation in this research will not affect your employment status. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

(If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at (706) -461-8388 or send an e-mail to bmastro@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board at telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

By completing an interview with the researcher, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project.

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Brandon Mastromartino

Appendix E – Research Participant Consent Form for Fan Participants

Date

Dear :

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. James Zhang in the Department of Sport Management at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Skating in the Sun. The purpose of this study is to find out how fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt States became a fan and why they chose to identify with that hockey team. The study is looking to interview 15-20 fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt region.

Your participation will involve answer questions and participating in a conversation with the researcher and should only take about 30 minutes – 1 hour. General demographic such as age, ethnicity, gender, education level, country, state, city of origin, years as a sports fan, years as a hockey fan, years as an NHL fan, previous favorite teams, years as a fan of current favorite team will be asked, as well as questions regarding the marketing of NHL hockey in the Sunbelt. Some sample questions include:

- What does being a highly identified fan of an NHL team mean to you?
- Tell me the story of how you became a fan of your team.
- What factors, if any, could influence you to change your favorite team?
- What factors contribute to you continuing to identify a fan of the team?
- Do you think the process in which you became a fan differs from those of fans in other markets?

You will be asked for your name and which team you are a fan of. If requested, your real name can be changed and a pseudonym can be used in the published study. As well, if requested the team you cheer for can be generalized to “a team in the region” so not to make your participation identified. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. The study may be published in an academic journal or presented at academic conferences. The interview will be recorded via an audio recording device for the purposes of analyzing the data once all interviews are complete, but the researcher is the only individual who will have access to the audio file and it will not be released with the study. It will be deleted once the research project is complete.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this research. You must be 18 years or older to participate. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The findings from this project may provide information on the culture of NHL fandom in non traditional markets and how to grow the game in new areas of the United States. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

(If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at (706) -461-8388 or send an e-mail to bmastro@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board at telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

By completing an interview with the researcher, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project.

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Brandon Mastromartino

Appendix F – Interview Guide for Sport Manager Participants

Questions will start out specific to get information about the demographic and background of the manager. The following information about that person will be asked: age, ethnicity, gender, education level, country, state, city of origin, job level/title, years working in sports, years working at the NHL level, other positions held. After gaining general information, the interview will turn to open ended questions.

1. What is your role within the organization?
 - a. What does an average day look for you?
 - b. How does it change throughout the hockey season?
2. Tell me about your organization's general philosophy on how to build a fan base?
3. How do you think an individual becomes a fan of an NHL team in general?
 - a. How do you think this process may occur for fans specifically in the Sunbelt region?
 - b. How do you think this process differs for those who become fans of teams in Northern markets?
4. Why do you think fans of your organization choose to become a fan of that team specifically?
 - a. How do you think that original identity process occurred for those fans?
5. What steps did the organization take to build a fan base when they first started?
6. What types of initiatives and strategies is the organization utilizing to build a bigger fan base?
 - a. At the grassroots level, what is your organization doing to attract new friends?

- b. How is the organization exposing the game and team to a new generation of fans?
- 7. How is the organization using media to reach and connect with fans?
- 8. For current fans, what is the organization doing to maintain the fan's high level of identity?
- 9. What do you think needs to be done to grow the fan base of your organization in the future?
- 10. What do you think the future looks like for the fans of NHL teams in the Sunbelt region?

Appendix G – Interview Guide for Sport Fan Participants

Questions will start out specific to get information about the demographic and background of the fan. The following information about that person will be asked: age, ethnicity, gender, education level, country, state, city of origin, years as a sports fan, years as a hockey fan, years as an NHL fan, previous favorite teams, years as a fan of their current favorite team.

The interview will then turn into more in-depth open-ended questions about their fandom.

1. What does being a highly identified fan of an NHL team mean to you?
2. Tell me the story of how you became a fan of your team.
 - a. What factors, if any, could influence you to change your favorite team?
3. What factors contribute to you continuing to identify a fan of the team?
4. How do you think the process in which you became a fan differs from those of fans in other markets?
 - a. How do you think the process of becoming a fan differs for those in Sunbelt states specifically?
5. What type of presence does an NHL team have in your local community?
6. What is the media coverage of your team like? Locally? Nationally?
 - a. Television
 - b. Newspapers
 - c. Online
7. What kind of influence does your fandom have on close friends and family in your life?

8. What things have you noticed your team do in order to attract more individuals to become fans?
9. How do you think your team could grow a larger base of committed long-term fans?

Appendix H – Sport Manager Participant Profiles

| Pseudonym | Team | Gender | Age | Ethnicity | Place of Origin | Current City | Highest Education | Level of Current Position | Years Working in Sports | Years working in the NHL |
|-----------|---------------------|--------|-----|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Thomas | Florida Panthers | Male | 29 | Caucasian | Connecticut | Fort Lauderdale, Florida | Bachelors | Mid - Level | 3 years | 3 years |
| Alan | Arizona Coyotes | Female | 47 | Caucasian | New Jersey | Phoenix, Arizona | Masters | Executive | 25 years | 1 year |
| Claire | Tampa Bay Lightning | Male | 27 | Caucasian | Sweden | Tampa, Florida | Bachelors | Front Line Manager | 5 years | 5 years |
| Toby | Carolina Hurricanes | Male | 31 | Caucasian | Wilmington, North Carolina | Raleigh, North Carolina | Bachelors | Mid - Level | 8 years | 8 years |
| Stuart | Dallas Stars | Male | 31 | Caucasian | Carlson, Texas | Alvarado, Texas | Bachelors | Upper - Level | 9 years | 9 years |

Appendix I – Fan Participant Profiles

| Pseudonym | Favorite Team | Gender | Age | Ethnicity | Highest Education | Occupation | City of Origin | Current City | Marital Status | Children |
|-----------|---------------------|--------|-----|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------|
| James | Florida Panthers | Male | 23 | American Jew | Bachelors Degree | Information Technology | Miami, Florida | Miami, Florida | Single | None |
| Noah | Dallas Stars | Male | 24 | Caucasian | Bachelors Degree | Auditor | Cleveland, Ohio | Temple Tech, Texas | Single | None |
| Owen | Tampa Lightning | Male | 26 | Caucasian | Some college (in progress) | Student | Tampa, Florida | Tampa, Florida | Single | None |
| Paul | San Jose Sharks | Male | 22 | Caucasian | High School | Bartender | Tallahassee, Florida | Tallahassee, Florida | Single | None |
| Amy | Nashville Predators | Female | 26 | Caucasian | Masters Degree | Teacher | Nashville, Tennessee | Coventry, Connecticut | Single | None |
| Emily | San Jose Sharks | Female | 39 | Caucasian | Masters Degree | N/A | Kansas City, Missouri | San Jose, California | Single | None |
| Austin | Carolina Hurricanes | Male | 24 | Caucasian | High School | N/A | Ridgewood, New Jersey | Raleigh, North Carolina | Single | None |
| Oliver | LA Kings | Male | 25 | Caucasian | Bachelors Degree | Electrical Engineer | Claremont, California | Claremont, California | Single | None |
| Henry | Nashville Predators | Male | 18 | Caucasian | Some college (in progress) | Student | Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania | Nashville, Tennessee | Single | None |
| Jeff | LA Kings | Male | 28 | Caucasian | Bachelors Degree | Medical Delivery | Orange County, California | Orange County, California | Single | None |
| Mark | San Jose Sharks | Male | 24 | Caucasian/Hispanic | Bachelors | Electrical | Mountain | San Diego, | Single | None |
| Andrew | Dallas Stars | Male | 19 | Caucasian | Some college (in progress) | Student | Kansas City, Kansas | Manhattan, Kansas | Single | None |
| Alex | Nashville Predators | Male | 28 | Caucasian/Asian | Bachelors | Environmental | Nashville, | Nashville, | Single | None |
| Elizabeth | Tampa Lightning | Female | 26 | Caucasian | Bachelors Degree | Photographer | Charlotte, North Carolina | Orlando, Florida | Single | None |
| William | LA Kings | Male | 28 | Caucasian | Bachelors Degree | Hotel Management | San Diego, California | San Francisco, California | Single | None |
| Daniel | Tampa Lightning | Male | 31 | Caucasian | Bachelors Degree | Upper manager at Chamber of Commerce | New York, New York | Tampa, Florida | Married | None |
| Jane | LA Kings | Female | 28 | Caucasian/Hispanic | Some college | Customer Service Rep | Alhambra, California | Tempe, Arizona | Single | None |
| Stephanie | Anaheim Ducks | Female | 24 | Asian | Bachelors Degree | Statistical Analyst | Chino, California | Chino, California | Single | None |
| Paige | Arizona Coyotes | Female | 25 | Caucasian | Some college (in progress) | Student | Staten Island, New York | Phoenix, Arizona | Single | None |
| Joseph | Carolina Hurricanes | Male | 31 | Caucasian | Bachelors Degree | Web Developer | Syracuse, New York | Durham, North Carolina | Married | Two |

Appendix J – University of Georgia Institutional Review Board Approval for Research



APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

September 23, 2015

Dear James Zhang:

On 9/23/2015, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Type of Review: | Initial Study |
| Title of Study: | Skating in the Sun - Examining Identify Formation of National Hockey League fans in the Sunbelt States |
| Investigator: | James Zhang |
| IRB ID: | STUDY00002626 |
| Funding: | None |
| Grant ID: | None |

The IRB approved the protocol from 9/23/2015.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Adam Goodie, Ph.D.
University of Georgia
Institutional Review Board Chairperson