

The Ottawa Senators Twitter activity and the effect on their followers

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Abstract

This thesis is written in the publishable paper format, which is comprised of two papers. The research took a case study approach analyzing the Twitter activity of the Ottawa Senators of the National Hockey League, and their followers'. The first paper, using content analysis, analyzed the Senators' tweets and resulting follower activity level. Focus group research aimed to uncover what specific Senators' Twitter activity influenced their followers online, and their creation and perceived inclusion in an online fan group. The second paper, through the questionnaire method, looked at the Senators' Twitter and it's the influence on their follower's social identity formation and fan commitment levels. These two papers highlight the importance of sport organizations facilitating connections between their followers and most importantly, facilitating the creation of an online central fan group specific to their Twitter handle.

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Chapter One

The increased opportunities available for interaction between individuals is a result of the creation of multiple communication platforms, due to the vast expansion of social media. Social media arose in 1997 with the emergence of the first original social networking site sixdegrees.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Sixdegrees.com allowed people to post to forums and privately message people in their first degree (family members), second degree (friends) and third degree (acquaintances) (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, the popularity of social media and increased number of users could be related to the rise of Web 2.0 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Web 2.0 is a term that encompasses all social networking sites (SNS) particularly those that allow individuals to post user – generated content (UGC) (Akar & Topcu, 2011). UGC allows individuals to construct their own reality and contribute to other individuals' online reality. Web 2.0 originated in 2004 and the inception of SNS such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter followed (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

According to Nielsen Media (2009a), the year 2009 marked the first time in history where communication through SNS outnumbered communication via e –mail. 2009 was also the year Twitter expanded by 1448% from 1.2 million users in 2008 and 18.2 million users in 2009 (Nielsen Media, 2009b). In 2010, Twitter was the 12th most visited website in the world (Broccoli, 2011). The 2012 Social Media Marketing Industry Report found that 43% of individuals who were in North America and that were between the ages of 20 – 29 spent more than 11 hours per week interacting on social media sites. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2012, 1 in 4 adults, between the ages of 18 - 29, used Twitter, whereas 1 in 8 adults between the ages of 30 and 40 used Twitter (Deprez, Mechant & Hoebeke, 2013). Between 2012 and

2013 Twitter was the fastest growing network and expanded by 44% (Bullas, 2014). In the U.S. the 2013, Superbowl XLVIII, had the largest audience reach with 15.3 million people seeing tweets about it (Nielsen Media, 2014). In 2014, 672 million tweets were sent during the 32 day period of the FIFA World Cup; the highest number ever recorded for a single sporting event (Burns, 2014). Many individuals are accessing these tweets via their smart phones, as 71% of all users' access social media on their mobile devices (Bullas, 2014). According to Twitter (2014) there are currently 271 million monthly active users and according to Bullas (2014) there are 550 million registered users. Due to the expansion of social media it is evident that organizations will flock to social media because they can connect to a large group of consumers instantaneously (Kaplan & Haenlin, 2010).

As shown through the sheer increase in user popularity, the expansion of social media specifically Twitter, offers sport organizations another avenue through which they can connect and engage with their consumers. Furthermore, sport fans have a high degree of passion usually for specific teams or players (Jacobson, 2003), and the ability to connect has been made easier through SNS. As Phua (2012) highlighted, social media usage, for people who identify as a sport fan is greater in comparison to general users as they spend approximately 13 hours per week online, seeking out information about their favourite sports team. Outside of television, 63% of sport fans use social media as a central source of information (Navigate Research, 2014). Furthermore, sports fans are 10% more likely to engage in social media than non – sports fans (Navigate Research, 2014).

Often time's individuals use SNS such as Twitter to congregate and discuss their favorite team (Hull & Lewis, 2014). SNS, like Twitter, have been shown to lead to the development of bonds between individuals and feelings of camaraderie (Chen, 2011). These bonds result out of

the individual joining SNS like Twitter because SNS provide a space for community formation that has the ability to satisfy the individuals need to belong with those who share similar norms, values and interests (Tardini & Cantoni, 2005). This community can evolve into the formation of a central fan group, otherwise referred to as a 'fan nation' (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Twitter, is a communication tool, and as a result of user (fan) communication can help the creation of identification and "in-group" favouritism (positive biases exhibited toward the central fan group) as it promotes the adoption of particular symbols and text, that signify an "unspoken understanding" between fans (de Groot & Robinson, 2008). Therefore, it is important to identify what specific language can stimulate Twitter activity, because as identified by de Groot and Robinson (2008), specific user Twitter activity can spawn online connections between fans. Thus, despite not meeting 'offline', individuals publicly reflect their membership within the online community through their online behaviour (Kozinets, 2002). Previous research has shown that the Twitter property the hashtag is a way for individuals to show their association with a player, team, organization or surrounding community (de Groot & Robinson, 2008; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Consequently, this group membership can lead to influential behaviour, which according to O'Shea and Alonso (2012) can include "merchandise purchases, live game attendance, season membership and television viewership" (p. 40). In other words, the more fans identify with their specific team and surrounding fan community, the larger their expected financial investment towards the team (O'Shea & Alonso, 2012). Furthermore, membership within these specific sport fan communities leads the individual to segment their social world as they associate themselves with a particular team. Membership within the fan group can result in the individual associating a part of their identity with that particular team: this is known as social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

A fans resulting identity, as they gain membership within a specific fan group, can move outside of the world of sport and into their daily life (Sadri, 2014). According to Jordan (2009) identities are shaped due to the interaction between the physical experiences (the ‘offline’ world) and digital experiences (the ‘online’ world). Thus, individuals can come to continuously define themselves as a fan of a particular sports team throughout their daily life. Furthermore, according to social identity theory, as the individual becomes more entrenched within the community they will begin to execute behaviours congruent with that group membership if they believe it reflects positively on their self – concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel and Turner (1986) state that being a part of the central fan group aids in the development and ties the team to one’s identity. However, as Frederick, Lim, Clavio and Walsh (2012) stated “connections formed through social media have yet to be studied in their entirety” (p. 481). Therefore, the online environment as a result of the fan and organization interaction, and fan – fan interaction, is important for sport organizations to understand as it may impact the fans relationship towards the team (Clavio & Kim, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhlagh & Greenwell, 2010). Therefore, this study will seek to uncover if a person perceives that they have established membership within an online central fan group and if membership impacts how they identify themselves.

Arguably, sport organizations must understand how their online presence within Twitter impacts their fans interaction because as Phua (2010) noted that the Web, “through its ability to be a major socializing agent and communication channel for sports fans, will continue to play a vital role, eventually superseding traditional media such as broadcast and print” (as cited in Pegoraro, 2010, p. 504). It is of importance that the fans continue to build and maintain a relationship with not only the sport organization but other fans as well, in order to sustain the online community. The online community provides an arena for sport fans to congregate and

satisfy that need to belong (Tardini & Cantoni, 2005). Therefore the sport organization must be cognizant of the social media strategy they are deploying and make sure it continually adapts to meet fan patterns and preferences (Pronschinske, Groza, Walker, 2012). Ultimately, it is important to understand how influential communication patterns are on fan behaviour as it may attract new sports fans and impact how the team becomes integrated within that fans social identity. Furthermore, the resulting influence membership has on social identity could alter behaviour. Behaviour could lead to fans subsequently increasing their financial spending on the team (Funk & James, 2006; O'Shea & Alonso, 2012). However, according to Clavio and Kim (2010) very few sport organization studies have examined social media from the perspective of the audience and content received.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research study is to examine the Twitter account of the Ottawa Senators of the National Hockey League (NHL), and analyze how the organization's tweets influence (if at all) their followers' activity online. The research will examine whether the followers' Twitter activity level consequently influences their perception of and perceived inclusion within the online central fan group that surrounds the Senators. Furthermore, the research study will seek to understand whether this membership can potentially influence their follower's social identity. Finally, the research will see if an individual's commitment to the team is impacted by their level of Twitter activity.

Research Questions

RQ1: What specific Ottawa Senators Twitter activity stimulates their followers to become active on Twitter?

RQ2: Does the followers resulting level of activity on Twitter influence the creation and their perceived level of personal inclusion within the Senators online central fan group?

RQ3: Does the followers resulting level of fan activity on Twitter stimulate and influence the fan's construction of their social identity?

RQ4: Does the follower's Twitter activity level in relation to the Ottawa Senators impact their commitment level to the team?

Literature Review

The proposed research project will look at self – categorization theory, which is an extension of social identity theory. The researcher chose this theoretical framework due to its applicability in explaining the human cognition involved in the formation of fan groups. Alongside this theoretical framework, the social media networking site Twitter, is the chosen phenomenon of study.

Social Media

Social media has grown exponentially and is a reflection of the growth of web technology. Web based applications and platforms have advanced from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Web 1.0 technology was limited as there was only one – way communication opportunities through e-mail, message boards and forums (Pegoraro, 2010). Web 1.0 did not provide the opportunity for instantaneous, collaborative communication between individuals. This type of communication was brought forth with the emergence of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is an umbrella term that encompasses the various segments of social media such as blogs, social networking sites

(SNSs) (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube), team websites, forums and bulletin boards (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Ioakimidis, 2010; Ming, MacIntosh & Bravo, 2012; Williams & Chinn, 2010). For the purpose of this research project social media will be defined as:

Tools, platforms and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate and collaborate with others. Social media are distinguished from other forms of communication because they support user participation on a massive, collective scale; the contributions are also distributed among the participants to view, share and improve

(Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 422).

Thus, this definition is inclusive of sections within Web 2.0 (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Web 2.0 arose in 2004 and changed the way in which software developers and ultimately the end – users utilized the World Wide Web (Kaplan, 2009). Web 2.0 brought about change in web application platforms, no longer is there a final end product which has been created and published by sole individuals or groups (Kaplan, 2009). The platform no longer has an ‘end point’ as it is continually modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion (Kaplan, 2009). Thus, Web 2.0 platforms are characterized by the creation and exchange of user – generated content (UGC) that can be shared amongst the individuals who are online (Akar & Topcu, 2011; Kaplan, 2009). Therefore, the user is in control of what they post online (Ming et al., 2012). Furthermore, this UGC is inclusive to the integration of text, graphics, pictures, video and sound content within the message (Ming et al., 2012). Since the main feature of Web 2.0 media platforms is the instantaneous interaction between individuals, this leads to a fluid and dynamic online environment that is not constant in nature. The contribution of each individuals post to the platform, thus helps to co-construct other people’s online reality.

Twitter. Twitter, is the social media outlet that is being researched within this study. Twitter was founded on March 21st 2006 by Jack Dorsey (@Jack), Evan Williams (@Ev) and BizStone @Biz (Picard, 2011). @Jack tweeted the first tweet: “just setting up my twttr.” (Picard, 2011). Since 2006 Twitter has become the most widely spread and adopted social media tool (Pegoraro, 2010). 5000 tweets were sent per day in 2007, 300 000 tweets were sent per day in 2008 and 2.5 million tweets were sent per day in 2009 (Internet Live Stats, 2014). In 2011, there were 200 million users world-wide (Picard, 2011). According to Twitter (2014a) in 2013 there were 271 million monthly active users, 500 million tweets were sent per day and 78% of Twitter active users are on mobile devices. According to the Pew Research Center during an emergency people consider Twitter to be an information lifeline as shown by the adoption of Twitter by news operations such as Huffington Post, the New York Times and government sources offering information during Hurricane Sandy in 2012 (Caumont, 2013). Twitter is expected to surpass other social networking sites such as Facebook, in popularity and longevity in the near future (Pendola, 2012; Thomas, 2011).

Twitter is a free social media channel that enables its users to post microblogs, which cannot contain more than 140 characters (Fisher, 2011; Thomas, 2011). These microblogs are known as ‘tweets’ and are posted on a person’s handle, also known as their Twitter profile page (Fisher, 2011; Thomas, 2011). This profile page contains information and pictures that are available for the public to see; the profile is a representation of the person that they would like to be conveyed as to the world. Twitter also allows people to subscribe to other people’s profiles (Thomas, 2011). These people are then known as ‘followers’ (Thomas, 2011). When individuals follow other people’s handles, it gives them the opportunity to view their tweets and respond if they wish (Pegoraro, 2010; Thomas 2011). Unlike Facebook, where online “friendships” are

reciprocal, Twitter allows individuals to choose who they want to see content published by thus, the reciprocal friendship feature is not required (Marwick, 2011). The reciprocal friendship is not a social expectation on Twitter, and therefore is not often exercised by famous people (Marwick, 2011).

Facebook versus Twitter. Facebook arose in 2004 (Boorstin, 2013), and Twitter did not arise until 2006 (Twitter, 2014). Facebook was founded on the idea of connecting friends, whereas the idea of Twitter circulates around the idea of connecting and starting a global conversation between all people world-wide (Boorstin, 2013). Table 1.0 as extracted from Abeza and O'Reilly (2014) highlights the similarities and differences between Facebook and Twitter.

Table 1.0

Features of Facebook and Twitter

Features	Facebook	Twitter
Connection	• Users need approval from another user to contact them. Friendship has to be mutually agreed and accepted. • Users cannot view some other users' profile, posts, or feeds unless connected.	• Users do not require the same type of approval as Facebook. Users can follow anyone without the permission of the person one follows. • Users can view other users' profiles and tweets.
Users' intention of use	• Users connect with friends and members and other people they care to keep in touch with. • More on expanding the breadth of the conversation networking and connection.	• Twitter is less about social friendships; it rather allows users to follow important topics, people, and conversations that are relevant or interesting to them. • It is more of a portal to get fresh and breaking news, to connect with people with whom users have no means of connecting otherwise.
Data Sharing	• Users can share pictures, videos, and links by posting the URL using the status update interface.	• Users can share pictures and videos via Twitpic and tweet other URLs by shortening the URL with tiny URL

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), Facebook continues to be the most popular social media site used by American adults however, membership levels saw little change from 2013 to

2014, whereas Twitter membership increased (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015). In 2014, 350 000 tweets and 382 000 Facebook likes were sent per minute (McCarthy, 2014). 70% of individuals who are on Facebook engage with the site daily compared to 36% of Twitter users (Duggan et al., 2015). Twitter users are classified as younger as 45% are between the ages of 18 – 29 and more educated as 40% have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, compared to the 30% on Facebook (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013). This suggests that Twitter will have longevity because it is adopted by the younger generation. Furthermore, this is corroborated by the increase of Twitter use with mobile smart devices. Twitter dominates the mobile domain (Boorstin, 2013) as 86% of the time people spend on Twitter is through their mobile device, compared to 68% of the time for Facebook (McCarthy, 2014).

Twitter and mobile devices. The ability to access social media via a mobile device is changing the world of marketing. According to Magrath and McCormick (2013), there are 3 forms of mobile marketing: entering a website via a mobile browser, a retailer re – designing their website specifically for use on a mobile device and thirdly, a native or third party app that can be downloaded from an app store. Twitter has designed an app for each mobile device. Each app has the same functions as the desktop version of Twitter. Thus, the Twitter application falls under the mobile social media umbrella. According to Kaplan (2012) mobile social media is “a group of mobile marketing applications that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (p. 131). Mobile devices have become a key access point for individuals who consume news via Twitter (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013) because of the instantaneous communication individuals can follow the story as it develops. However, according to the Pew Research Center only 8% of the adults in the United States get their news via Twitter, compared to the 30% who get their news via Facebook (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013). According to Nielsen Media's 2014

Sport Media Report, 75% of sport fans use their smartphones, and 46% of sport fans use their tablet to access and increase their sport consumption (Media and Entertainment, 2014a).

Furthermore, NHL fans are 15% more likely to own a tablet and smartphone (Media and Entertainment, 2014a). From October 2012 to October 2014, there was a 35% increase the in the amount of time per month spent on mobile sports content (Media and Entertainment, 2014a).

The emergence of third party mobile applications (such as Twitter and Facebook) on mobile devices (tablets and smart phones) has increased the pathways in which sport fans can consume sport, thereby forcing sport teams to integrate it into their traditional and new media campaigns (Wang, 2007; Watkins & Lewis, 2014). Watkins and Lewis (2014) looked how professional sport teams within the NBA, WNBA, NFL, NHL, and MLS and found that 90% of the team's mobile applications integrated Twitter while 65% provided fans with access to Facebook. As Watkins (2014) determines, those who identify with a team have an increased probability of using mobile platforms to connect with the team. This is corroborated by Seo and Green (2008) as they reported that the motivation to gain insider information and connect with other fans is what drives them to log onto sport web sites. Therefore, the projected longevity of Twitter is only increased with the adoption of these mobile devices. With the increase in mobile device consumption it has led to individuals now participating in dual – screening of live events (Caumont, 2013).

Twitter and dual – screen. Dual – screening (viewing the television accompanied by using a social media site) has increased, specifically in relation to Twitter as 50% of tweets about television in the United States were regarding sporting events (Media and Entertainment, 2014b). Dual – screening is altering the TV experience as the increased user engagement around sport events “is significant as teams, programmers and advertisers look to reach and amplify messages

to audiences across screens” (Media and Entertainment, 2014b, para. 2), thereby altering program development as it provides “a valuable opportunity for advertisers to tap into and leverage the momentum of social conversations” (Media and Entertainment, 2014c). Despite this not being sport specific, it is transferrable to the world of sport.

Twitter properties. There are identifying properties of Twitter that separate it from other SNS, particularly the hashtag #. The hashtag, the # symbol, is used before relevant words within the text to signify the overarching topic of the tweet and ultimately categorizing that tweet under that specific hashtag (Twitter, 2014). Furthermore, people can search these specific hashtags in the Twitter search bar to see who is discussing the topic that they are interested in (Twitter, 2014) and in doing so they can ‘follow’ the conversation online. The hashtag is the beginning of ‘searchable talk’ which is “an online conversation where people actively render their talk more findable” (Zappavigna, 2011, p. 25). According to Zappavigna (2011), the hashtag “presupposes a virtual community of interested listeners who are actively following this keyword or who may use it as a search term” (p. 7). Furthermore McCracken (2009) discovered that tweets with the most resonance with people make an observation, take a stance or are humorous for the followers (as cited in Zappavigna, 2011). Hashtags are ultimately used to increase the ‘loudness’ of ones’ tweet; the likelihood that they will be seen by others and thereby increasing the “probability that a user’s production [of tweets] over time will be actively ‘followed’ by others” (Zappavigna, 2011, p. 21). Particular hashtags can be seen as trending. Trending is seen on the discover timeline of a Twitter page (Twitter, 2014). According to Twitter (2014) trends are determined by an algorithm and are the most popular topics being discussed on Twitter. An example of a yearly reoccurring trend during the Stanley Cup Playoffs since 2011 is #BucciOverTimeChallenge (Burns, 2014). In 2011, ESPN sports anchor John Buccigross piloted

a Twitter contest during the Stanley Cup Playoffs (Burns, 2014). If a playoff game goes to overtime Bucci's followers tweet #BucciOverTimeChallenge followed by the 2 players who the individual thinks will score the winning goal for their respective teams (Bucciovertimechallenge.com, 2014). John Buccigross also makes a prediction (Lamb, 2013). If Buccigross's predictions are correct he picks two individuals who tweeted using the #BucciOverTimeChallenge with the correct predictions and sends them a t-shirt (Lamb, 2013). If Bucci's prediction is incorrect he sends three t-shirts, randomly picking individuals, who on Twitter, made the correct prediction (Lamb, 2013). This contest, as John Buccigross has said "[has] kind of brought the hockey world together. It's a passionate, intimate community and that's why I love it so much" (Lamb, 2013, para 6). Players such as Justin Schultz of the Edmonton Oilers have also taken part within the contest (Lamb, 2013). Another example of how the hashtag is used is by Jimmy Sanderson an Assistant Professor of media and communication courses at Clemson University (Burns, 2014). Sanderson encourages his students to discuss course related topics on Twitter, using a predetermined, course – specific #hashtag (Burns, 2014). He has had much success with including Twitter in the daily conversation as Gregg Doyel from CBS Sports, and Logan Morrison of the Seattle Mariners have both skyped in as guest lecturers to discuss the impact of Twitter (Burns, 2014).

The use of the hashtag has also been studied in academic literature. Blaszk, Burch, Frederick, Clavio and Walsh (2012) conducted a content analysis, surrounding the Twitter hashtag #WorldSeries. The purpose was to uncover the main participants engaged in the conversation surrounding the 2011 World Series (Blaszka et al., 2012). Blaszk et al., (2012) case study found the hashtag was used to express interest, fanship and a way for individuals to identify with a particular team. Furthermore, the case study provided information to marketers

that hashtags should be created for specific teams and their promotions to increase their spotlight within the public eye.

The hashtag was also studied to see if its use mirrored a predetermined agenda. Frederick, Burch and Blaszkia (2013) studied The London 2012 Olympics, also termed the ‘social media’ Olympics. Frederick et al., (2013) performed a content analysis on tweets emitted from @London2012 and tweets containing the hashtag #London2012. The purpose was to determine if agenda setting was present during the Games (Frederick et al., 2013). Frederick et al., (2013) found that there was variability in the focus of the tweet, the sports mentioned and the countries mentioned between the two groups. This suggests there is no agenda presence on Twitter; the main topic of focus is not transferred to the Twitter audience (Frederick et al., 2013). This could be plausible as the media agenda of one organization can be impacted by the various news outlets that are available to follow on Twitter (Frederick et al., 2013). This highlights how Twitter is changing the sport media landscape as Hardin (2005) states news editors base decisions for content based on audience interests (as cited in Frederick et al., 2013) thus, suggesting an incongruity between perception of audience interests and actual interests.

Twitter in sport. Research surrounding social media has been conducted from a variety of perspectives. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the fans’ perspective of the success of social media activities on behalf of a sport organization in bringing them together to create a community environment and invoking social identity formation within the individual.

Pegoraro (2010) also examined the communication opportunities and the potential for interaction between athletes and fans on Twitter. Twitter is increasing the amount of fan – athlete interaction, however “its potential as a marketing tool is not being realized by athletes” (p. 511) as they do not promote their personal (or their sponsors) products and websites. Fans have

realized that Twitter offers unprecedented and (the perception of) direct access to their favourite professional athletes thus, their use of the social media channel has increased (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Marwick, 2011; Pegoraro, 2010). Pegoraro (2010) supported this claim, and found that Twitter is used by fans to ask athletes direct questions. Whereas athletes, use Twitter to discuss their performance, interact with teammates, and provide thoughts about their actions off the field; providing their fans with what the fan perceives as an insider perspective on their personal lives (Marwick, 2011; Pegoraro 2010; Sanderson & Hambrick 2012). Furthermore, athletes are using Twitter because they control the message: their content is not edited by their affiliated sports team, sport organization or mainstream media outlets (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010).

Furthering fan use of Twitter, Clavio and Walsh (2014) surveyed Division 1 college sport fans (n = 1036) to attempt to understand why they engage in sport – focused social media; whether for interactive or informational purposes. Clavio and Walsh (2014) study surprisingly showed that there was a low level of social media participation and a large level of traditional media usage and Web 1.0 technologies to gather college sport team related information. Live video or embedded video links were under the highest level of usage which suggests fans are looking for sensory – rich media. Furthermore, Clavio and Walsh (2014) found that social media should not be viewed holistically, as there is a distinct variability between what attracts fans to Facebook and Twitter.

There are various reasons as why fans of specific sports team use social media. Gibbs and O'Reilly (2014) studied the fans of 8 Canadian Football League (CFL) teams and their followers on Twitter. A content analysis was performed surrounding the public tweets of the 8 CFL teams, and an online survey and semi – structured interviews were conducted to see what motivates the

Twitter followers of these particular teams. Gibbs and O'Reilly (2014) found that the instantaneous communication associated with Twitter provides an advantage over other social media outlets (ex: Facebook) due to the speed of information delivery. Furthermore, the results showed that Twitter is used for news delivery and fan engagement, which supported the 4 gratifications, or reasons as to why fans use and continue to use Twitter: interaction, promotion, live game updates, and news (Gibbs & O'Reilly, 2014). This research study furthers Gibbs and O'Reilly (2014) work as it analyzes the results of fan engagement levels in response to a professional sport organizations Twitter activity. Gibbs and O'Reilly (2014) stated that their results support that Twitter has a "speed advantage in the ability to share information over other forms of social media, yet there remains a question related to fan engagement, which is more than just speed of reach" (p. 204).

The utilization of Twitter by Indy Car drivers has also been examined. Clavio, Walsh and Vooris (2013) performed qualitative interviews with Indy Car series drivers asking questions related to their Twitter usage. The major themes that arose were authenticity, as drivers consciously were making an effort to develop personal and meaningful relationships with their fans online; personal branding, as the drivers were acutely aware of the power of Twitter and its ability to drive forth the interest of themselves and the Indy Car Series; and finally, social extension, as Twitter is an avenue to fulfill the demand for public attention (Clavio et al., 2013). Clavio et al., (2013) study showed that athletes are aware of the social connections that can be made through Twitter and as a result are actively pursuing the development of these connections.

Armstrong, Delia and Giardina (2014) extended how sport teams use Twitter by analyzing the Twitter account of the Los Angeles (LA) Kings @LAKings. Armstrong et al., (2014) argues that the LA Kings exhibit the execution that is required to go beyond brand

development, and encourage Twitter “conversations” to take place. It is through the animated @LAKings handle – a personality comes to life because they have positioned the organization to appear “real” to the consumer, with heightened earnestness and truthfulness (Armstrong et al., 2014). This thereby promotes individuals to follow them because they feel they are being provided with special or select information (Armstrong et al., 2014). The researchers argue that through their Twitter activity the LA Kings, allow for sport consumption to occur in a collective community environment (Armstrong et al., 2014). However, the study only focused on tweets sent from @LAKings (approximately 32 000), two content produced blogs that had direct interaction with the Kings (i.e. linked on the official Kings website) and content produced by sports media outlets (i.e. Yahoo Sports Puck Daddy blog, ESPN.com). This study despite describing what constitutes an interactive Twitter feed fails to analyze the response of those who are participating in the interaction with the @LAKings, the fan.

Sport governing bodies are also adopting social media platforms such as Twitter. The sport governing body that has had an immense boost in popularity with their adoption of Twitter was the National Hockey League (NHL). According to Martinez (2010), a survey in 2008 highlighted that the popularity of the NHL is on the rise in comparison to Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Basketball Association (NBA). The significant driver of growth was the NHL’s early adoption of social media to connect with its fan base (Martinez, 2010). The NHL established a social media department in 2010, which dealt with their then 355 000 Twitter followers (Martinez, 2010). The NHL’s Twitter handle, @NHL, now has 3 088 727¹ (Sportsfangraph.com, 2014).

¹ As of February 3rd 2015

Twitter has also changed the sport media landscape. Gibbs and Haynes (2013) performed 18 semi – structured interviews with both Canadian and United States sport media professionals. Three clusters were identified that help to explain how Twitter has changed the job: media landscape, “mechanical” job functions and sport media relations (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). Gibbs and Haynes (2013) argue that Twitter has flattened the sport media hierarchy, and could be the most influential social – media platform of today. This can be attributed to the speed of information delivered and the competition for exposure that is associated with Twitter; both under the media landscape umbrella (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). As result of increased speed and competition it has changed the “mechanical” job functions, as Twitter is monitored for unique and important news stories and the resulting fan response to assess what specific issues should be discussed (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). Furthermore, sport team – media staff relations now encourage coaches and players to engage and connect with fans via Twitter (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). Finally, under the sport media relations cluster, two concepts arose: filter elimination and direct access (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). These two concepts support “the statement that Twitter was the first platform to actively promote a closer connection between media relations staff and the fan” (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013, p. 403). Not having to utilize traditional media outlets filter elimination occurs as the prescribed message will not be altered, and the direct access with fans allows them to actively engage in dialogue with fans (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). Therefore, Gibbs and Haynes (2013) argue that “a review of the lived experiences of sport communication informants would suggest that Twitter promotes a closer connection between the sport entity and the fan” (p. 404).

Twitter and self – presentation. Twitter and self – presentation. Twitter has also been examined from the self – presentation lens. Lebel and Danylchuk (2014), using self -

presentation examined how professional athletes present themselves through their Twitter profile picture, and Generation Y reaction to these photographs. It was found that gender lines were present as both males and females provided glamourized photos, however female photos occupied a non – sport role whereas the male photos were sport dominant (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). Furthermore, they found that those photos taken within a sport context were ranked more favourably and linked with positive word associations (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014).

Twitter, outside of athlete usage has been studied from a sports broadcaster point of a view. Much like athletes, sport broadcasters – celebrities within the world of sport – are concerned with their public presentation. To analyze the self – presentation of individuals on Twitter Weathers et al., (2014) performed a content analysis of the tweets tweeted by Erin Andrews and Kirk Herbstreit during the 2012 – 2013 college football season. Weathers et al. (2014) found that traditional gender lines manifested as Andrews gave snapshots of her personal life, with tweets offering information about her fashion choices, she engaged with non – sport celebrities and offered little sport insight and opinion. Whereas, Herbstreit focused on sport and communicated with sport specific people while offering little information into his personal life (Weathers et al., 2014). Thus, through their distinct communication style, Weathers et al., (2014) argues that “Twitter seems to be reinforcing rather than breaking down traditional sports – media gender roles (p. 18). Furthermore, Weathers et al., (2014) found that Andrews and Herbstreit began cultivating perceived levels of attachment from their followers, due to a large amount of interaction Andrews and Herbstreit had with their followers. This interaction and resulting attachment, Weathers et al., (2014) defined it as parasocial interaction.

Athletes and parasocial interaction on Twitter. Since 2008, Twitter has become a popular online forum for athletes to contact and connect with their fans (Fisher, 2009). It is an

avenue that allows athletes to “express a more multifaceted identity that extends beyond their athletic exploits” (Sanderson, 2013 as cited in Weathers et al., 2014, p. 6). Furthermore, fans have flocked to Twitter because of the perceived level of direct access to their favorite athlete (Marwick, 2011). The direct access is a result of “insider” information posted on that athletes handle in the form of first – person pictures and opinionated statements (Marwick, 2011). Thus, through social media athletes are able to control the message they communicate, and interact directly with their audience (Pegoraro, 2010; Sanderson, 2008, 2010; Weathers et al., 2014).

The insider perspective provided by Twitter, can cultivate bonds of attachment on behalf of the fan (follower) towards the athlete, as a result of parasocial interaction (PSI). PSI is a psychological phenomenon surrounding the relationship users establish with a media figure such as an athlete or coach (Frederick et al. 2012; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2010;). Parasocial relationships originated when people began to develop one - sided interpersonal relationships with television characters (Rubin & McHugh, 1987) with whom individuals believed they shared a special connection with (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). PSI, in the relation to Twitter, leads the follower to develop strong emotional attachments leading to the exhibition of strong emotional responses related to the media persona (ex: athlete, coach, sport organization) they are following on Twitter (Frederick et al., 2012; Sanderson 2010). Therefore, PSI leads the follower to behave in ways that mirror actual relationships (Frederick et al., 2012; Sanderson 2010). However, this relationship is mediated and one – sided as the media persona is whom controls the message (Frederick et al., 2012; Sanderson 2010). There are several factors which impact the establishment of PSI relationships and they are: perceived realism, perceived similarity, attitudes, and social and task attraction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

There has been research executed surrounding the establishment of these mediated relationships on Twitter. Research has shown the power PSI relationships have in framing the media user's viewpoint toward particular celebrities and the societal issues they have become intertwined with. Examples of such celebrities and societal issues are Magic Johnson and the risk of contracting AIDS (Brown & Basil, 1995) and Mark McGwire in relation to performance enhancing drugs (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003). Alongside moulding the media user's viewpoint, Twitter has become increasingly popular amongst all athletes, as it has become a tool in creating and managing their own 'brand'. The athlete is no longer subjected to information modification, and they can instantaneously communicate with their fans (Hutchinson, 2011). By utilizing Twitter, athletes can ensure the success of their brand through the formation of PSI mediated relationships with their fans.

Kassing and Sanderson (2010) addressed the formation of PSI mediated relationships between followers of American and English riders on Twitter during a 3 week cycling event called the Giro. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) tracked the frequency at which the athletes tweeted and performed a content analysis on the tweets to discover the resulting emergent themes. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) found that Twitter helped to increase levels of PSI, resulting in the formation of a bond of intimacy for the fan toward the athlete (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). The relationship was furthered when the athletes would provide private information, commentary and shared their opinions via Twitter, thus creating an insider perspective (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Kassing and Sanderson (2010) found that Twitter furthered the individual's interest in the specific athlete however, they also found that the athlete's followers became interested in the conversations occurring on Twitter between other individuals surrounding that their specific athlete of interest. Thus, individuals began identifying

with the larger fan group surrounding the Giro (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). This study highlighted how athletes, through a specific online social medium, can further their relationship with their fans; and more over the study highlighted how individuals can congregate online and through discussion form a community surrounding a sporting event. Kassing and Sanderson's (2010) study is limiting because it was geared toward single athletes throughout a single event, not a sport organization that wants to engage their fans throughout the entirety of a season.

Frederick, Lim, Clavio and Walsh (2012) furthered the realm of PSI research when they studied the followers of two different athletes: one who was predominately social and one who was predominately parasocial on Twitter. The determination of these categories was based on a content analysis of athlete tweets conducted prior to the study (Frederick et al., 2012). Social tweets were those that contained an @ symbol, whereas parasocial tweets did not (Frederick et al., 2012). Frederick et al., (2012) found that the development of PSI was higher amongst those who followed the social athlete; this finding is supported in previous PSI research as characteristics of PSI relationships are similar to that of social interaction (Giles, 2002). This study highlighted specifically how athletes can develop deeper "relationships" with their fans via their Twitter accounts.

Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen and Burch (2012) also analyzed relationship promotion by athletes on Twitter using PSI. Frederick et al., (2012) performed a content analysis on professional athlete's tweets to see if subconsciously an athlete's Twitter style was predominately parasocial (one – way mode of communication) or social (two – way mode of communication). Frederick et al., (2012) found that athletes are classified on a continuum and participate in both types of communication. Social tweets were targeted toward other athletes and

parasocial tweets contained information related to personal life insights or general statements (Frederick et al., 2012).

Social Identity Theory

The social aspect of sports and the interaction that occurs on social media channels often results in dialogue and the formation of bonds between fans of particular sport teams, regardless of social, religious and political differences (Hull & Lewis, 2014). The unique method of Twitter allows fans to connect with a multitude of other like – minded individuals. Depending on the number connections made between individuals, and the strength of each of these associations a fan group surrounding the team can emerge. The corresponding central fan group can also be known as a fan nation (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Foster and Hyatt (2008) argued that each of these communities that manifest online have a shared image of their communion. “Sport fans comprise a nation because they share a common image of what it means to be a fan...Moreover, the image that is shared amongst fans can be made to be inclusive” (Foster & Hyatt, 2008, p. 269). Thus, a fan nation is not bound by location as exhibited within a social media site; it is a sense of cohesiveness shared by other anonymous members (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). For the purposes of this paper fan nation and fan group will be used interchangeably.

Membership within a central fan group can help define an individual’s identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). If the individual perceives the fan group as positive they will attempt to maintain their membership within that fan group. Individuals aspire and strive to attach themselves to a group of individuals who they perceive as similar or slightly better because the individual believes this association would reflect positively on their own self – concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This is known as social identity theory. Social identity as defined by Tajfel (1978) is “that part of an individual’s self – concept which derives from his knowledge or his membership of a

social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). Thus, social identity theory highlights that the formation and ongoing maintenance and support of ones’ identity is tied to group membership (Jacobson, 2003). Social identity theory highlights that when a person is involved in an intergroup relation (in this case, involved within the central fan group of the Senators), this person then becomes defined by the cognitions, attitudes, beliefs and emotions shared by the group as these are reflected through their behaviour as they strive to maintain their membership within the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Furthermore, the individual derives satisfaction from participating in activities that are congruent with the group identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Membership within small intimate groups, constructs social identity based on the personal connections and face – to – face interactions with other members of that group however, within larger social groups, the social identity is often forged out of resulting feelings of symbolic attachment and collective identity (Grove, Fish & Eklund, 2004). Therefore, individuals who value membership within the fan group will all exhibit similar behaviour that lead to the establishment of group norms, and by participating in such behaviour they are furthering their feeling of inclusiveness within the group. The individual will continually cognitively segment and evaluate their social world to decipher their position and others within the fan group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Therefore, social identity theory suggests individuals participate is a psychological distinction, “a psychological separation between those who are “in” and those who are “out”” (Phua, 2012, p. 192). Therefore, this psychological segmentation results in an increased awareness of the people who are members of the “in-group”, and those who are not (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Furthermore, an inherent justifiable social distance between the two groups is created (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Ultimately, identifying with a central fan group surrounding a specific sports team can lead a fan to experience a feeling of belonging and solidarity amongst all due to the acquiring and exhibition of similar characteristics and behaviour (Ashforth, Harrison & Corely, 2008; Cole & Bruch, 2006; Phua, 2012). The value placed upon group membership will increase a person's effort to exhibit behaviour that will affirm their identity (Ashforth et al., 2008) which then may subsequently impact fan commitment levels. In relation to the Ottawa Senators, in order to increase fan commitment levels, as Akar and Topcu (2011) stated, the organization (the Ottawa Senators) must be the catalyst for fan communication because the most important aspect of the dialogue that occurs on social media sites is between the fans themselves. This dialogue may create connections between the fans, which may potentially result in each individual subconsciously attempting to solidify their social identity to the Ottawa Senators, by potentially segmenting their social world and placing themselves within the central fan group, thus, connecting themselves to the team at large.

Self – Categorization theory. Within the realm of psychology there are three widely held assumptions surrounding self – concept (Turner, 1978). First, the self – concept is a cognitive component; a person can possess a multitude of self – concepts, all of which are differentiated and can function independently of each other; second, specific self – concepts can become activated dependent upon the situation; and thirdly, particular self – concepts can lay dormant if an individual perceives a situation in which particular characteristics associated with that self – concept are incompatible (Turner, 1987). An individual's self – concept can be defined when a person begins to cognitively segment their social world based on group involvement therefore, defining themselves based on their membership group status; otherwise known as social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People adopt

an identity, a self – concept, that is reflective of the norm of the social group if this social group possess a source of personal meaning (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When a person's further defines their identity on the basis of social comparison thus, comparing themselves with others; this is self – categorization, an extension of social identity theory (Kozinets, 1999). Self – categorization theory will be the theoretical framework used for this study. Self – categorization can be defined by how an individual views their placement within a set of categories that highlight the similarities between others within the group, and differences with those outside the group (Turner, 1987). However, within the context of each group a hierarchal classification system results (Turner, 1987). The hierarchal classification system results out of self – comparison with others. There are cognitive processes, attitudes, behaviours that are reflective of the best group norm. The existential group norm is referred to as a target, a prototype that all members strive to resemble (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

With the resulting hierarchal classification system due to social comparison, individuals define their placement in relation to the reflective group norm. The individual's perception is reflective on the group prototype. There are individuals who are exemplars of this prototype within each group. Prototypes are those who “embody all attributes that characterize groups and distinguish them from other groups including beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviours...maximizing the similarities within and differences between groups” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123 – 124). The exemplary “prototype”, is central to self-categorization theory as members within social groups evaluate their position and modify their behaviour to match the prototype (Hogg & Terry, 2000). As often times with group membership, individuals strive to become an exemplar of the group resulting in the depersonalization of one self (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Depersonalization results in an individual depressing their own unique characteristics,

thus minimizing their personal identity as they aspire to fit the prescribed prototype of the group. The concept of a prototype produces “normative behaviour, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, positive in group attitudes and cohesion, cooperation and altruism, collective behaviour, shared norms and mutual influence” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123). Prototypes/exemplars are not fixed, they are fluid and often responsive to what outgroup is salient (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Therefore, self-categorization is a “dynamic, fluid and content-dependent process that reflects changing definitions of the self in relation to a constantly changing social reality” (Turner et al., 1994, as cited in Grove, Fish & Eklund, 2004). The fluid nature of self-categorization is the central reason as to why it is the theoretical backdrop for this study. Self – categorization is reflected within social media. Social media is changing how social groups are formed. Social media gives open opportunity for individual expression which could cause a continuous challenge to the prototype. Therefore, the reality within the social media sphere is dynamic and constantly changing as social media, specifically Twitter allows instantaneous communication between individuals. Therefore, Twitter provides the arena for which social comparison and self – categorization is continually happening.

Fan

Fans are vital to the success of any sport team as it is their financial expenditure which keeps the franchise alive. Fans are defined as those individuals “who know about the techniques, guidelines and rules associated with the sports they follow; many are walking compendiums of the current status of particular players and teams” (Gantz & Wenner, 1995 p. 59). However, there are two types of fans when it comes to classifying fan group inclusion. There are potential members (those who are not a part of the central fan group) and members (those who are a part of the central fan group) (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Furthermore, social media has supported the

surge in the delocalization of sports team as fan nations are no longer bound by specific geographic boundaries (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). A prime example of a delocalized sports team is Real Madrid, whose fan support is global (Foster & Hyatt, 2008); according to Sportsfangraph (2014) Real Madrid boasts the highest number of Twitter followers across all leagues and teams with 14 577 108 followers. Furthermore, social media has resulted in the emergence of another type of fan: the connected fan (Hull & Lewis, 2014). The connected fan is a result of the expansion of the internet (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Specifically, this fan is a result of the platforms associated with Web 2.0, as they encourage the establishment of connections between individuals. Connected fans find team information and connect with other like – minded individuals through websites, social networking sites and mobile phone applications at least once per day (Hull & Lewis, 2014).

Fan commitment and community. As individuals possess varying levels of commitment, it is the fan who possess a higher level of commitment towards the team that are vital to the success of the franchise (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). This finding was supported in Smith, Patterson, Williams and Hogg's (1981) study of the avid sport fan and they found that "deeply commitment fans displayed a much greater propensity to watch and attend sporting events featuring their favourite teams" (as cited in Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000 p. 15). The ideal fan commitment level is one that would cause the individual to become a full member of the community surrounding the team (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). In order for a community to manifest interaction must occur; membership identities occur via interaction between others (Quick, 2000). However, within the virtual community world, individuals are connected by impersonal links as "they are bound by reference to common objects or goals, not by personal relations" (Memmi, 2006, p. 288). However, it should not be implied that these virtual

communities are less real than physical communities because as Kozinets (1998) states “these groups have a ‘real’ existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour” (para. 5). Adam and Smith (2008) describe virtual communities as electronic tribes, as an “exclusively narrowly focused, network – supported, aggregate of human beings in cyberspace who are bound together by a common purpose and employ a common protocol and procedure for the consensual exchange of information and opinions” (p. 17). However, a key aspect within the development of a community is missing within Adam and Smith (2008) definition of virtual community: the development of personal relationships. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper the notion of an online community will come from Rheingold (1993) definition of virtual communities which are “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on these public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5 as cited in Zappavigna, 2011, p. 5). Therefore, adapting the two definitions of a virtual community, an online community can be thought of as one that encourages interaction between individuals and results in the development of personal relationships between members through common protocol, either online or off-line with the focus of these relationships centered around a specific interest through which individuals identify (further adapted from Seo et al., 2007 description of a community). However, the sport fan was a common identity not mentioned by Adam and Smith (2008) or Rheingold (1993). According to Norman (2014) it is the “online social formations and interactions of sport fans [that] remain underexplored” (p. 398) and furthermore “the description of online groups as communities is contested in the academic literature on Internet-based social interaction” (p. 404). Therefore for the purpose of this research paper the term fan nation will be adopted. Fan nation is defined as an imagined community, limited and sovereign. The nation is

imaged as most members will never meet or interact but “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). This coincides with Rheingold’s (1993) definition of an online virtual community. Therefore, for this research paper the term fan nation and online virtual community will be used in conjunction describing the Senators online central fan group.

As Derbaix, Decrop and Cabossart (2002) stated is the experience as a part of the community which relates to the fans consumption of professional sport. Seo, Green, Ko, Lee and Schenewark (2007) examined individuals whom use NFL team websites (n = 144) and examined how perceived cohesion, commitment and attitude toward NFL team websites impacts their future intent to use it via web survey. Seo et al., (2007) found that “cohesion and commitment directly enhance attitude toward the website; and, cohesion has a strong positive association with commitment” (p. 213). This research will further Seo et al., (2007) findings because it examines the use of the features of Twitter by professional hockey fans, and can contribute to the body of knowledge as it examines the placement of a different Web 2.0 technology within the facilitation of community creation surrounding professional sport within their lives. Thus, in order to facilitate a sense of community surrounding the team, sport marketers must understand how to utilize social media in a way that aids in building and creating connections between their fans regardless of where they may reside. Therefore, the researcher will analyze how the Ottawa Senators Twitter account, aids in the creation of dialogue between individuals thus spawning the creation of connections between fans. Furthermore, the research will analyze if these connections transpire into the formation of a central fan group surrounding the team and ultimately, how this impacts fan commitment levels.

Research Design

Study Context

The object under review is the Twitter account of the Ottawa Senators of the National Hockey League (NHL). This study will be guided by mixed methods research that includes case study methodology. A case study method was chosen because the intricacies of a single case will be illuminated throughout the research process (Gerring, 2004; Johansson, 2003). Furthermore, case study methodology was chosen for this project because it supports the use of multiple methods (Tellis, 1997). The use of multiple methods produces an in – depth investigation that meets the criteria for a case study (Tellis, 1997). There are six common sources of evidence that are used when conducting a case study: documentation, archival research, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Yin, 1994). Within paper one the researcher employed documentation, direct observation, participant observation as well as conducted a focus group. For paper two, the researcher used a questionnaire.

The case study methodology may allow the researcher to draw generalizations across the wider domain (Gerring, 2004). Therefore, the case study results may be applicable for other professional sport teams' Twitter campaigns. Finally, a singular case study was adopted as a comparative analysis of numerous NHL teams could not have been completed within the time constraints of this study.

Case study. The purpose of conducting a case study is to thoroughly analyze an object of study which is “a complex functioning unit, investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods, and be contemporary” (Johansson, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, case study methodology is

conducive to the researcher undertaking content analysis of the Senators tweets, focus group research and the administration of an online questionnaire. Therefore, through the utilization of multiple methods the case study methodology is used because it will allow the researcher to further delve into the current social phenomenon, Twitter and describe the links that occur within it (Yin, 1994).

Paper one of the case study will provide the researcher with information regarding what specific tweets elicit a greater reaction from the Ottawa Senators' followers on Twitter and furthermore, if this level of activity impacts their level of inclusion within the central fan group.

Paper two of the case study will provide the researcher with information regarding the impact of the Ottawa Senators Twitter campaign, how that influences the followers' social identity formation and if this is related to the followers' Twitter activity level. Finally, the research will uncover whether the Senators' Twitter followers' activity level is indicative of their fan commitment level to the team.

Data Collection and Analysis

Paper one employed a two-phased research approach: 1) thematic analysis and 2) focus group research. Two different tools were used to help analyze the data and they were, Twitonomy and NVIVO.

Twitonomy. Twitonomy, an analytical software, will retrieve Twitter information vital to phase one of this research. Twitonomy will export the following information to an excel spreadsheet: the tweets sent by the Ottawa Senators, and the number of times the tweet was retweeted –

and its resulting potential reach, and the number of times the tweet was favourited (Twitonomy, 2013). The resulting excel spread sheet from Twitonomy will then be imported to NVIVO10.

NVIVO. NVIVO10 is the other research tool that will be used for phase one of the research project. NVIVO10 will allow for the organization of all pertinent documents related to the research project (QSR International, 2012). NVIVO10 will assist in the qualitative content analysis for the project – as the researcher will be able to create specific nodes (themes) in relation to the content tweeted (QSR International, 2012).

Phase One

The official Twitter account for the Ottawa Senators, @Senators³ was monitored from August 1st 2013 to November 30th 2013. The tweets derived from the Ottawa Senators' Twitter account were publicly available. A total of 2026 tweets were analyzed. The researcher had a larger number of units of analysis than previous Twitter research (ex: 1193 tweets (Pegoraro, 2010) 1450 tweets (Blaszka et al., 2012) and 895 tweets (Hull, 2014)). The allotted research dates were chosen as they represented different periods within the hockey season. For instance, August represented the off – season, September represented the pre – season, October represented the beginning of the season and finally, November represents when the season is completely underway. It was believed that these periods would enable the researcher to explore the various ways in which communication with the followers on Twitter, may differ based on the time period within the season.

³ @NHL_Senators and changed to @Senators on September 9th 2013

Thematic analysis. An inductive approach was taken to the data set. Inductive thematic analysis was chosen as it is a systematic procedure where qualitative data is guided by specific evaluation objectives; however, it is not limited based on previous concepts, theories or methodologies (Thomas, 2006). Thus, the researcher evaluated the text to decipher specific themes that resulted out of the text tweeted by the Ottawa Senators and furthermore, which theme elicited the greatest response by their followers. According to Thomas (2006) there are five key features to inductive analysis and they are:

- Category label: a word or short phrase used to refer to the category. The label often carries inherent meanings that may or may not reflect the specific feature of that category
- Category description: a description of the meaning of the category, including key characteristics, scopes and limitations
- Text or data associated with the category: examples of text coded into the category that illustrate meanings, associations, and perspectives associated with the category
- Links: each category may have links with other categories. In a hierarchical category system these links may indicate superordinate, parallel and subordinate categories (e.g., “parent” or “sibling” or “child” relationships). Links are likely to be based on commonalities in meanings between categories or assumed casual relationships.
- The type of model in which the category is embedded: the category system may subsequently be incorporated in a model, theory or framework (p. 240).

Therefore, incorporating the 5 key aforementioned features, each unit of analysis, each tweet sent by the Ottawa Senators within the four month period was analyzed. Fan replies to the Ottawa Senators’ tweets were excluded from analysis. Through inductive analysis, the development of

specific patterns and therefore emergent themes arose within the Ottawa Senators' text (Patton, 2002).

The researcher obtained the text (the tweet) by downloading them daily from Twitonomy. The text was then imported to NVIVO. The researcher began by reading the text tweeted by the Senators daily over the four month period, and an outline of themes resulted. The researcher read the data multiple times to see if new codes emerged; if so, the data was read again to include the new coding structure to ensure that the message of each text fit the appropriate theme. Finally, the data was read "horizontally". "Horizontally" reading text is to review each set of group data by theme type (Marshall, 1999). This was done to ensure that each specific unit of analysis was categorized around the appropriate theme.

Alongside this, the researcher looked for popular hashtags used by both the Ottawa Senators Twitter account and their followers. The #hashtag was analyzed because it not only indicates the overarching topic of a particular tweet (Blaska et al., 2012) but particular hashtags promote the image of a cohesive communion amongst all participants (Anderson, 2006) as it signifies that the online community reached a consensus regarding a symbol that can help to coordinate and distribute conversation amongst all (Axel & Burgess, 2011). The researcher kept a separate word document and recorded hashtags used by the Senators.

Furthermore, The Ottawa Senators Twitter account, @Senators will be quantitatively analyzed by the researcher for the following: the number of times a tweet was retweeted (and the resulting potential reach) and the number of times a tweet was favourited will be derived from Twitonomy. Additionally, the researcher will manually record the number of replies each tweet received. The URL was also imported to an excel spread sheet by Twitonomy therefore easing the access (if clarity is needed) to each particular tweet for the researcher.

The number of times a tweet was retweeted and the number of replies to each tweet will be measured because those activities can be publicly viewed on Twitter. If an individual retweets the Senators their followers can view the original text sent by the Senators. Furthermore, when individuals reply to @Senators, those who follow @Senators can see the Twitter handles of those who reply to their tweets. Therefore retweets and tweets can be considered ‘public statements’. These statements show that the Twitter user has an interest in the Senators and those particular Twitter activities portray that interest to the larger online community. As well, the number of retweets, replies and favourites a tweet receives will show the Senators what particular tweets are more favorable with their followers. ‘Favouriting’ a tweet does not include a public statement -- it is not publicized on a person’s handle therefore, their followers are not aware when they favourite someone’s tweet -- however, it is a direct indication of the popularity of the content tweeted by the Senators. Additionally, the researcher will manually record whether it is game day vs. non – game day, and whether the games are home vs. away in order to measure the difference in Twitter activity levels by the Ottawa Senators followers. These findings when associated with a specific theme type will indicate what specific tweet types create an increase in user interaction on their Twitter handle.

Phase Two

Preceding the content analysis of the Ottawa Senators’ Twitter account, a focus group was conducted. The focus group research was used to uncover how the personal Twitter activity level of the Ottawa Senators’ followers influences their position within the online central fan group. The focus group was conducted in March of 2014 and was one hour and ten minutes long.

Focus group research. The focus group will be guided by the researcher. The focus group was chosen because it increases the chance of accessing difficult to obtain information

(Berg, 2001). When focus groups are executed properly “they are extremely dynamic. Interactions among and between group members stimulate discussion in which one group member reacts to comments made by another” (Berg, 2001, p. 112). Thus, one participant is able to add information and expand on another fan’s point. Therefore, greater detail and more insight can be generated through focus group discussion (Berg, 2001).

A focus group was conducted in March 2014. For the purposes of this research project, specifically recruitment, the researcher created a Twitter handle @MAResearchStudy. The researcher tweeted information regarding focus group participation. Individuals who were interested in participating were asked to send an e-mail to the e-mail account generated for this study: maresearchstudy@gmail.com. Within that e-mail potential participants were asked to include their name, age, gender, location and whether they followed the Senators’ on Twitter as that was a requirement for participation as the focus group pertained to the Ottawa Senators’ Twitter activity. When participants emailed the study, a confirmation e-mail was then sent indicating the date and time of the focus group and instructions on how to add the researcher to Skype. The focus group was conducted on Skype to follow the methodology of netnography chosen for this research project. To follow the concept of Twitter, where individuals can only see the name and profile photo of whom they follow, participants were instructed to disable their webcam during the video call (this also increased anonymity) The app Callnote by Kanda Software was used to record the audio from the online focus group (Microsoft, 2013). The focus group involved seven participants. According to Krueger (1994) “suggests that for complex problems focus group size should be kept to no more than 7 participants” (as cited in. Berg, 2001). The focus group audio was then transcribed and imported to NVIVO10.

Paper Two

Questionnaire. A questionnaire was administered for paper two of this research project. To coincide with the netnography methodology the questionnaire was administered online through Twitter, via SurveyMonkey.

The questionnaire was constructed using the first well-known instrument for measuring identification/commitment (I/C) developed in 1993 by Wann and Branscombe, the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) (Wann & Pierce, 2003). The SSIS has strong internal consistency, validity and reliability (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Pierce, 2003). The SSIS is an 8 item Likert-type scale with the (1) no I/C and the larger numbers indicating a greater level of identification, (8) high level I/C (Wann & Dolan, 1994). However, for the purposes of this research project the scale has been adapted to a 5 point Likert-type scale. Furthermore, specific terms have been designated to each point within the scale.

The questionnaire contained 18 – closed questions. The questionnaire was approved by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa. The questions related to the following:

Demographic Information. Participants completed general demographic questions related to their age and gender.

Measures of Senators Fan Behaviour. Participant completed measures of three dimensions of Senators fan behaviour (Fan activity, Social identity and Fan commitment). Fan Activity was comprised of three items that examined Twitter Minutes, Reading the Senators Handle and Interacting with the Senators. Social identity was comprised of one item about participant's social identity related to the Ottawa Senators. Finally, fan commitment was measured using six

items about team connection, Fan Commitment, Connection to the Fan Group, Online Relationships, Fan Club Membership and use of Senator hashtags. For each item participants responded using a 1 to 5 scale the extent to which the statements applied to them ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). See Appendix A for the full questionnaire.

The survey was created online using surveymonkey.com. Surveymonkey.com is a leader in online survey creation, and has the most recognized online trust seals including Norton, TRUSTe, McAfee and the Better Business Bureau (SurveyMonkey, 2013). Surveymonkey.com allows the researcher to create a URL specific to the survey (SurveyMonkey, 2013). The URL was distributed on Twitter. By distributing a questionnaire online the aspect of social desirability bias -- where individuals feel they must answer in a politically correct fashion -- was eliminated (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009). Furthermore, the researcher was able to access a large sample group by distributing the questionnaire online (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Despite the benefits of online dissemination, a remaining issue surrounding the questionnaire's distribution is validity of results since the designated respondents may not fill out the questionnaire completely (Bryman et al., 2009). This could be due to the respondent being unable to clarify specific details regarding a specific question with the researcher (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Bryman et al., 2009). However, this possible issue was overcome using Twitter. The researcher created a Twitter account specifically for this study (@MAResearchStudy). The account was set to 'public' to allow anyone to see @MAResearchStudy tweets, giving any Twitter user the opportunity to publicly or privately tweet questions at the researcher. The researcher tweeted a link to the questionnaire using the specific URL created by surveymonkey. The Ottawa Senators proceeded to retweet this specific tweet to their followers. In doing this, the researcher's handle @MAResearchStudy was made visible to all of the Ottawa Senators followers. The researcher monitored the retweet and

followed the discussion on the Senators Twitter handle regarding the questionnaire. Thus, the researcher read all the replies that the questionnaire tweet received. This was to ensure that if anyone had a question and asked it through a reply, an answer would be provided.

Interested participants, after giving their informed consent, completed the ten minute questionnaire. A requirement for individuals to participate in the questionnaire was whether they followed the Senators on Twitter. Therefore, to target this specific sample the researcher asked the individuals if they followed the Senators on Twitter, and if they were to answer yes, they would continue on with the questionnaire. However, if the individual responded no, then the individual was thanked for their participation and was not allowed to continue on completing the questionnaire. The recruitment was voluntary in nature and those who participated were able to discontinue the survey at any point by closing their browser.

The sample is a self – selected sample. According to Sterba and Foster (2008) within a self – selected sample, the researcher chooses the sample under analysis however, they have the option to explicitly participate or not. Due to the online nature of the questionnaire and focus group participating the individuals (the units) can agree or decline to participate. A self – selected sample is adequate for this research because the individuals who participate in the survey and the focus group are a direct representation of the sample group. Furthermore, because the study is administered via the Ottawa Senators Twitter account it ensures that every individual who follows them on Twitter has the same probability of being selected and that they are not eliminated based on geographic location.

The Ottawa Senators' Twitter account retweeted the tweet containing the link to the questionnaire two times: on February 27th, which was not a game day, and March 25th, which was an away game where the Senators faced off against the Florida Panthers. The Ottawa

Senators retweeting the tweet specifically targeted the participants for this study: followers of the Ottawa Senators. Due to the nature of Twitter, the researcher had no ability to track who then proceeded to retweet the link from the @Senators or who would retweet it from @MAResearchStudy as the researcher kept an open Twitter profile. The survey closed on Tuesday May 20th. The responses were then downloaded from surveymonkey.com into an excel file. From there the researcher imported the excel file into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Article One: Can 140 characters connect them all?

Abstract

This research is a case study surrounding the Ottawa Senators of the National Hockey League. The case study method was chosen and the Ottawa Senators Twitter account @Senators, was the object of study. Through content analysis the researcher found what specific tweet type elicited the greatest Twitter activity (i.e. retweets, replies and favourites) from the followers of the Ottawa Senators. Alongside this, a focus group with 7 participants all of whom follow @Senators, took place. It was found that the players had the biggest impact on enticing a person to follow or become active on Twitter. This was also supported by the Twitter activity levels of the followers in relation to player specific tweets. Even though player specific tweets draw individuals to @Senators, the Senators do very little to engage their followers and create a relationship with them. Parasocial interaction (PSI) does not occur between the Senators organization Twitter handle and their followers, because as the results show @Senators is viewed online as a brand. As a result, the Senators do not create a fan community centralized around @Senators as they do not form connections with their followers. The fan group surrounding the team is fan created. I argue that each individual creates their own sub-section of the fan group on their Twitter handle. It is the summation of those sub – sections that create the online fan group. I also argue that this could forge a more inclusive fan community because there are various sub – groups that fans could fit in to. Thus, the lines become less distinct as between who is a member of the fan group and who is not, as the definition of a member becomes blurred across multiple Twitter handles.

Twitter is a social media, microblogging platform that has been gaining popularity since its inception in 2006 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The first tweet ever tweeted, was sent on March 21st, 2006 (Twitter, 2006). There are many reasons as to why individuals flock to Twitter. Twitter has the potential to connect individuals from a variety of geographical destinations and from various religious, political and cultural backgrounds. As one user tweeted, “this is why I love Twitter. I can come on here at any time to talk about any of my interests and have people who relate to what I’m saying⁴” (Twitter, 2014a). Twitter, due to its reigning popularity with the general public, many sports teams, coaches and athletes, have created Twitter accounts to capitalize on its current popularity and have begun to integrate it into their promotional and marketing activities (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). An example of a very successful Twitter account is the New England Patriots whom boast the most followers in the National Football League with 1.26 million followers⁵ (Burns, 2014). According to Christy Berkery, the New England Patriots media relations coordinator, Twitter for New England is the “cornerstone of our social media presence” (Burns, 2014, para. 5). For their marketing activities to be effective, they must ensure that their communication strategies through these social media platforms are engaging the consumer (Gronroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010). These communication strategies must create a dialogue between the organization and participants in order to establish a relationship between them (Gronroos, 2004). If consumers are satisfied with their relationship with an organization, long – term satisfaction will result and customers will be retained (Gronroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010). According Twitter (2014b), “each tweet represents an opportunity to show your voice and strengthen the relationship with the fan” (para. 1), therefore Twitter has the potential to strengthen bonds between sport organizations and their

⁴ This was tweeted by @lukejamesbgn March 14th 2014 at 9:22pm.

⁵ @Patriots as of February 10th 2015

followers. Therefore, this research paper will examine the Twitter handle of the sport organization the Ottawa Senators of the National Hockey League (NHL). According to Frederick, Lim, Clavio and Walsh (2012) the formation of connections manifested online “through social media have yet to be studied in their entirety” (p. 481). The perceived establishment of connections made online by fans of a sport organization have the potential to spawn an online central fan group (otherwise known as a fan nation) that surrounds the team (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). As a result, this study will research the followers of the Ottawa Senators on Twitter. This study will seek to explore what Twitter activity disseminated from the Ottawa Senators organization stimulates their followers to become active on Twitter. The researcher will be looking at the number of retweets, replies and favourites for each tweet. Furthermore, this research will also uncover if a followers’ resulting level of activity on Twitter specifically towards @Senators, influences the creation of and their perceived level of inclusion within the central fan group. Ultimately, this study will analyze what Twitter activity on behalf of the Ottawa Senators stimulates their followers to become active on Twitter and if this resulting activity influences their followers creation and position within the Senators central fan group.

Literature Review

Social Media

For the purpose of this research project social media will be defined as...

tools, platforms and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate and collaborate with others. Social media are distinguished from other forms of communication because they support user participation on a massive, collective scale; the contributions are also distributed among the participants to view, share and improve

(William & Chinn, 2010, p. 422).

This definition is inclusive of sections within Web 2.0, which is an umbrella term that encompasses the various segments of social media such as blogs, social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube), team websites, forums and bulletin boards (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Ioakimidis, 2010; Ming, MacIntosh & Bravo, 2012; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Web 2.0, “refers to a second generation of Web-based services that enable users to collaborate and share information online, highlighting user-created content (UGC)...[which is] any material created and uploaded to the Internet by amateur contributors” (Akar & Topcu, 2011, p. 38). This UGC is inclusive to the integration of text, graphics, pictures, video and sound content within the message, and ultimately places the user in control of what they post online (Ming et al., 2012). They also allow people to contribute to other individuals’ posts, thus helping to co-construct other people’s online reality. These sites also offer an element of exclusivity, as there are factors that determine who gets to participate within the online discussion.

Twitter. Twitter is the social media outlet that is being researched within this study. Twitter has been the most widely spread and adopted social media tool (Pegoraro, 2010). Twitter is a social media channel that allows users to post microblogs, which cannot contain more than 140 characters; these microblogs are posted on a person’s handle, also known as their Twitter profile page (Fisher, 2011). This profile page contains information and pictures that are available for the public to see. The profile is a carefully selected representation of the individual projected to the world. By providing consistent content, Twitter allows people to over-time “develop his or her own voice” (Burns, 2014, para. 6). Twitter also allows people to ‘follow’ other people’s handles, giving them the opportunity to view their tweets and respond if they wish (Pegoraro,

2010; Thomas 2011). Twitter, due to its textual and visual appearance is unlike other social media tools as its core is centered around facilitating conversations; its function is more communicative than social (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Ovadia, 2009).

Twitter in sport. Research surrounding social media has been conducted from a variety of perspectives. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the fans' perspective of the success of social media activities in bringing them together to create a community environment. Ioakimidis (2010) did a comparative study of 12 professional sports teams in four top tier leagues: The National Hockey League (NHL), The Super League (rugby), The Premier League (soccer), and the National Football League (NFL). Ioakimidis (2010) studied the online presence of the leagues and opportunities for fan interaction on their websites. Ioakimidis (2010) found that the perceived benefits fans received from the online social media sites, is getting harder to fulfill because the fans want even more opportunities for the development of social connections. Ioakimidis (2010) research highlights the reality that fans are the ones driving the growth of social media. Many fans want their social media opportunities to be exclusive to those that follow their particular team (Ioakimidis, 2010) or those who are a part of the "in-group" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Fans also want to be provided with a more in-depth perspective surrounding the entire sport experience, and most importantly, they want to be provided with the opportunity to develop social connections between each other. Ioakimidis (2010) stated, "establishing an online community provides a virtual home for fans to increase their 'felt' connection to the team and to other fans; it also offer opportunities to express a person's ideas and feel a greater sense of belonging to the community and the team" (p. 281).

Twitter in sport has also been analyzed for the utilization of its unique properties, such as the hashtag #. Blaszk, Burch, Frederick, Clavio and Walsh (2012) conducted a content analysis,

surrounding the Twitter hashtag #WorldSeries, during the 2011 World Series, to uncover who was mainly active on Twitter. Blaszk et al., (2012) case study provided information to marketers on how to actively communicate and create dialogue with their target audience through Twitter properties, by uncovering who is doing the majority of the communication. The hashtag #, provides a gateway into discovering the main audience engaged in the conversation (Blaszka et al., 2012).

Pegoraro (2010) also examined communication opportunities on Twitter but specifically for athletes. Pegoraro (2010) found that Twitter is increasing the amount of fan – athlete interaction, however “its potential as a marketing tool is not being realized by athletes” (p. 511). Fans are flocking to Twitter, because of the perception of direct access to athletes (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Pegoraro (2010) supported this claim, and found that fans use Twitter to ask athletes direct questions whereas athletes are using Twitter to give their fans an insider perspective on their personal lives.

Athletes and parasocial interaction. The insider perspective can often cultivate bonds of attachment as a result of parasocial interaction (PSI). Parasocial Interaction is a psychological phenomenon surrounding the relationship users establish with a media figure such as an athlete or coach (Frederick et al. 2012; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2010). PSI leads the fan (user) to behave in ways that mirror actual relationships. The fan begins to develop strong emotional attachments and exhibit strong emotional responses relating to the media persona (ex: athlete, coach, general manager, organization) they are following on Twitter (Frederick et al. 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2010). However, the relationship between the fan and the athlete is mediated and one – sided; it is the athlete who controls the content being delivered (Frederick et al., 2012; Sanderson, 2010). Twitter, despite it being a

social platform where users attempt to engage other users, a barrier exists as there is not in person interaction, however traditional relationship patterns may result (Frederick et al., 2012). There has been research executed surrounding the phenomenon of these mediated relationships particularly via Twitter. It has been researched as to how PSI manipulates/moulds the media user's viewpoint toward particular celebrities and societal issues attached to them. Examples of such celebrities and societal issues are Magic Johnson and the risk of contracting AIDS (Brown & Basil, 1995) and Mark McGwire in relation to performance enhancing drugs (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003). Alongside moulding the media user's viewpoint, Twitter has become increasingly popular amongst all athletes in creating and managing their own 'brand'. It allows athletes such as Usain Bolt and Serena Williams to instantaneously communicate with their fans, no longer restricted or subjected to potential information or context modification that can result out of traditional media outlets (Hutchinson, 2011). It also is a free 'branding' tool, for amateur athletes that are unable to receive the large endorsement deals. By utilizing Twitter, athletes can ensure the success of their brand through the formation of PSI mediated relationships.

Kassing and Sanderson (2010) addressed the formation of these relationships by measuring levels of PSI between the fan and the athlete. PSI was measured over a 3 week time period, during a cycling event called the Giro (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Kassing and Sanderson (2010) tracked American and English riders on Twitter from the beginning to the end of the event. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) tracked the frequency at which the athletes tweeted and the emergent themes that arose out of those tweets. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) found that Twitter helped to develop increased levels of PSI. As a result, a bond of intimacy was developed by the fan towards the athlete (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Fans began taking an increased interest not only in the specific athlete, but in the interactions occurring between fans as well;

individuals began identifying with the larger fan group surrounding the Giro (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). The research found that Twitter can help develop the athlete–fan relationship because the athletes provided insight, and private information through commentary and sharing of their opinions via Twitter, which cultivated an insider perspective (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). This insider perspective enhanced the ‘bond’ the fans felt toward the athlete. This study highlighted how athletes, through a specific online social medium, can create a more in–depth relationship for the fan. However, Kassing and Sanderson’s study is limiting, because it was geared toward single athletes throughout a single event, not a sport organization that wants to engage their fans and increase their fan commitment levels throughout the entirety of a season.

Fan Types

Fans are vital to the success of any sport franchise. Fans are defined as those individuals “who know about the techniques, guidelines and rules associated with the sports they follow; many are walking compendiums of the current status of particular players and teams” (Gantz & Wenner, 1995 p. 59). However, there are two types of fans when it comes to classifying fan group inclusion. There are potential members (those who are not a part of the central fan group) and members (those who are a part of the central fan group) (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). However, with the emergence of social media, the connected fan has arose (Hull & Lewis, 2014). The connected fan is a result of the expansion of the internet (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Specifically, this fan is a result of the platforms associated with Web 2.0, as they encourage the establishment of connections between individuals. Connected fans find team information and connect with other like – minded individuals through websites, social networking sites and mobile phone applications at least once per day (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Connected fans can be either potential member or members. For the purpose of this research the connected fan will be under review.

Fan community. The ideal fan is one whom is a member of the community surrounding the team (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). However, in order for a community to arise interaction between individuals (i.e. potential members) must occur (Quick, 2000). The interaction and dialogue that occur on social media channels between sport fans, can result in the formation of bonds between fans of particular sport teams (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Depending on the resulting number of connections a fan community can arise. However, within the virtual world, members of virtual communities (i.e. connected fans) are connected by impersonal links as “they are bound by reference to common objects or goals, not by personal relations” (Memmi, 2006, p. 288). Many communities can be described as a fan nation. A fan nation is defined as an imagined community, limited and sovereign (Anderson, 2006). The nation is imagined as most members will never meet or interact but “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). This coincides with Twitter, as it defies geographical boundaries (ex: fans who identify as a member of Red Sox Nation are not limited to residing within the Boston area). Within the context of this study the Senators is what links each connected fan together. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) describe traditional communities as being marked by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions. The concept of a shared consciousness coincides with the description of a fan nation as both encourage the thought of a ‘shared image’ of what it means to be a fan. However, there is not a definition centered specifically on online communities. Adams and Smith (2008) fill this void as they describe virtual communities as electronic tribes. Electronic tribes are an “exclusively narrowly focused, network – supported, aggregate of human beings in cyberspace who are bound together by a common purpose and employ a common protocol and procedure for the consensual exchange of information and opinions” (Adams & Smith, 2008, p. 17). Adams and Smith (2008) describe the tribe as bound by a common purpose,

the development of personal relationships is not explicit. The development of personal relationships is what sustains a community as according to Rheingold (1993) definition of virtual communities which are “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on these public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5 as cited in Zappavigna, 2011, p. 5). Adapting the description of electronic tribe (Adams & Smith, 2008) and virtual community (Rheingold, 1993) an online community is a collection of human beings in cyberspace, that are bound together by a common purpose, that encourages interaction between individuals and results in the development of personal relationships between members through common protocol, either online or off-line with the focus of these relationships centered around a specific interest through which individuals identify (further adapted from Seo et al., 2007 description of a community).

However, the sport fan was a common identity not mentioned by Adams and Smith (2008) or Rheingold (1993). According to Norman (2014) it is the “online social formations and interactions of sport fans [that] remain underexplored” (p. 398) and this research paper attempts to fill that void by analyzing how the Senators fans interact with their handle and its effect on community formation. Furthermore, Norman (2014) identifies that “the description of online groups as communities is contested in the academic literature on Internet-based social interaction” (p. 404). Therefore, for this research paper the term fan nation (Foster & Hyatt, 2008) and virtual community (Rheingold, 1993) will be used in conjunction when defining the Senators online central fan group.

Methods

This study will be guided by qualitative research methods that include the case study methodology. A case study was chosen because the intricacies of a single case will be

illuminated throughout the research process and furthermore, the findings can be applicable across the wider domain (Gerring, 2004; Johansson, 2003). Twitonomy and NVIVO will be used for data analyses purposes.

Case Study

The purpose of a case study is to thoroughly study a particular case (Gerring, 2004). A case is defined as the object of study and it should be “a complex functioning unit, investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods, and be contemporary” (Johansson, 2003, p. 2). As a result, the complexities of a single case should be illuminated throughout the research process. Furthermore, the case study methodology is used because it will allow the researcher to further delve into the current social phenomenon, Twitter. The outcome of the case will also allow the researcher to draw generalizations across the wider domain (Gerring, 2004). Therefore, the case study approach will allow the researcher to uncover what specific Twitter activity of the Ottawa Senators results in increased follower activity (i.e. retweets, replies and favourites) on Twitter. Furthermore, the case study results may be applicable for other professional sport teams’ Twitter campaigns. Finally, a singular case study was adopted as a comparative analysis of numerous NHL teams could not have been completed within the time constraints of this study.

Data Analysis

This study employed a two-phased research approach: 1) inductive thematic analyses and 2) focus group research to help answer the research purpose. Two different tools were used to help analyze the data, specifically Twitonomy and NVIVO.

Twitonomy

Twitonomy will be one of the research tools chosen for this project. Twitonomy is an analytical software which will retrieve information from Twitter that is vital to the research project. Twitonomy will export the following information to an excel spread sheet: the tweets sent by the Ottawa Senators, the time it was tweeted, the number of times the tweet was favorited, the number of times it was retweeted and the resulting potential reach (Twitonomy, 2013). The resulting excel spread sheet from Twitonomy will then be imported to NVIVO10.

NVIVO

NVIVO10 is the other research tool used within this project. NVIVO10 will allow for organization of all pertinent documents related to the research project (QSR International, 2012). NVIVO10 will assist in the qualitative content analysis for the project – as the researcher will be able to create specific nodes (themes) in relation to the content tweeted (QSR International, 2012).

The official Twitter account for the Ottawa Senators, @Senators⁶ was monitored from August 1st 2013 to November 30th 2013. These dates were chosen as they represented different periods within the hockey season. For instance, August represented the off – season, September represented the pre – season, October represented the beginning of the season and finally, November represents when the season is completely underway. It was believed that these periods would enable the researcher to determine/explore the various ways in which communication with the fan base may differ based on the time period within the season. This expands previous

⁶ @NHL_Senators and changed to @Senators on September 9th 2014

research as other studies have analyzed communication with one off sporting events (see Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), playoffs (see Blaszkowski et al., 2012) and the Olympics (see Gruzdev, Doiron, & Mai, 2011).

Following the content analyses of the Twitter account, focus group research was used to help determine how their personal Twitter activity in relation to the Senators handle impacted their position within the central fan group. The focus group research was also used to determine specific activity on behalf of the Senators that made their fans feel included within this community and how the Senators could improve their inclusivity for all.

Phase One

The information on @Senators is publicly available.

Inductive analysis occurred during phase one by observing the @Senators account. Inductive analysis is guided by evaluation objectives set by the researcher (Thomas, 2006). However, the evaluation is not constrained by structure; by previous concepts, theories or methodologies (Thomas, 2006). Specifically, the inductive analysis approach consists of “the use of detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The data is a result of each tweet that was sent on behalf of the Ottawa Senators Twitter account throughout the four month research process. Fan replies to each tweet were excluded from analysis. Through inductive analysis, the development of specific patterns and therefore emergent themes arose within the Ottawa Senators text (Patton, 2002). The researcher obtained the text (the tweet) by downloading them daily from Twitonomy. The text was then imported to NVIVO. The researcher began by reading the text tweeted by the Senators daily. Major ideas were recorded. This was done over the four month period. After the four month period a raw outline of themes

had been recorded. The researcher read the data again to see if new codes emerged; if so, the data was read again to include the new coding structure. Reviewing the data multiple times was to ensure that the underlying message of the text fit the developed themes. Finally, the data was read “horizontally”. “Horizontally” reading text is to review each set of group data by theme type (Marshall, 1999). This was done to ensure that the text fit the appropriate theme.

Alongside this, the researcher looked for popular hashtags used by both the Ottawa Senators Twitter account and their followers. The #hashtag was analyzed because it not only indicates the overarching topic of a particular tweet (Blaska et al., 2012) but particular hashtags also signal common interests amongst fans, promotes the image of a cohesive communion amongst all participants (Anderson, 2006) as well, it signifies that the online community reached a consensus regarding a symbol that can facilitate conversation amongst all (Axel & Burgess, 2011). The researcher kept a separate word document and recorded hashtags used by the Senators.

Furthermore, The Ottawa Senators Twitter account, @Senators was quantitatively analyzed by the researcher for the following: the number of times a tweet was retweeted, the potential reach as a result of the retweets, the number of replies to each tweet and, the number of times each tweet was favoured. This Twitter activity will be accounted for throughout the duration of the research period. The tweet itself and the number of favorites, retweets and the resulting potential reach will be derived from Twitonomy. However, the researcher had to manually count the number of replies to each tweet. The URL was also imported to an excel spread sheet by Twitonomy therefore easing the access (if clarity is needed) to each particular tweet for the researcher.

The number of times a tweet was retweeted and the number of replies to each tweet will be measured because those activities can be publicly seen on Twitter. Followers of each individual can see the specific text retweeted on that persons handle. Those who follow @Senators can see the Twitter handles of those who reply to their tweets. Therefore, retweets and tweets can be considered ‘public statements’. These statements then show that a particular follower has an affiliation to the Senators. As well, the retweet and replies reinforce particular tweets are more favorable than others. Furthermore, the retweet and replies are of significance because they are a fans’ way of communicating with the larger online community surrounding the Senators. The researcher will also record the number of times a tweet is favoured. ‘Favouriting’ a tweet does not include a public statement (the action is not published on a person’s handle when they favourite someone’s tweet) however, it is a direct indication of the popularity of the content, and a person’s identification and affiliation towards the team. Favoured tweets will give the Senators a clearer idea as to what their fans find stimulating. The researcher will also be cognizant and manually record whether it is game day vs. non – game day, and whether the games are home vs. away in order to measure the difference in Twitter activity levels by the Ottawa Senators followers. These findings when associated with a specific theme type will indicate what specific tweet types create an increase in user interaction on their Twitter handle.

Phase Two

A focus group was conducted in March 2014 via Skype by video call. Participants were instructed to disable their webcam during the video call, to increase anonymity – this is in line with the concept of Twitter, whereby the individual does not have physical contact with other Twitter users. The only visible information was the Skype participant’s names and the photo

each individual may or may not have provided for their Skype profile. This is very similar to Twitter as individuals only see each other's names and profile pictures. The app Callnote by Kanda Software was used to record the audio from the online focus group (Microsoft, 2013). The focus group audio was then transcribed and imported to NVIVO10. The focus group involved seven participants, all of whom were recruited via Twitter. For the purposes of this research project, specifically recruitment, the researcher created a Twitter handle @MAResearchStudy. @Senators retweeted a tweet from @MAResearchStudy that contained a link for the questionnaire that is applicable for phase two of the study. The researcher then tweeted information from their own account regarding the focus group. Individuals whom were interested in participating were asked to send an email to maresearchstudy@gmail.com (an e-mail account created specifically for this study). The participants were then asked to provide their name, age, gender, location, Twitter username, and whether they followed the Senators. Following the Senators on Twitter was a requirement to participate as all of the questions within the focus group pertained to the Ottawa Senators Twitter activity. When participants emailed the study, a confirmation e-mail was then sent indicating the date and time of the focus group, and step-by-step instructions on how to add the researcher to the video call.

Results

This phase of the study was comprised of examining the types of tweets, the number of retweets and the resulting potential reach, the number of favourites and the number of replies. First, the results section will detail the findings of the inductive analysis. Following this, the focus group results will be reported.

Phase One

Examining Tweets

A total of 2026 tweets were analyzed over a four month period within this study. Tweets were analyzed from August 1st 2013 until November 30th 2013. August retrieved 220 tweets; September 534 tweets; October 713 tweets and November 559 tweets. Each tweet was categorized under specific nodes. The unit of analysis for the content analysis was the text tweeted by the Ottawa Senators over the four month research period. The text was read through six times to obtain a sense of the whole. The text was then divided into specific nodes and child nodes during the various iterations. For example, during iteration two the following nodes were present:

- Content – Article, Audio, Pdf, Video, Website
- Fan – Content, Engagement
- Interactivity – Retweet a Player, Retweet a Sponsor, Tagging of Individuals, Tagging of Sponsors
- Promotional – Games, Game Updates, Audio, Events, Sponsors, Tickets
- Senators Staff – Coach, Eugene Melynk, GM, Senators Staff
- Player

Throughout the four month period different themes would arise in the text. It should be noted that a particular child node of interest arose and that is the ‘tagged’ node. Throughout the coding process it was identified that the ‘@’ symbol serves more than its previously defined function in literature of direct communication. Throughout the content analysis it was discovered that based on the content of the tweet direct communication may not be occurring and the purpose of the ‘@’ symbol is to provide a link to the person’s Twitter handle who is being discussed within that particular tweet. Following that, notes about the tweets were taken for each theme. Once all the data, was compiled the researcher read through the text again with the definitions of the themes that were previously determined. With the emergent of new themes, and the current themes being

compared based on differences and similarities further refinement of the coding categories took place. The following tentative categories are an example from four:

- Content – Article, Audio, Pdf, Video, Website, Outside Website
- Fan
- Follower – Modified Tweet, Retweet
- French Communication
- Game Updates – Tweet at a Player
- Interactivity – Retweet a Player, Retweet a Sponsor, Tagging Individuals, Tagging Sponsors, Retweet Sens Foundation
- Player
- Promotional – Audio, Events, Games – Lineups, Post Game Thoughts
- Senators Staff – Coach, Eugene Melynk, GM, Senators Staff

The focus group participants discussed themes such as player statistics and milestones and the Senators placement within the community. The researcher then applied the themes statistics and milestones and community to the text after the focus group concluded. The purpose of that exercise was to uncover the Twitter activity levels of the Senators followers in response to those themes and compare whether the activity level mirrored those deep resonating feelings of community within the focus group. To ensure consistency that the text fit the appropriate theme the text was read ‘horizontally’ to ensure each sample tweet fit the appropriate theme (Marshall, 1999). This allowed the researcher to determine if there were any inconsistencies within the categories. The final higher order nodes that emerged throughout the coding process were as follows: Online Media, Followers, French Communication, Games, Player, Rookie Camp and Senators Staff. It should be noted that a hashtag node was created called #Hashtag just to see what specific hashtags were being used within the Ottawa Senators tweets. The majority of the higher order nodes each had child nodes associated with them.

Measurable Twitter Activity

Each node was analyzed to see the average number of retweets each tweet received over the four month period. The following table highlights which node received the largest number of retweets on average.

Table 1.0

Top five categories with the highest number of retweets.

Node	Retweet	
	<u>Number of retweets</u>	<u>Number of retweets/tweet</u>
Online Media: Article and Video n = 70	16836	240.51
Player: Tagged n = 137	19327	141.07
Sponsor: Tagged n = 167	18 041	108.03
Followers: Fan Engagement n = 30	3593	129.76
Community: Recognizing Community Members n = 3	222	74
Player: Statistics and Milestones n = 62	3859	62.24

For a full outline of the number of tweets per category, the total number of retweets and favorites and averages for both, see Table 1.0 in the appendix.

The top five retweeted tweets for each month were collected to see if there was a theme type associated with each tweet. See Table 2.0 in the appendix for the top five tweets for each month. For the month of August the top two tweets both involved Centermen, Kyle Turris. In the

month of September, the top three tweets with the highest number of retweets were also coded as player tweets. It should be noted that the tweet with the highest number of retweets in the month of September was regarding the new captaincy position; this is not an annual occurrence. For the month of October, the top three retweets, and the four remaining retweets for the month of November were all coded as Game Updates and specifically said “SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!” It should be noted that the season began Friday October 4th 2013 (National Hockey League, 2013). Thus, the results showed that tweets pertaining to members of the team received the highest level of reaction on Twitter through retweeting, specifically in the months of August, September and November.

The number of favorites that each node received was also tallied and average. The following table highlights the categories that received the largest number of favourites on average.

Table 2.0

The top five favourited categories

Node	Favourite	
	<u>Number of favourites</u>	<u>Avg. number of favourites/tweet</u>
Community: Recognizing Community Members n = 3	137	456
Player: Statistics and Milestones n = 62	2307	37.21
Online Media: Twitter n = 22	756	34.36
Player: Tagged n = 137	2279	16.64
Games: Upcoming Games n = 71	1140	1629

See Table 1.0 in the appendix for all node categories and associated favourite.

The number of replies each tweet received was also recorded. To see the top five tweets that received the most replies for each month please refer to Table 3.0 in the appendix. The month of August received 0.54 replies for each tweet; the month of September received 2.79 replies/tweet; the month of October received 3.36 replies/tweet; and the month of November received 3.29 replies/tweet.

The activity, the number of times a tweet was favourited, replied to, or retweeted, was recorded on game days and whether it was home vs. away. The total number of tweets tweeted during game days and the resulting level of activity can be viewed in Table 4.0 in the appendix.

The type of tweets for each month tweeted by the Ottawa Senators were analyzed to see which had the highest prevalence. For the month of August, retweeted tweets from the hierarchical node Followers comprised 7.48%, Players comprised 5.45%, Instagram comprised 4.83%, Video comprised 3.58% and Tagged under the hierarchical node player comprised 3.27%. The top five themes for the month of September were: Game Updates at 8.15%, Player at 7.15%, Instagram at 5.22%, Video at 4.0% and Tagged Sponsor at 3.42%.

The top five themes for the month of October were Game Updates at 9.93%, Instagram at 6.03%, Player at 5.58%, Contest at 3.04% and finally, Article at 2.74%.

The top five themes for the month of November were: Game Updates, Player, Picture, Sponsor Tagged and Video. Game Updates comprised 13.07% of all tweets tweeted, where Player comprised 4.97%, Sponsor Tagged comprised 3.48% and links to Videos comprised 2.74%. To view the full list of categories and the percentage of tweets they comprised see Table 5.0 in the appendix.

Phase Two: Focus Group Research

There were 7 members of the focus group; all of whom follow the Senators on Twitter. The demographic information of all participants is presented in Table 6.0 in the appendix. The purpose of the focus group was to uncover what their Twitter activity was in relation to the Senators and how that influenced their position within the central fan group. Additionally, the focus group was to uncover what specific Twitter activity the members of the focus group found engaging, and how that could be improved to help their followers to feel more included within the online community. The following emerged as major themes from the one hour and ten minute long focus group: Online Activity, Official Account, Hashtags, Online Community, Players, Team or Organization, Current Online Activity and Improvements.

Online activity. Many of the members of the focus group were unanimous regarding the activity level they exhibit towards the Ottawa Senators Twitter account. Participant 2 highlighted “I will pretty much just will see it [@Senators tweets] when it comes up on my news feed with other things. But I would maybe only check it if I saw something that seemed interesting to me”. Participant 7 agreed with this statement however, identified a reason that would send her to search @Senators, “I probably don’t go on the official account at all, unless it shows up in my news feed, or if there is somebody who is not playing for example and I can’t find out information on why”. This was supported by participant 5 “If something is happening in the league, on that particular day that involves the Sens I might go look it up”. The reason for this is, as one focus group member (participant 3) said, “Basically the Ottawa Senators tweet, I read them and hardly ever retweet them....[its] just like the Senators giving the facts”. One participant identified that the reason the official Twitter account of the Ottawa Senators doesn’t play a central role in their online activities (they don’t actively seek out what is posted) because as participant 4 said “It [the official account] is more of a brand than a person”.

Official account. @Senators, is the Ottawa Senators organization official account on Twitter. It is through this account that they manage their organization’s image, or as previously mentioned ‘brand’. As participant 6 said

I find that Sens are basing their Twitter account more on factual instead of trying to bring in more of a fan base through the younger crowds who always trade teams and jump on bandwagons compared to the long standing fans that have been there for the whole time (focus group, March 25, 2014)

The Ottawa Senators Twitter account has been identified by members of the focus group as a brand, focused on producing facts, thus posing the question does the current way the account is being executed work towards creating an ‘online community’ for their followers? Participant 7, identified the Senators account as a small member of the community.

I think the Sens official Twitter does contribute to this online community and helps to build it but I think they are a smaller player in it than some of the other Twitter accounts. I think that the official Sens Twitter does less to create an online Sens community than all of the other fan run accounts such as Silver Sevens, Red Scarf Union that kind of stuff (focus group, March 25, 2014)

Participant 3 agreed and said

I find that the Sens, play a very small part in creating the fan community. You need the fans of course and I just don’t think they [@Senators] really are making you want to cheer for them they are just posting news that they find interesting...it is just interesting stuff that makes you want to follow them but they aren’t creating that fan community it is more of the fans themselves (focus group, March 25, 2014)

The official Twitter account of the Senators was identified as a non – contributing member of the online community however participant 7 pointed out

I was just thinking about community stuff and whether or not like I felt like a part of a community based on the official Senators Twitter account and I realized the Sens use a lot of hashtags and hashtags are usually how I get in touch with other Sens fans on Twitter, and to see what they have to say. I mean there are certain people and certain accounts that I follow but I like to look at the hashtag and see what people are saying. So

yea, actually in a way I think I do feel like part of this community and I think that I kind of overlooked the use of hashtags as a way to engage the fans, because even though the engagement isn't happening directly through the official account, the hashtags help to get people talking and connect those people (focus group, March 25, 2014)

The hashtag had been identified in the focus group as a vocal point within Twitter, especially those hashtags created by the official Twitter account of the Ottawa Senators because those are the hashtags used by their followers to connect to other fans of the team.

Hashtags. Some of the hashtags identified by the focus group members were #GoSensGo, #Sensarmy and #Sens. These hashtags are used as mentioned by the focus group, to identify themselves as Sens fans, rather than someone who is just commenting on the Sens. However participant 3 addressed their indifference to hashtags "I never really use hashtags at all, the only hashtags I incorporate with my tweets is from the tweets I retweet. I am not really big on the hashtags so for me it doesn't really apply". Participant 4 identified her use of the hashtag to communicate her affiliation for the Sens "I use hashtags and stuff mostly because more people see your tweets, if you use hashtags, it will likely be heard, so it is a vocal way to gain a few more followers". Participant 7 identified their use of hashtags to directly connect with other followers "...I realized the Sens use a lot of hashtags and hashtags are usually how I get in touch with other Sens fans on Twitter...". Therefore, hashtags allow the opportunity for interaction.

Online community. In order for the establishment of an online community, there must be interaction and communication between individuals. The dialogue between individuals can create a multitude of connections and it is the summation of these connections that have the potential to create a community. Participant 4 said "Twitter is kind of a funny thing, you are interacting with more people but you don't really know them so you are making little internet

chat room friends, so in ways like that then that doesn't equate with me making me feel more a part of the Sens community, like as a team or in the city of Ottawa, but I guess it does in my online presence you know when I get more followers". Thus, this participant identified her use of Twitter in aiding the creation of an online community for herself. However, this online community as highlighted in her statement would not exist without other followers. Two participants, participant 4 and 7 identified that Twitter eases their ability to stay connected to other fans. Participant 4 (the same participant who said Twitter helps with her online presence) outlined that "I tweet often with other fans and because I am seeing more perspectives on the Sens and hockey in general". Thus, tweeting and communicating not only elicits relationships but extends knowledge surrounding the Senators. As participant 3 said "when you have Twitter come around it makes everybody, you don't realize how many people are out there watching it, tuning into the same thing you are and when you have other people thinking that it makes you feel more connected to the game". A prime example of the power of social media and establishing online connections was brought forth by participant 7 sharing her own experience. Participant 7, did not start off as a fan of the Ottawa Senators. However, before the inception of Twitter the Ottawa Senators had message boards and her use and interaction on those message boards changed that. Through her communication via the message boards with other fans she became a part of that community, and it therefore furthered her connection to the Senators. The participant stated "I think it absolutely can have those connections [connections between fans]. I still communicate with some of those people from that message board via Twitter, who I otherwise would not be socializing with I guess". Participant 3 identified that they have been able to move the connections they established online, 'offline' and have been to a game with people they have communicated with online.

I don't know if anybody is aware of RSU, Red Scarf Union, so most of the people on there are on Twitter. I have actually been to some Sens games with people that are in that group and that communicate on Twitter so it is a good way to meet up at games and get to know them outside of Twitter and cool kind of meeting them in person and you talk to them on Twitter and tweet them and all that and then you are games together so yeah I find that pretty interesting too how it connects fans like that (focus group, March 25 2014)

Thus, the Red Scarf Union uses Twitter as a tool to communicate and move relationships offline. However, one participant identified that it is not strictly the other fans that make up the online community. Participant 2 said "I agree with the fact that I like seeing more of the player interaction, like I feel more a part of the fan community, I feel less [a part of the community] when following the official Twitter and following the players themselves".

Players. Players are a key to the success of any professional hockey team – their on ice performance is crucial however, how they interact with fans can also impact fan retention levels. This interaction can occur via Twitter, and as one focus group member, participant 1, mentioned it can be beneficial "I think for Twitter it is mostly about developing that emotional connection [getting] closer with the players because you know what is going on...". The player presence on Twitter is important because it makes the follower feel connected to specific players, thus the team overall. Followers show this connection via their Twitter activity. As participant 7 said

I tend to retweet when a player has a milestone. Because they [@Senators] will usually send out a tweet like last night when Erik Karlsson hit the franchise record for defencemen they posted about that, so I retweeted that or when a call up gets their first NHL goal, stuff like that I will retweet (focus group, March 25 2014).

Team or organization. Within the focus group a distinction arose, whether or not the individuals were a fan of the team, or a fan of the organization. Many of the individuals within the focus group follow the Senators on Twitter because of their ‘off – ice’ activities. Participant 6 said “But more of the aspects towards the fundraising/sponsors and the Do it for Darren campaign, that sort of thing, it [Twitter] brings my attention to that, not being a Sens fan and realizing how much they support [the community] as being a sports team”. This individual also said “So it wouldn’t commit me to go to the Sens organization as supporting them as a team on the ice, but it would still allow me to support them off the ice in what they’re doing – skating, fundraising – and that sort of thing”. Thus, the focus group members outlined that Twitter not only provide fans with updates but also provides those who enjoy the community work exhibited by the Senators with information on how they can get involved. As participant 1 mentioned

They build a community by what they do in the community...[people] who don’t care about hockey as much, they are going to see what the hockey team does to commit to their community and they are doing things to better their community so I would say that they need to develop that that sense of belonging in the community. It reaches out to people who wouldn’t necessarily look at the Sens [but] just because they are hockey fans they will be on their feed... (focus group, March 25, 2014)

Current online activity. The participants have outlined that they appreciate when the Sens discuss players or the work they participate in as a team within the community. As an example, participant 5 said “I will watch player interviews and stuff, or if they have links to other things in general like maybe an article about the team or about game recap or game preview. I won’t read numerous tweets one after another, I will look for an interesting one that will link out to something else usually”. Another participant (1) said “...if they are doing

outreach in the community like here in Ottawa, I like knowing about that or working for any not for profit organizations I do like hearing about that kind of stuff”. Another participant (7) agreed when she said

I do agree with what [participant 1] was saying in that when the Sens show their community involvement and what they are doing to give back to Ottawa as a whole it may make me feel more of an emotional connection to them so I think that focusing on that through Twitter is probably a good way to make people feel more committed to the team

(focus group, March 25, 2014)

Despite outlining numerous positives in reference to the Senators Twitter activity the focus group outlined ways the organization can further connect with their fans via Twitter.

Improvements. Despite outlining numerous positives about the Senators activity the focus group outlined ways the organization can further connect with fans via Twitter. One focus group member, participant 1 said

I would feel more involved if sometimes you’ll tweet something and somebody will favorite it or they will start following you, that immediately makes me feel more connected to that person. I would say if the site [@Senators] did more that, or even posted like whose at the game tonight and then did a hashtag and people started following that hashtag and they retweeted and said like send me a picture of your seats or you know like more of that personal interaction I would say that I would feel more a part of it [Twitter community] (focus group, March 25, 2014)

This was further supported by participant 3's comment "Whenever I go to games, I'll always put a tweet out saying that I'm at this game and if I go with somebody I will tweet their Twitter handle as well just so that gets my involvement with the Senators when I go to games because I am excited for them." He further went on to explain that the reason he lacks an interest in the Ottawa Senators feed is due to the lack of engagement from the official Senators account over Twitter.

That would be interesting I would find. Like thanks for coming along have a good time at the game something like that but they have never done that, so that's why I don't really have interest in Ottawa Senators feed, like I follow them on Twitter but they don't really communicate with me for my Sens tweets so it makes it hard to feel connected to them (focus group, March 25, 2014)

The lack of engagement towards the fan was felt by another participant. Participant 7 said

I feel like it would be nice to see some more engagement with the fans from the official account because most of the fan engagement that I participate in or that I see is among people who follow each other or maybe some of the Sens blogs like Silver Seven Sens that kind of stuff. I think if the Sens official account engaged more with the fans by tweeting at them or retweeting them then there might be more of a community there (focus group, March 25, 2014)

Discussion

The purpose of the study is to analyze what Twitter activity on behalf of the Ottawa Senators stimulates their followers to become active on Twitter, and to determine whether this

activity influences their followers' perception of their inclusion within the Senators online central fan group.

To discover what particular Twitter activity on behalf of the Ottawa Senators stimulated their followers to become active on Twitter, the researcher performed a content analysis on the tweets tweeted by the Ottawa Senators. Alongside this, the researcher recorded the number of retweets and resulting potential reach, along with the number of favourites and replies each tweet received. The tweet, the number of retweets, the potential reach, and the number of favourites was gathered from Twitonomy. Twitonomy is an online analytical software which will retrieve the aforementioned variables and export it to an excel spread sheet (Twitonomy, 2013). Concurrently, the researcher manually recorded the number of replies each tweet received. The researcher monitored those aforementioned Twitter responses to see what particular tweet type elicited a greater Twitter response from the Ottawa Senators followers. This information was collected over the four month research period, August 1st 2013 to November 30th 2013. These dates were chosen as each month provided a snapshot of a specific point in time within the Ottawa Senators hockey season. August: off – season. September: pre – season. October: beginning of the season. November: season underway. The resulting sample size, the number of tweets that were analyzed were 2026.

The second objective of this research was to uncover whether a followers' activity level on Twitter influences the creation and their perceived level of personal inclusion within the Senators central fan group. To determine feelings of inclusion within the fan group a focus group was conducted. The focus group consisted of 7 participants. To be included in the focus group participants had to follow the Ottawa Senators on Twitter. The focus group occurred in March of 2014 and was one hour and ten minutes long.

This section discusses the development of Parasocial Interaction relationships between athletes and fans, and the organization and the fans. Secondly, it will analyze the importance of the hashtag and its fundamental use in the Senators online community development. Thirdly, the development of new fan categories, their relation to the online central fan group and the power of community initiatives are discussed. Finally, the makeup, the amalgamation of many sub fan – groups are discussed.

The impact players have with fans are influential for a sport organization as fans often want to associate with specific players. With the arrival of social media, fans often migrate to Twitter to satisfy and further this association (see Frederick, Lim, Clavio & Walsh 2012; Sanderson, 2010). As proven by Kassing and Sanderson (2010), when a fan is provided with an insider perspective on an athlete a bond of intimacy is created between the fans towards the athlete. This bond will ignite the fan to develop a strong psychological and emotional attachment to an athlete – this is known as Parasocial Interaction (PSI). Individuals who are involved in a PSI relationship, “...will often engage actively rather than passively in their relationships with media personas” (Frederick et al., 2012, p. 483). This want to associate with athletes was highlighted and supported by focus group statements and the measurable Twitter activity associated with player tweets. For example: tweets regarding Kyle Turris in the month of August received the largest and second largest number of retweets; and Erik Karlsson occupied the third largest number of retweets, received the most replies in the month of August, and was also mentioned in the focus group. Therefore, through the Ottawa Senators providing information about their players via their tweets they are helping the fans to satisfy this need for association. Thus, fan – athlete relationships don’t have to be mediated by the athlete. The Senators can position the athlete through their official Twitter account, @Senators in such a way

that PSI relationships between the athlete and the fan are formed, as it is the media persona – the persona of the player on Twitter that the fan develops a relationship with. Therefore, the athlete can potentially be bypassed in the creation of the athlete – fan PSI relationship.

To further cultivate the fan – athlete relationship the Senators can provide information about the player and promote their athletes Twitter handle by tagging them in a tweet using the '@' symbol. By tagging a player in a tweet, the Senators are providing their followers with an option to also follow the tagged player. In doing this, the Senators are giving their followers the opportunity to further immerse themselves within the Senators online community by finding out more information about that specific player. As Kassing and Sanderson (2010) noted, when the fan becomes attached to an athlete, they are also interested in the interactions that occur via Twitter surrounding their particular player of interest. This may then lead the follower to actively search for conversations taking place that involve that particular player. Furthermore, when fans identify with specific players as a by-product they may begin to immerse themselves within the associated team because the team directly impacts that specific player. As a result, the follower will seek out team related information. Therefore, the influence the organization has on the development of the fan – athlete PSI relationship is paramount as they can influence the position and depth, and possibly mould these relationships in a way which draws the individual more so to the team.

Information being provided by the organization about specific players, or the organization guiding players on how to execute their own Twitter accounts, may impact how fans perceive whom they are building a relationship with; they could view it as being mediated. However, Twitter and its inherent unique design, provides the perception of filter elimination and direct access to athletes (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). The desire to associate with a player

and/or team will overcome the thought of ‘filtered’ text, as long as the information still provides a ‘snapshot’ into the athletes daily life; the tweets must be perceived to provide insight, private information, opinions and interaction with followers (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Weathers et al., 2014). Therefore, it is the specific information provided via tweets that will impact whether fans interpret their relationship as mediated or authentic.

According to Armstrong et al., (2014) organizations who have the most successful social media campaigns focus on “being active, relatable, and truthful – all in an effort to facilitate a community like – environment where organizations and consumers seamlessly exist“ (p. 6). As previous PSI research (Fisher, 2009; Giles, 2002; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2010; Weathers et al., 2014) has highlighted individuals develop bonds over social – media mediums with a media persona. In this particular research context the media persona would have been the Ottawa Senators organization as it is their Twitter account under study. However, the data from the focus group showed that followers do not develop a PSI relationship with the Senators. The Senators are a media figure on Twitter; however according to the focus group their online demeanor portrays more of a ‘brand’. The Senators and their followers do not seamlessly exist in the same online environment. Being classified as a brand is inhibiting their followers from developing the emotional and psychological connections required to mimic actual relationships as it appears that there is not a human presence behind the @Senators Twitter handle. Therefore, the Senators organization is not successful in developing relationships with their followers. The lack of bond formation could be a reason why the online fan group isn’t centralized around @Senators. According to the focus group the Senators are not central to the sustainment of the online community; the interaction between the fans creates and sustains the community. The Senators only interacted with their fans 2.38% over the four month research period and the

resulting level of follower Twitter activity was low. Despite the lack of their followers resulting Twitter activity in response to tweets categorized as interaction, direct communication with the followers on Twitter is needed. The Senators recognizing their fans, according to the focus group on Twitter will result in feelings of appreciation on behalf of the fan and thus, will strengthen the bonds between the organization and the follower regardless of that individual's current attachment level. Therefore, without the Senators specifically interacting with their followers on Twitter they will never be able to create specific PSI mediated relationships with their followers. Whereas if these PSI relationships could manifest the Senators Twitter handle @Senators, could become the central location of the online fan community. It is the direct interaction between @Senators and their followers that may lead to their development of a PSI mediated relationship thus, creating a fan group that is centralized, mediated and controlled by @Senators.

The opportunity for interaction between individuals to discuss shared experiences is a key component of Twitter (Hull & Lewis, 2014) as these interactions have the potential to manifest into an online community surrounding the team. Hashtags provide the potential for numerous connections to materialize between fans, when individuals actively search for hashtags related to the Ottawa Senators, and then communicate with those who use Senators specific hashtags. Ultimately, hashtags allow people to search, find, and connect with each other; it is the cornerstone of conversation between individuals on Twitter. However, the use of the hashtag and the affinity for them as outlined by the focus group is individualistic. Topic dependent, the hashtag can direct the conversation in a number of ways. The Senators organization should create topic specific hashtags which direct the conversation in a way that positively frames the team. Despite being identified by the focus group as a non – influential member of the online community at large, the focus group identifies the Ottawa Senators Twitter account as significant

because it serves as the source of team related hashtags that they use to connect with other fans. Through the use of staple hashtags such as #Sens, #GoSensGo, #UnitedinRed, #RoadToHome, and #OTTAWAROARS the Ottawa Senators place followers in a position to use Twitter to seek out other like-minded individuals. Overall, the hashtags for each of the Senators' events needs to be created by the Ottawa Senators themselves. This strategy will show fans that the Senators are starting and promoting team – related conversations. The hashtags will serve as a guide; they will provide the fans with the specific language needed to get in contact with one another and thereby, further the online conversation, maintaining the online community.

A fans level of attachment to a sport team can be impacted by their position within the fan group that surrounds that particular team. The strength of a fan's identification with a fan group can provide a sense of community and a sense of belonging (Jacobson, 2003). The question is whether the followers of @Senators engage in a level of activity (retweeting, replying or favoriting @Senators tweets) that makes them feel a part of the central fan group. The focus group identified that their personal activity level on Twitter related to the Senators does not impact their position within the Senators' online community. However, the follower's activity in relation to the Senators that did impact their fan group membership was different than that proposed by this study. The focus group members stated that the more they interact either by following specific players of the team, retweeting tweets from @Senators, or interacting with their personal followers (whom many also follow the Senators), the further entrenched they become in the online community. The focus group emphasized it is the conversations they have with other fans of the Senators on Twitter that have the biggest impact surrounding their position in the online community. The strength of the community comes from fan run accounts and furthermore, fans interacting with each other on Twitter. This supports the research that “for

connected sports fans, the sense of community may not be the team or player for which they root, but Twitter itself” (Hull & Lewis, 2014, p. 24). Twitter as outlined by the focus group gives fans of the Senators a medium to connect – they can communicate and follow each other and get a wider scope of the game, specific players, the overall team and the organization itself. These personal communities have been created by each individual searching, following, and tweeting at others who also value the Senators through their own Twitter handle. The Senators fan community is an amalgamation of each of their followers self – created communities. As one particular focus group member said, she became a fan of the Senators because of her interaction with other fans through the Senators message boards. She then migrated from the message boards to Twitter to maintain contact with these individuals. Without the opportunity to interact with individuals via the message boards (and now Twitter) her sense of community, and thus attraction to the Senators may not have manifested. These connections made online between individuals can actually manifest into ‘official’ sub-groups surrounding the team. One focus group member experienced firsthand, how sub – groups form through social media which has allowed people to go from ‘online’ to ‘offline’ through The Red Scarf Union (RSU). According to the RSU’s website the RSU is a group of die – hard Ottawa Senators supporters, who coin themselves as the ‘best fans in the NHL’ (Red Scarf Union, 2014). The gathering of members of the RSU is promoted online and they meet offline at the arena and attend games together. The aforementioned examples (RSU and migration from messages boards to Twitter) illustrate that the “social aspect of sports and how the interaction that occurs as a result is able to create conversations and bonds among viewers that can bridge social, religious, and political differences among fans of the same team” (Hull & Lewis, 2014, p. 24). The Senators must continue to migrate, evolve and establish online identities with each emerging social media

channel. Their presence will ensure that their fans can migrate from each social media channel and still have a body of reference (a social media identity of reference) to associate with and thereby continue their affiliation with the Senators organization. Therefore, in light of this research it has been shown that the Ottawa Senators online fan community is not created by @Senators; it is fan created. Each followers' online universe becomes a sub – section of the online fan community surrounding the Ottawa Senators. It is the sum of these sub – sections that create the fan community as a whole. However, despite the focus group members creating their own fan community via their own Twitter handles, many focus group members still felt disregarded as @Senators do not facilitate one large and specific community. Due to this some of the focus group members still categorize themselves as outside the 'official' fan group.

The research also identified two types of Senators fans: individuals who were fans of the team and individuals who were fans of the organization. As identified within the focus group to be a fan of the team an individual is a fan of their on – ice product. As a result, that individual wants the Senators to have a successful on – ice winning percentage. A fan of the organization is an individual who is supportive and likes the philanthropic work the organization does in the community; these individuals are not necessarily fans of the Senators on – ice product. Many of the individuals in the focus group who identified as fans of the Senators organization support other teams on the ice. Therefore, you can be a fan of the organization and not the team, a fan of the team and not the organization, or a fan of both. Many of the focus group members who identified as only fans of the organization came to be affiliated with the Senators based on their current residence. All of the focus group members either originated or had moved to Ottawa and the surrounding area. Therefore, you can become a fan of the organization out of geographic circumstance as the Senators are the closest affiliated NHL team in the Ottawa area. In addition

to geographical proximity, affiliation is impacted by each individual's socialization processes. An example of such factors that impact an individual are the influential roles played by family, friends, peers, and co – workers (Jacobson, 2003). This study did not look at socialization processes, however this is an avenue for further study. Therefore, the Senators need to be cognizant of these two different types of fans.

Both groups of fans within the focus group outlined that through their utilization of Twitter they have increased their affinity for the Senators organization. All participants in the focus group, regardless of their fan position concluded that their affinity for the Senators organization has increased because the Senators tweeted information that shows their concern and investment for others through their community initiatives. An example that resonated with the entire focus group was the Do It For Darron Campaign (D.I.F.D). DIFD supports young people who suffer from mental illness; it encourages youth to talk openly about and issues surrounding mental illness (DIFD, 2014). The Senators support DIFD through “Hockey Talks”, which is a month long campaign (it occurs in February), and each hockey team associated with it spreads awareness through in-arena messaging and online story – telling (DIFD, 2014). One of the Senators major events is the Youth Mental Health Awareness Night, held in conjunction with the Senators Foundation in honor of Darron Richardson⁷ (DIFD, 2014). Therefore, the quantitative data analysis and the focus group illustrate that the concept of community is sentimental and important amongst all fans regardless if they are fans of the team or organization. The research also highlights that community initiatives provide a topic of discussion for both fans of the organization and fans of the team. Therefore, community

⁷ Daron Richardson was the daughter of the American Hockey League Binghamton Senators Head Coach Luke Richardson. The Binghamton Senators are the farm team affiliated with the Senators.

initiatives provide the opportunity to bridge the gap between both groups of fans. By bridging the gap, opportunities for dialogue arise which could result in the establishment of emotional connections between individuals of both groups. Due to the materialization of emotional connections between individuals who classify themselves as fans of the team and individuals who classify themselves as fans of the organization, fans of the team may seek out team related information in order to sustain this newly formed relationship. Through this process, it may then lead to team identification. Therefore, this could lead to the recruitment of new fans of the team. Thus, community initiatives may potentially open the door for further fan recruitment, as the fan of the organization is an untapped resource who already possess a level of attachment toward the organization.

Beyond community initiatives it was highlighted that player information and fan engagement were ways that the Senators could increase fan affiliation for the team and the organization. This leads to the suggestion that the Ottawa Senators need to utilize their players and get them involved in the community. The use of players within community initiatives will target both groups of people; those who are fans of the organization and those who are fans of the team. By incorporating players and having them publicly participate in the initiatives that take place within the Ottawa community, this will increase the potential topics for conversation for individuals to have online. Providing a mutual topic of interest as previously mentioned, may bridge the gap between those who identify as fans of the teams and fans of the organization as there is a common interest: community initiatives. Furthermore, this may elicit a positive emotional connection in both groups of individuals, furthering their affinity for the Senators organization. It may also ignite and pique the interest of fans of the organization toward a

specific player leading them to find out more information about that player; thus, furthering the association to the team one player at a time.

Therefore, in summation and in response to RQ1 the specific Ottawa Senators Twitter activity that stimulates their followers to become on Twitter is player laden tweets, tweets that contain links to Articles and Videos. Furthermore, the Senators recognizing community members had an immense retweet response. This response coincides with findings in the focus group that many of the individuals became attracted to the organization based on their community initiatives. Finally, providing followers with Game Updates is a crucial. Despite the low retweet and favorite percentage related to game updates, people replied to these type of tweets – and often times, in response to each other. Thus, game updates facilitates interaction between followers within the Senators Twitter feed promoting community formation.

In summation, in response to RQ2 upon beginning this research project the researcher determined there was ‘one central fan group’ as previous research depicted fan groups as so (see Anderson, 2006; Crawford, 2004; Foster & Hyatt, 2008). However, upon conducting the focus group the researcher determined that there is not a fan group centralized around the Ottawa Senators Twitter account. The fan group at large is an amalgamation of each individuals self – created fan group that they execute via their own Twitter handle, mainly through interacting with other Sens fans. Furthermore, the Twitter activity in direct relation to @Senators bears no impact on their inclusion within the fan group. It is the activity with other followers that bears an impact.

Practical Importance

This study provides the Senators with the information necessary to execute a fan centralized Twitter campaign. It highlighted how the Ottawa Senators can specifically utilize Twitter to increase traffic on their handle, and propagate the formation of a centralized fan community that unites via Twitter.

Firstly, the Ottawa Senators need to work towards creating dialogue that will engage discussion between their followers. Results highlighted the fans have an affinity for player specific information. Therefore, the Ottawa Senators can engage their followers and increase dialogue between them by increasing the percentage of tweets that are player specific.

The Ottawa Senators should utilize their players by having them tweet from the @Senators account, and answer specific questions posed to them by followers. This will draw fans to the official account. Furthermore, the Senators should have their players become members of Twitter. In doing so, they should interact with the official Ottawa Senators Twitter account, and have them interact and engage in dialogue with their personal followers by replying to specific questions and retweeting their tweets. By players interacting with their followers it will lead to a sense of appreciation which could potentially be reflected onto the team and organization due to the direct relation. The players should tweet personal thoughts related to games, practices, and their private life. It was mentioned in the focus group that they like information on the player's diet, hobbies, what they do on road trips, etc. Players should also interact with their teammates on Twitter. Interacting with other individuals online will give their followers insight into their personal friendships (see Weathers et al., 2014). Players should also provide information that is not sport related, as to provide another aspect of their personal self.

Player efforts should also be directed towards community initiatives as this would further fan recruitment by targeting those individuals who are fans of the organization. It would increase the likelihood of fans of the organization and fans of the team engaging with each other via Twitter as there is a point of common interest between both parties. Therefore, players should physically be in the community and both they and the Senators should tweet about their efforts.

In order for followers' to have the opportunity to connect with one another the creation of hashtags specific to Senator related events need to be created. This will help each follower to find other like-minded individuals to converse with. This will also allow the Senators to track the conversation being had by their fans on Twitter by following the specific event created hashtag. This will also provide the Senators with the opportunity to gain feedback regarding the specific event and may give those indications on how to improve.

The issue of 'filtered' information on Twitter is prevalent, as the organization is conscious of the impact on their brand and overall image. It is this filtered information which may deter individuals from following the Senators online. To overcome this barrier, the Senators need to determine what their 'personality' is on their social media outlets, and how this will be executed via Twitter. Their personality should differ however, be similar to that of the Los Angeles Kings in that they should appear 'real' to the consumer; provide earnest and authenticity within each tweet (Armstrong, Delia & Giardina, 2014). This extends to each of the Senators players as information they tweet impacts not only the fan – athlete relationship but the fans relationship with the team and organization. Furthermore, the Senators should interact with their fans by either retweeting, or replying specifically to them; engage them in dialogue because in doing so it is another way for fans to develop involvement with the team (Armstrong et al., 2014). Specifically, fans wanted to be recognized that they were at a game. Replying to fans and

thanking them for attending, or retweeting their tweet is a way for the organization to engage in dialogue and show appreciation for their fan base. Furthermore, communication with the fan was identified by both those who are a fan of the organization and those who are a fan of the team as a way to create a fan community that would be dictated by @Senators.

Conclusion

The research proves that in order for the Ottawa Senators to stimulate their followers online they must focus on fan engagement: direct communication with the fan either by retweeting or replying to them. This is critical to the success of the Senators Twitter campaign because the direct communication with their followers will further feelings of recognition on behalf of the follower thus, making them feel valued. Accompanying this, when a follower feels valued by the organization they will continue to (or potentially increase) their online activity with the Senators.

Outside of fan recognition the Senators can focus on their player – fan relationship by providing information about their players via their tweets. This will allow followers to develop a PSI mediated relationship that elicits emotions that mirror an actual relationship with a particular player (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). This relationship may extend the followers relationship to the team as the team directly impacts the player.

The player also impacts the organization as this research found that players coupled with community initiatives are the key to the success of bridging the gap between individuals and creating connections between those who identify as a fan of the team and those who identify as a fan of the organization. Therefore, player involvement in community initiatives are a way to

target the untapped fan base: fans of the organization, and influence them to become a fan of the team.

The research proved that an individual's level of activity on Twitter in relation to the Ottawa Senators Twitter (i.e. retweeting, replying or favouriting their tweets) account bears no impact on their creation and perceived level of inclusion within the central fan group that surrounds @Senators. One of the major determinants was the fact that the Ottawa Senators do not facilitate the creation of a fan group spear headed by their own account. Therefore, there is not a central fan group surrounding @Senators. However, the research did determine that an individuals' Twitter activity can impact their position within their personal self-created central fan group with the main topic being the Senators. The largest determinant of the creation of their own fan community was how much they interacted with other individuals who are concerned with the Senators. Therefore, the central fan group is impacted by Twitter activity that is not directly related to the @Senators account. The central fan group is created through each individuals participation via Twitter through retweeting, following and replying to those who are likeminded about the Senators. Therefore, each Twitter user, through their online activity creates their own sub – section of the fan group and it is the amalgamation of these subsections which create the fan driven and fan sustained central fan group surrounding the team.

Future Research

To further the advancement of research a longitudinal study could be undertaken to see how a new sports team's utilization of Twitter impacts their fan created online communities and if that impacts their success (i.e. longevity and financial stability) as an organization. Secondly, a comparison of the social media sites Twitter and Facebook could also be completed to see how

the creation of the online fan group changes between the two social media platforms. To advance this particular study a researcher could look at the advancement of the online community over the entirety of a hockey season. Thirdly, a comparative study could be completed between two NHL teams that are close in proximity (ex: New York Rangers and New York Islanders) and the research could analyze the impact that geographic radius of NHL teams has on online fan community development. Finally, the strength of PSI mediated relationships conducted by third parties (i.e. organization mediating for an athlete online) could be analyzed.

Limitations

This research and its results are specific to the Ottawa Senators and followers of the Ottawa Senators on Twitter. The sample size is of concern as only 7 out of their 200 006⁸ followers were members of the focus group. A larger sample would have enhanced the accuracy and the generalizability of the results however, for the purpose of focus group research, numbers of fans needed to be limited to a manageable size. Secondly, another limitation in relation to the focus group would be the ages of the individuals who participated. The ages of the participants were all in their early to mid-twenties; thus, the focus group did not provide information regarding the opinions of those that fall into other age categories. However, according to Pew Research Center (2014) 35% of those who are using Twitter are between the ages 18 – 29, thus the age bracket of my focus group falls within the age majority of Twitter users. Thirdly, another limitation was the aspect of being a season ticket holder was not address. None, of the focus group members were season ticket holders. It would have been of interest to see how that impacts a followers' Twitter activity level and their perception of fan group creation. Finally, the

⁸ As of July 10th, 2014.

time period from which the tweets were analyzed is limiting. A longer assessment period for the content analysis of tweets would have been able to highlight what period of the season is most dependent on their online activity to engage followers.

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Table 1.0

Average number of favorites and retweets (RT) per tweet per category

Node	Favorite		Retweet	
	Total number	Avg. number favorites/tweet	Total number	Avg. number RT/tweet
Follower				
Contest (<i>n</i> = 100)	455	4.55	399	3.99
Fan Engagement (<i>n</i> = 30)	1877	62.9	3593	129.76
Fan General (<i>n</i> = 61)	970	15.90	1121	18.38
Interactivity (<i>n</i> = 48)	450	9.38	297	6.19
Modified Tweet (<i>n</i> = 18)	18	14.11	206	11.44
Retweet (<i>n</i> = 80)	80	8.78	461	5.77
French (<i>N</i> = 25)	45	1.8	109	4.36
Games				
Game Update (<i>n</i> = 579)	579	11.12	19741	34.10
Lineups (<i>n</i> = 81)	717	8.85	1049	12.95
Post Game Thought (<i>n</i> = 37)	193	5.22	187	5.05
Upcoming Games (<i>n</i> = 71)	1140	16.29	2269	31.96
Online Media				

Alternative Website (<i>n</i> = 20)	166	8.3	220	11
Pdf (<i>n</i> = 21)	97	4.62	192	9.14
Picture (<i>n</i> = 330)	4087	12.38	6039	18.3
Twitter (<i>n</i> = 22)	756	34.36	820	37.27
Video (<i>n</i> = 194)	1664	6	1854	9.56
Senators Website (<i>n</i> = 43)	182	4.23	255	5.93
Article (<i>n</i> = 41)	889	21.68	1623	39.59
Article and Video (<i>n</i> = 70)	409	5.843	16836	240.51
Audio (<i>n</i> = 16)				
Game Day Journal (<i>n</i> = 124)	708	5.71	894	7.21
Player				
Player (<i>n</i> = 360)	4549	12.64	6037	16.77
Interactivity (<i>n</i> = 2)	11	5.5	5	2.5
Mascot (<i>n</i> = 5)	56	11.2	61	12.2
Prospect (<i>n</i> = 60)	384	6.4	536	8.93
Retweet a Player (<i>n</i> = 10)	210	21	153	15.3
Statistics and Milestones (<i>n</i> = 62)	2307	37.21	3859	62.24

Tagged (<i>n</i> = 137)	2279	16.64	19327	141.07
Promotional				
Events (<i>n</i> = 50)	358	7.16	532	10.64
Community Initiatives (<i>n</i> = 65)	783	12.05	17 238	265.2
Recognizing Community Members (<i>n</i> = 3)	137	45.67	222	74
Student (<i>n</i> = 1)	6	6	10	10
Sponsor				
Retweet a Sponsor (<i>n</i> = 3)	17	5.67	22	7.33
Sponsors Product (<i>n</i> = 9)	116	12.89	108	12
Sponsors Tagged (<i>n</i> = 167)	1662	9.95	18041	108.03
Rookie (<i>N</i> = 50)	600	12	950	19
Senators Staff				
Assistant Coach Dave Cameron (<i>n</i> = 1)	2	2	5	5
Assistant GM Tim Murray (<i>n</i> = 1)	6	6	6	6
Coach Luke Richardson (<i>n</i> = 6)	27	4.5	31	5.17
Coach Paul MacLean (<i>n</i> = 150)	745	4.97	943	6.29

GM Bryan Murray (<i>n</i> = 11)	137	12.45	278	25.27
Owner Eugene Melynk (<i>n</i> = 8)	40	5	74	14.8
Personnel (<i>n</i> = 3)	8	2.67	3	2.67
President Cyril Leeder (<i>n</i> = 5)	14	2.8	16	3.2

Table 2.0.

Top five retweeted (RT) tweets per month and game day (GD) or non a game day (NGD)

Tweet	Number of RT	Potential Reach	Type of Tweet	GD v. NGD
August				
#Sens centre @KyleTurris will be visiting @BellSensplex this week for #SensHockeyCamps. Details here: http://t.co/ugt3Mh3IhC	16354	Value not returned ⁹	Player Community Tagging of Sponsors/Players	NGD
#Sens fans, Retweet this to wish a very Happy Birthday to @kyleturris, who turns 24 today!! http://t.co/qXLfsfFRUe	204	9695	Fan Engagement Player Player: Tagged	NGD
Erik Karlsson says he'll be 100% come the start of the season. http://t.co/IK4j6von6B	86	15292	Player Video	NGD
BOOM. MT @kyle7zimmerman: I was in NYC & visited the NHL store. Decided to let people know who the best team is http://t.co/gWqqNxdRRK	43	5781	Modified Tweet	NGD
PIC: Z-Bad (aka @MikaZibanejad) throws down a killer set at @JunXionOttawa last	39	15001	Picture Tagging of Sponsors	NGD

⁹ Twitonomy was unable to retrieve the value associated with the number of retweets

	night in downtown Ottawa! http://t.co/0NQPJNK mdg			Tagging of Individuals	
September					
	News Release: #Sens Named No. 1 Professional Sports Team in Canada by ESPN the Magazine's Ultimate Standings: http://t.co/8XPqJ27fri	322	26344	Article	NGD
	#Sens training camp officially begins today! Retweet if you are excited that Sens hockey is back!	358	8596	Fan Engagement	NGD
	EXCLUSIVE: @CraigAnderson41 has a new mask. Retweet if you think it looks killer. http://t.co/Z5Qspraxg M	374	10678	Player Tagging of Player Picture Fan Engagement	NGD
	Free agents: Signed. Captain: Named. Suspense: Killing us. Let's play some hockey.	504	27522	Player	NGD
	Its official: Jason Spezza is the new captain of your Ottawa Senators. #Sens	1251	17413	Player	NGD
October					
	Sending our best from the nation's capital to Montreal's @GeorgeParros.	364	74697	Recognizing Community Members	NGD

GOAL. KING. KARLSSON.	392	16994	Game Update	GD
SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	405	13411	Game Update	GD
SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	457	18523	Game Update	GD
SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	468	16475	Game Update	GD
November				
SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	285	14618	Game Update	GD
SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	315	16574	Game Update	GD
SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	354	14278	Game Update	GD
SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	371	13211	Game Update	GD
PIC: Mark Borowiecki with the puck from his 1st NHL goal tonight. Retweet to say "Congrats" to Mark! http://t.co/XM6Lan8 Rly	432	22059	Player Picture Fan Engagement	GD

Table 3.0

The top five tweets (and associated tweet category) that received the most replies and whether it is game day (GD) or not a game day (NGD)

Month	Tweet	Number of Replies	Category	GD v. NGD
August				
	Erik Karlsson says he'll be 100% come the start of the season. http://t.co/IK4j6von6B	16	Player Video	NGD
	Happy 10 year anniversary, @MelnikEugene! http://t.co/WcIxjJs4kj http://t.co/RVEoZ5Fu6R	13	Senators Staff Twitter Article & Video	NGD
	Help Alex out -> RT @alexglabreque: Should I get an @NHL_Sens heritage jersey with @b_ryan9 or @ErikKarlsson65 on the nameplate? #sens	12	Follower: Retweet	NGD
	Props to Dad. #SensMan RT @TimTheBeard: @NHL_Sens here's my dad's awesome collection. All the jerseys are autographed http://t.co/z5xxPhqhEM	11	Follower: Retweet Outside Twitter Handle	NGD
	A Spezza 39 AND 44 in this pile. #Collectibles RT @gener4: which one to wear to the home opener? #ChoicesChoices http://t.co/IXBNk0TJFf	10	Follower: Retweet	NGD
September				
	We'd like to congratulate the Sens Army on the record for most Dunn puns	18	Fan Engagement	NGD

	in five minutes on Twitter ever.			
	Check out the new #Sens @CokeZero_CA cans! They're available NOW at stores across the Ottawa Region #SensCokeZeroCan http://t.co/4RyVtK4vw1	17	Sponsor: Tagged Picture	NGD
	#Sens fans, it's official! There is #NoMoreUnderscore - our Twitter handle is now @Senators http://t.co/ueOdLlez0W	16	Online Media: Twitter	NGD
	We don't come to Saskatchewan often, but when we do, we bring the best fans! #SensArmy http://t.co/cDSyctgWaC	16	Fan Engagement Instagram	NGD
	Rookie camp kicks off at 9 AM at @BellSensplex tomorrow. See you there, #Sens fans!	15	Sponsor: Tagged Rookie Camp	NGD
October	Watching the game on @Sportsnet? Name the player just interviewed during the @Sportschek player interview. Tag #sportchektowel to WIN!	53	Sponsor: Tagged Contest Fan General	GD
	Opening Day Fact: This year's #Sens goal song is a very well known track put together by one of our most famous followers...	36	Fan General	GD
	SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	31	Game Update	GD
	SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	20	Game Update	GD

	van Riemsdyk scores for Toronto, #Sens and Leafs are tied at 4. #GoSENSGo	20	Game Update	GD
November				
	Watching the game on @Sportsnet? Name the player interviewed during the @Sportchek player interview. Tag #sportchektowel to WIN!	19	Sponsor: Tagged Contest	GD
	Koivu scores for Minnesota, #Sens trail 4-3. #GoSENSGo	19	Game Update	GD
	SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	19	Game Update	GD
	#Sens fall in the shootout by a 4-3 score.	19	Game Update	GD
	SENS WIN! SENS WIN! SENS WIN!	19	Game Update	GD

Table 4.0

Number of retweets, replies and favorites per tweet on a home game v. away game per month

	Home Game				Away			
	# of tweet	Retweets	Replies	Favorites	# of tweets	Retweets	Replies	Favorites
August	0		No Games		0		No Games	
September	0		No Games		0		No Games	
October	410	2547	115	1540	488	3776	170	2036
Avg./tweet		6.21	3.57	3.76		7.74	2.87	4.17
November	171	3248	705	2766	36	358	72	388
Avg./tweet		18.99	4.12	16.18		9.94	2	10.78

Table 5.0

Emergent themes per month

	August	September	October	November
Theme #1	Follower: Retweet	Game Updates	Game Updates	Game Updates
Percentage	7.48%	8.15%	9.93%	13.07%
Theme #2	Player	Player	Instagram	Player
Percentage	5.45%	7.15%	6.03%	4.97%
Theme #3	Instagram	Instagram	Player	Instagram
Percentage	4.83%	5.22%	5.58%	4.74%
Theme #4	Video	Video	Contest	Tagged: Sponsor
Percentage	3.58%	4.04%	3.04%	3.48%
Theme #5	Player	Tagged: Sponsor	Article	Video
Percentage	3.27%	3.42%	2.74	2.74%

Table 6.0

Demographic Information Regarding Focus Group Participants

Participant Number	Age	Location	Gender
1	21	Downtown Ottawa	Female
2	25	Downtown Ottawa	Female
3	21	Mallorytown	Male
4	25	Downtown Ottawa	Female
5	24	Downtown Ottawa	Male
		*originally from Sudbury	
6	19	Downtown Ottawa	Male
7	25	Nepean	Female

Article Two: The Ottawa Senators: Twitter and how 140 characters can shape identity

Abstract

This research study analyzed the Twitter followers of the Ottawa Senators and whether their Twitter activity level stimulates and influences their social identity formation and furthermore, if their Twitter activity is indicative of their commitment level towards the Ottawa Senators. Participants completed a questionnaire that included 18 questions related to their perception of the effectiveness of the Ottawa Senators' Twitter feed in influencing social identity formation, facilitating connections between fans, and the resulting impact on fan commitment levels. The results showed that reading the Senators tweets was the biggest predictor in the individual's social identity formation. In addition, a followers' interaction with the Senators handle reinforced the individuals desire to maintain this identity. Reading the Senators handle had a significant impact on all factors related to fan commitment. Due in part, because it provides the information that is vital for followers so they can engage in dialogue with other fans. This is supported by the survey results as they highlighted that the followers believed that the Senators Twitter handle assisted them in creating connections between individuals. Therefore, the study showed that social identity formation is intertwined with group membership and is a predictor in fan commitment.

Sport, a continually expanding landscape that is increasing in popularity with the arrival of social media. Social media has the potential to increase the accessibility of sport for fans worldwide as platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are now adopted by the majority of sport organizations (Blaszka, Burch, Lim, Clavio & Walsh 2012).

One of the most widely adopted social media tools used by sport organizations is Twitter (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). According to Twitter (2014a) there are 271 million active users with 500 million tweets tweeted per day. Twitter not only provides a platform for sport organizations to connect with their fans; it also allows fans to connect with their favourite athletes, owners, team representatives, as well as with other fans (Gregory, 2009). Twitter provides an arena for individuals to connect and congregate online, offering a means for people to converse, share information, knowledge and opinions regarding topics of mutual interest (Safko & Break, 2009). As the number of online relationships contingent on shared topics of interests grow, online communities tend to form as large numbers of people discuss these shared interests (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). There are four elements which contribute to the development of online communities: membership, when individuals sign up for social media sites; fulfillment of needs, which is provided by the constant information updates about shared topics of interest made available by social media feeds; influence of opinion, which results from online discussions and interaction between community members; and finally the establishment of an emotional connection, which also develops through the interaction between community members (Hull & Lewis, 2014).

A person may strive to cement their membership within the community if they believe it reflects positively on their self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). An individual's self – concept is inclusive to their attributes and how they define themselves (Baumeister, 1999). This is known as

social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Within any given community there are individuals who embody all the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that reflect the core of what it means to be a member of that particular group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Each individual member of the community then evaluates their position in the group based on their perception of themselves in relation to others (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus, the individual compares their cognition, attitude, and behaviour in relation to others (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This comparison is often unconscious as the social influence of the group impacts the individual as they desire social acceptance and approval, along with validation of beliefs, perceptions and judgements (Abrams & Hogg 1990).

Considering social identity theory, the purpose of this study was to examine the followers of the Ottawa Senators' Twitter. The research analyzed the success of the Ottawa Senators' Twitter account in influencing social identity formation, fostering connections between their fans and, how this is impacted by each followers own Twitter activity level. Finally, the researcher will analyze whether or not the followers' Twitter activity level in relation to the Ottawa Senators Twitter handle is indicative of their commitment to the team.

Literature Review

Social Media

For the purpose of this research project social media will be defined as:

tools, platforms and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate and collaborate with others. Social media are distinguished from other forms of communication because they support user participation on a massive, collective

scale; the contributions are also distributed among the participants to view, share and improve (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 422).

This definition is inclusive of sections within Web 2.0, which is an umbrella term encompassing various segments of social media such as blogs, social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube), team websites, forums and bulletin boards (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Ioakimidis, 2010; Ming, MacIntosh & Gonzalo, 2012; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Web 2.0 “refers to a second generation of Web-based services that enable users to collaborate and share information online, highlighting user-created content (UGC)...[which is] any material created and uploaded to the Internet by amateur contributors” (Akar & Topcu, 2011, p. 38). Web 2.0 UGC includes the integration of text, graphics, pictures, video and sound content within the message, and ultimately places the user in control of what they post online (Ming et al., 2012). The basis of each message that is posted online constitutes each individuals opinion, attitude, and underlying emotion toward a subject, event, or organization (Dang – Xuan, Stieglitz, Wladarsch, & Neuberger, 2013). The bulk of Web 2.0 UGC appears on popular social media sites. Social media sites also allow people to contribute to other individuals’ posts, thus helping to co-construct other people’s online reality. The growth of social media and the interaction accompanied by it, allows individuals to connect in a multitude of ways that supersede geographical boundaries (Zhang, Qu, Cody & Wu 2010). Social media sites also offer an element of exclusivity as only those who are online can participate within the online discussion.

Twitter. Twitter is the principal social media outlet researched by this study. Twitter has been the most popular social communication technology adopted by sport teams and sport fans alike (Clavio 2011; Pegoraro, 2010). According to Digital Insights (2013), “Twitter boasts over

500 million active users, or “followers” with more than 288 million active users every month” (as cited in Gibbs, & O’Reilly, 2014, p. 189). Twitter is popular due to its ability to connect people with one another succinctly, enabling users to form interest-based communities while facilitating easy communication between large groups or organizations (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010). In function, Twitter is a social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send and read short microblogs (messages that cannot be longer than 140 characters); that are commonly referred to as “tweets” (Fisher 2011; Gruzd, 2013; Thomas, 2011). Tweets are posted on a person’s handle, also known as their Twitter profile page (Fisher, 2011; Thomas, 2011). An individual (or organization’s) Twitter handle is their platform for online self-presentation (Sanderson, 2008) as it contains information and pictures that are available for the public to see; the profile is a representation of the person (or organization) designed to reflect them as they would like to appear to the world. Beyond designing their handle to present themselves in particular ways, Twitter also allows people to ‘follow’ other people’s handles, giving users the opportunity to view another person’s tweets and to respond if they wish (Pegoraro, 2010; Thomas 2011). It is worth noting, however that people do not have to ‘follow’ other people’s handle in order to view their tweets: if a Twitter user has not put specific privacy settings on their account anyone on the internet (even if they do not have to have a Twitter account) can read their posts (Johnson, 2009). Overall, as Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) found, there are many reasons why people frequent Twitter including accessing information, technical knowledge, finding entertainment and diversion, and communicating with like-minded users.

Twitter’s impact in sport. Research surrounding Twitter in sport has explored how Twitter has been utilized by professional sport teams (Gibbs & O’Reilly; 2014; Ioakimidis,

2010), sport event organizers (Hambrick, 2012), athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Clavio & Kian, 2010) and its impact on sport journalism (Hull & Lewis, 2014).

Ioakimidis (2010) did a comparative study of 12 professional sports teams in four top tier leagues: The National Hockey League, The Super League (rugby), The Premier League (soccer), and The National Football League in an effort to understand opportunities for fan interaction with the leagues through their websites. Ioakimidis (2010) found that the opportunity for fans to develop social connections with each other is not equal to the perceived increase in access fans have with sports teams due to the development of social media. Therefore, fans want sports teams to increase the opportunities for them to interact. Ioakimidis (2010) research highlights the reality that fans are the ones driving the growth of social media, as they want their social media opportunities to be exclusive to those that follow their particular team. Ioakimidis (2010) stated, “establishing an online community provides a virtual home for fans to increase their ‘felt’ connection to the team and to other fans; it also offers opportunities to express a person’s ideas and feel a greater sense of belonging to the community and the team” (p. 281).

One of the unique properties of Twitter is the hashtag. Blaszkas et al. (2012) conducted a content analysis surrounding the Twitter hashtag #WorldSeries during the 2011 World Series to uncover who was mainly active on Twitter. Blaszkas et al. (2012) found that the hashtag was used by fans to express fanship; overall interest in the World Series and identification with a particular team. The hashtag provides a gateway to discover the main audience engaged in the conversation about a team or event (Blaszkas et al., 2012). Furthermore, Blaszkas et al., (2012) case study highlighted that marketers should use the same continual hashtags to increase notoriety of the sport organizations and arrange team promotions using the specific team – identified hashtags.

Pegoraro (2010) also examined the communication strategies employed by athletes on Twitter. Pegoraro (2010) looked at a total of 1193 tweets sent by 49 athletes from 9 different sports (approximately the top 5 athletes for each sport) over a 7 day period. Pegoraro (2010) found that the two main themes athletes addressed on Twitter were: their personal lives and their responses to fan questions; thus, supporting the finding by Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) that Twitter is providing unprecedented (and unmediated) direct access to athletes. Pegoraro (2010) also found that athletes are not utilizing Twitter to its fullest potential, as they are not realizing its marketing power as there was no mention of their personal (or sponsors) products, nor were there links to their personal websites.

Therefore, it has been identified that further research needs to be done in the world of social media and sport. Specifically, there is a gap regarding the fans' perspective on the success of a sport organization's Twitter campaign in influencing their social identity formation and furthermore, whether it is impacted by the fans Twitter activity level. Alongside this, how a sport organizations Twitter activity impacts fan commitment requires further analysis.

Social Identity Theory

Sport popularity within society as a whole continues to grow as more people become interested in sports and participate in them every day (Wann, Melnick, Russell & Reese, 2001). Increased interest in sport leads individuals to become segmented within the sporting community through association by aligning themselves with a particular team. As Sadri (2014) states, "sport fandom is often associated with one's affinity for specific sport teams" (p. 214). Depending on a fan's individual degree of affinity for a team, the team becomes a part of the fan's social identity (Hu & Tang, 2010) as fans often see teams as an extension of themselves (Wann et al., 2001). This extension is promoted through social media. As Smith and Smith (2012) found individuals

used identifiers on Twitter to signify their interest in the 2012 College World series of baseball. Fans would use hashtags such as #CWS to identify themselves as fans of specific teams, in addition to showing favouritism towards other fans of the same team (Smith & Smith 2012).

If a fan feels team identification enhances their self – concept, they will strive to maintain membership in specific social networks surrounding the team (Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel, 1981). Membership with a group consists of the establishment of connections between individuals. In the sport context one can develop a number of connections with numerous fans of the same team resulting in a fan group (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). In many cases, the central fan group associated with a given sports team can also be known as a fan nation (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Foster and Hyatt (2008) argued that these fan nations are imagined communities as many of the members will never meet, however they all shared a “common image of what it means to be a fan...Moreover, the image that is shared amongst fans can be made to be inclusive” (Foster & Hyatt, 2008, p. 269). Thus, a fan nation is not bound by location; moreover, it offers a sense of cohesiveness shared by its anonymous members (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Membership or perceived membership within that central fan group can help to define an individual’s identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Tajfel, 1981). Therefore, as reflected in Foster and Hyatt’s (2008) work, as individuals become members of a fan nation they will strive to maintain this membership if it reflects positively on their self-concept; this is known as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Social identity as defined by Tajfel (1978) is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge or his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). As social identity theory highlights, when a person is involved in an intergroup relation (in this research context when a

fan of the Ottawa Senators voluntary identifies as a member of the online central fan group on Twitter), this person is increasingly defined by the cognitions, attitudes, beliefs and emotions shared by the group. A person's tendency to share the group's cognitions, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions is reflected in their behaviour relative to the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Identifying with a particular group leads each individual to cognitively segment their social world, enabling the person to locate themselves in relation to each other (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The segmentation between group members and non-group members is a psychological separation which results in an increased awareness of the people who are members of the "in-group" compared to those who are not. Furthermore, segmentation between group members and non-group members creates an inherent justifiable social distance between the two groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Phua, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, social identity theory highlights how fans exhibit similar behaviour, leading to the establishment of group norms which further their feeling of inclusiveness within the group. Ultimately, identifying with a team and the central fan group can foster a feeling of belonging and solidarity amongst members due to the development of these similar characteristics (Ashforth, Harrison & Corely, 2008; Phua, 2012).

The more value placed upon membership within a group, the increased effort a person will exhibit to affirm their identity therein (Ashforth et al., 2008). This identification encourages the individual to engage in behaviour that represents the group norm (Ashforth et al. 2008). As Akar and Topcu (2011) state, in order to increase fan participation in an online group, the organization must be the catalyst for fan communication because the most important aspect of dialogue that occurs on social media sites is between fans. As such, it is important for the organization to guide the message about the team in a positive frame. Therefore, with the topic related to the Ottawa Senators, the dialogue which occurs on Twitter may create connections

between Senators fans. These connections may result in each individual fan segmenting their social world, by placing themselves within the Senators central fan group, connecting them to the team at large and linking their social identity to the Ottawa Senators. Therefore, this study explores if a person's social identity as an Ottawa Senators' fan is impacted by their Twitter activity level in response to tweets sent by the Ottawa Senators.

Self – categorization theory. When a person begins to segment their social world, they do so by social comparison; this process is called self-categorization (Kozinets, 1999). Self-categorization is an extension of social identity theory (Kozinets, 1999).

With the establishment of any group there are cognitive processes, attitudes, and behaviour that best represent the group norm. With membership in that group it often results in the depersonalization of one self (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The individual's personal identity becomes dormant, as one begins to compare themselves to others. The perception of others often exhibits and is reflective of the group prototype. "Prototypes embody all attributes that characterize groups and distinguish them from other groups including beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviours...maximizing the similarities within and differences between groups" (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123 – 124). Exemplary "prototype" members of the group are central to self-categorization theory. The depersonalization of each individual and modification of their behaviour is a result of the aspiration to fit the prescribed prototype which therein produces "normative behaviour, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, positive in group attitudes and cohesion, cooperation and altruism, collective behaviour, shared norms and mutual influence" (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123). Prototypes/exemplars are not fixed, they are fluid and often responsive to what outgroup is salient (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Therefore, self-categorization is a "dynamic, fluid and a content-dependent process that reflects changing definitions of the self in relation to a

constantly changing social reality” (Turner et al., 1994, as cited in Grove, Fish & Eklund, 2004). The fluid nature of self-categorization means it is especially relevant to discussions of social media: social media is changing how social groups are formed by giving everyone an opportunity to express themselves, causing a continuous challenge to the prototype. The constant change in social reality occurring between people on social media is why self-categorization is the main theoretical backdrop for this research.

Fan Commitment

The experience a fan has as a member of the fan community can affect their consumption of sport (Seo, Green, Ko, Lee & Schenewark, 2007). According to Seo et al., (2007) as the psychological relationships between the fan and the sport, fan and the organization, fan and the team, and between fans – to a large extent determine the level of fan’s attachment to the community. Furthermore, a fans experience as a member of the team’s community is linked to their level of sport consumption (Seo et al., 2007). Within a sport team fan community there are two types of fans: potential fan members (those who are not a part of the central fan group) and fan members (those who are a part of the central fan group) (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Despite geographic boundaries, there has been a surge in the delocalization of sports teams (a prime example is Real Madrid, whose fan support is global) (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Due to the delocalization of sports teams, Foster and Hyatt (2008) advocate that the formation of marketing techniques should not be limited to traditional marketing methods (i.e. radio, newsprint), and that a team’s marketing should possess meaning for all current and potential fans regardless of their geographic location, so they can all be categorized as fan members within the central fan group.

Fan commitment to a franchise can be defined in numerous ways. However, for the purpose of this study commitment is viewed as a psychological component which causes a desire

within the individual to maintain their relationship with a team's community and continue or further their participation therein (Scanlan, Simmons, Carpenter, Schmidt, & Keller, 1993; Seo et al., 2008). The ideal fan commitment level would cause the individual to become a full participating member of the community surrounding a team (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Foster and Hyatt (2008) believe that a person can become a full member of a fan nation regardless of their geographic boundary, a process which is aided by the possibilities for community development enabled by social media communications. Thus, in order to facilitate a sense of community surrounding the team, sport marketers must understand how to utilize social media to aid in building and creating connections between fans, many of whom will never meet face-to-face.

An example of how social media can bring a fan closer to their fan community is Ottawa native Eric Doty. Eric Doty, a 24 year old PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania, said he "turned to Twitter to link up with his Sens community" (Smith, 2013, p. E5). In 2013, Eric launched "Sens Money on the Board (@SensMotB)", where he requested his followers to pledge a dollar value if a specific event were to occur during the game. If that event occurred, Doty asked his followers to donate the money directly to the Sens Foundation to contribute to the team's local charity work (Smith, 2013). Fans pledged \$7, 472 by Game 5 against the Habs (Smith, 2013). This is a prime example of how social media can link individuals through a shared interest in sport to ignite connections between social media users and foster a sense of benevolent community. Doty said "keeping up with the Sens community through Twitter makes him feel like he's right in the thick of playoff spirit in the capital" (Smith, 2013, p. E5). As Crawford (2004) argues, Doty's behaviour shows that sports fans are "arranged around the choice of a team and how the team fits within their social sphere. As society becomes more cold

and distant, the [fan community] offers “warmth” that the individual cannot find in another venue” (p. 268).

Since a fan’s commitment level is a result of their experience with the team’s community (Seo et al., 2007), this study will analyze one component of the Ottawa Senators online community; that is the relationship between the Senators and their Twitter followers. Furthermore, the research will analyze the resulting influence on social identity formation and fan commitment as a result of the Ottawa Senators’ Twitter feed and their followers’ resulting level of Twitter activity.

Method

The case study methodology was chosen because it examines a contemporary phenomenon and describes links that occur within it (Yin, 1994). Therefore, the case study methodology will allow the researcher to examine the contemporary phenomenon Twitter. Furthermore, the questionnaire method will be applied within this research. Questionnaires will be used as they are a way to gather data from participants based on a pre-determined set of questions and are an easy way to gain statistical measurements from a large sample group (Gratton & Jones, 2004)

Case Study

The research undertaken addresses the Twitter activity of the Ottawa Senators and considers the Twitter consumption of its followers. The Twitter consumption is measured in three ways: how many minutes the individual is on Twitter, how many minutes the individual spends reading tweets tweeted by the Ottawa Senators and, how many minutes the individual interacts (i.e. replies and retweets) with the Senators. The purpose of the research is to examine

the impact the Ottawa Senators Twitter activity has on their followers' formation of their social identity and fan commitment level.

A case study allows the researcher to gain further insight into the subject and the ability to delve deeper into the analytical decision process made by the followers of the Senators. The deeper understanding of the followers afforded by a case study helps reveal the cornerstones from which decisions were made, why they were made, how they were conducted and the final result (Yin, 2003). Ultimately, the case study methodology allows the researcher to explore the impact of the current social phenomenon Twitter; and how the Ottawa Senators' Twitter influences identity formation and its resulting impact on fan commitment. Finally, the case study may be generalizable among the wider domain (Gerring, 2004), providing other professional sport teams with information that can guide their online Twitter campaigns.

Questionnaire. A questionnaire was the method used for this research project. The questionnaire consisted of 18 closed questions. See Appendix A for full outline of the questionnaire. A requirement for completing the questionnaire was whether the participants followed the Senators on Twitter. Therefore, to target this specific sample the researcher asked the individuals if they followed the Senators on Twitter, and if not, what would prompt them to do so? If the individual were to answer yes, they would continue on with the questionnaire. However, if the individual responded no, then the individual was thanked for their participation and was not allowed to continue on completing the questionnaire. In doing this, is resulted in a self – selected sample. Included within this section is the first well-known instrument for measuring identification/commitment (I/C) developed in 1993 by Wann and Branscombe, the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) (Wann & Pierce, 2003). The SSIS has strong internal consistency, validity and reliability (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Pierce, 2003). The SSIS is

an 8 item Likert-type scale with the (1) no I/C and the larger numbers indicating a greater level of identification, (8) high level I/C (Wann & Dolan, 1994). However, for the purposes of this research project the scale has been adapted to a 5 point Likert-type scale. Furthermore, specific terms have been designated to each point within the scale. The survey was created online using surveymonkey.com. Surveymonkey.com is a leader in online survey creation, and has the most recognized online trust seals including Norton, TRUSTe, McAfee and the Better Business Bureau (SurveyMonkey, 2013). Surveymonkey.com allows the researcher to create a URL specific to the survey (SurveyMonkey, 2013). The URL was distributed on Twitter. By distributing a questionnaire online the aspect of social desirability bias -- where individuals feel they must answer in a politically correct fashion -- was eliminated (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009). Furthermore, the researcher was able to access a large sample group by distributing the questionnaire online (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Accessing the questionnaire via Twitter allowed all active Twitter users interested in the Senators to take part in the questionnaire regardless of their geographic location. Despite the benefits of online dissemination, a remaining issue surrounding the questionnaire's distribution is validity of results since the designated respondents may not fill out the questionnaire completely (Bryman et al., 2009). This could be due to the respondent being unable to clarify specific details regarding a specific question with the researcher (Bryman et al., 2009; Gratton & Jones, 2004). However, this possible issue was overcome using Twitter. The researcher created a Twitter account specifically for this study (@MAResearchStudy). The account was set to 'public' to allow anyone to see @MAResearchStudy tweets, giving any Twitter user the opportunity to publicly or privately tweet questions at the researcher. The researcher tweeted a link to the questionnaire using the specific URL created by surveymonkey. The Ottawa Senators proceeded to retweet this specific

tweet to their followers. Furthermore, the researcher monitored the retweet and followed the discussion on the Senators Twitter handle regarding the questionnaire. Thus, the researcher read all the replies that the questionnaire tweet received. This was to ensure that if anyone had a question and asked it through a reply, an answer would be provided. The Ottawa Senators' Twitter account retweeted the tweet containing the link to the questionnaire two times: on February 27th, which was not a game day, and March 25th, which was an away game where the Senators faced off against the Florida Panthers. Featuring the tweet on the Ottawa Senators' Twitter account was appropriate, as individuals who follow the Ottawa Senators on Twitter are the target population for this study.

Data Collection

The researcher created a Twitter handle specific for this research study, @MAResearchStudy. A questionnaire was created that asked participants to respond to a series of questions about fan activity, identity and commitment. The survey consisted of 18 closed questions. The questionnaire was approved by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa. The questionnaire was created using surveymonkey.com. The URL specific to the survey was posted on the researcher's handle. Participants were invited to take part in the study through an invitation by The Ottawa Senators when the questionnaire URL was retweeted by the Senators from @MAResearchStudy. Interested participants, after giving their informed consent, completed a ten minute online survey about their Twitter activity, and the Ottawa Senators' Twitter activity. The recruitment was voluntary in nature and those who participated were able to discontinue the survey at any point by closing their browser. Interested participants completed an online questionnaire that contained the following information:

Demographic Information. Participants completed general demographic questions related to their age and gender.

Measures of Senators Fan Behaviour. Participants completed measures of three dimensions of Senators fan behaviour (Fan activity, Social identity and Fan commitment). Fan Activity was comprised of three items that examined Twitter Minutes, Reading the Senators Handle and Interacting with the Senators. Social identity was comprised of one item about participant's social identity related to the Ottawa Senators. Finally, fan commitment was measured using six items about team Connection, Fan commitment, Connection to the Fan Group, Online Relationships, Fan Club Membership and use of Senator hashtags. For each item participants responded using a 1 to 5 scale the extent to which the statements applied to them ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely). See Appendix A for the full questionnaire.

The survey closed on Tuesday May 20th. The Ottawa Senators retweeting the tweet specifically targeted the participants for this study: followers of the Ottawa Senators. Due to the nature of Twitter, the researcher had no ability to track who then proceeded to retweet the link from the @Senators or who would retweet it from @MAResearchStudy as the researcher kept an open Twitter profile. The responses were then downloaded from surveymonkey.com into an excel file. From there the researcher imported the excel file into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

The sample was comprised of 700 Twitter users. However, only respondents who indicated that they followed the Ottawa Senators Twitter handle @Senators, were included in the analysis. This reduced the sample size to 620 participants. The sample size was further reduced

as individuals who answered less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the survey were omitted. Therefore, the sample size was reduced to 453. This sample size is larger in comparison to other social media studies who have used online questionnaires (144 survey respondents for Seo et al., 2007).

Of the 453 participants 245 were male and 208 were female. Participants ages ranged from 11 through to 61 and the most popular age groups were 16 – 20 years old (26%) and 21 – 25 years old (24%). 45.03% of respondents read the Senators tweets for 1 to 5 minutes per day. The average amount of time each individual spends on the Senators Twitter account was 4.48 or approximately 36 minutes per day. According to Table. 2.0 participants rarely, 2.49, interacted (i.e. retweet, reply) with the Senators handle. The questionnaire showed 34.7% said they rarely interacted with the Senators' handle and 35.4% said they somewhat interacted with the Senators' handle.

Despite a lack of interaction, participants identified a strong level of social identity averaging at 4.45 according to Table 2.0. Therefore, the participants said that they very much identified as a fan of the Ottawa Senators. See Table 1.0 for a full outline of the total responses for Gender, Age and time spent reading the Senators handle per day.

Responses related to the Senators Twitter activity, 44.1 % of participants identified that the Senators Twitter activity impacts their fan commitment level whereas 16.4% said it barely had an effect and 21.6% answered it very much affected them. 43% of participants identified that the Senators Twitter activity impacts their connection to the team, whereas 43% said it somewhat and 29.7% said that it very much impacts their connection to the team.

According to the survey 35.8% of participants identified that the Senators' Twitter activity somewhat facilitates connections between individuals, whereas 33.6% identified that it very much did.

As well, the survey showed 40.4% of participants identified that the Senators' Twitter activity somewhat impacts their connection to the larger fan group. Furthermore, 78.8% of all participants identified as a member of the larger fan group and 21.4% said they are not.

The results also showed that 5.5% of participants said their group membership had an extreme impact on their commitment level to the team while 20.1% said it very much had an impact, 16.8% said it barely had an impact and 21.0% said it had no impact at all.

Finally, 22.1% of participants identified that they frequently use hashtags while 33.4% of participants identify that occasionally use hashtags to identify that they are online fans of the Ottawa Senators.

Preliminary analyses. All data was cleaned and screened for any outliers. The descriptive statistics for all of the model variables are available in Table 1.0. To identify univariate outliers, the standardized scores were calculated for all model variables and participants with z – score below – 3.29 and above 3.29 were classified as outliers (Kinnear & Gray, 2008). In these instances, the scores were recorded to the closest value within normal range for each variable.

To assess if a fan's activity level influenced the construction of their social identity a multiple regression where fan activity (Twitter Minutes, Minutes Reading the Senators Handle and the Minutes Interacting with the Senators handle) predicted their social identity with the Senators were run. The results suggest that the data fits the model well ($F_{(3,446)} = 9.03, p < .001$). 5% of the variance in fan identity was explained by the 3 predictors: Twitter Minutes, Minutes

Reading the Senators Handle, Minutes Interacting with the Senators handle. Looking at each of the predictors individually only the Minutes Reading the Senators handle had a significant impact on fan identity ($\beta = .173$, $t = 3.22$, $p < .001$).

To assess if a follower's Twitter activity level is indicative of their fan commitment level for the team six sets of multiple regression analyses were run to determine whether fan activity (Twitter Minutes, Minutes Reading Senators Handle and Minutes Interacting with Senators Handle) impacted the six measures of fan commitment. The full results of these analyses are in Table 2.0.

Overall, the model fit the data well, and fan activity significantly predicted all six measures of fan commitment. The model explained the most variance for use of Senators' hashtags (33%) and the least variance for online relationships (5%). Looking at the individual predictors, Twitter minutes had a significant negative impact on Team Connection and Fan Commitment but did not have an impact on Connection to the fan group, Online Relationships or Fan Group Membership. Twitter minutes had a positive impact on use of Senators' hashtags. Across all six analyses, Reading the Senators Handle had a significant and positive relationship on all six measures of fan commitment. As shown, it had the largest impact on a fan's identification of their commitment level. See Fan Senators Commitment ($\beta = .20$). Interacting with the Senators Handle also had a significant and positive relationship with all six measures of fan commitment. The highest was in predicting the use of Senator hashtags ($\beta = .49$) and the lowest was in predicting online relationships ($\beta = .14$).

For the following ANOVAs and MANOVAS the age groups had to be re – coded in SPSS in order to reflect equal sample sizes. As a result, there were 2 age groups (1) 11 to 25 and (2) 26 and older. See Table 3.0 for total responses for the new age categories.

To assess if the Senators' Twitter activity impacted their followers fan commitment levels, a three – way ANOVA was run based on Age, Gender and the minutes spent reading the Senators handle (Minutes Reading Sens). See Table 4.0 for full results. The impact the Senators Twitter activity had on fan commitment based on gender differed significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(1, 423) = 7.25$; $p < .01$. The impact the Senators Twitter activity had on fan commitment based on age did not differ significantly: $F(1, 423) = 1.81$; $p > .05$. The impact the Senators Twitter activity has on fan commitment based on the minutes spent reading the Senators handle significantly differed beyond the .01 level: $F(7, 423) = 5.00$; $p < .01$. A post hoc Tukey test showed that the not reading the Senators handle (0 minutes) and those who read the handle 6 to 10 and 11 to 15 minutes a day differed significantly at $p < .05$. Furthermore, it showed that not reading the Senators handle (0 minutes) differed significantly from those read the handle 16 to 20 and 31 minutes (and above) per day at $p < .01$. Tukey, was chosen because of the unequal group sizes within minutes read (Kinnear & Gray, 2008). See Table 5.0 for full results. The two – way interaction Gender and Age did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(9, 423) = .27$; $p > .05$. The two – way interaction Gender and the minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(7, 423) = .72$; $p > .05$. As well as, the two – way interaction between Age and the minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(43, 423) = .52$; $p > .05$. The mean scores for Gender, Age and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(21, 423) = .66$; $p > .05$.

Furthermore, it was of interest to determine if the Senators Twitter Activity influenced a followers' connection to the fan group and if this was impacted by Age, Gender and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle therefore another three – way ANOVA was run. The impact

the Senators Twitter activity had on an individuals connection to the fan group based on gender did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(1, 423) = 1.04$; $p < .05$. The impact the Senators Twitter activity had on an individual's connection to the fan group based on age did differ significantly: $F(1, 423) = 7.74$; $p > .01$. The impact the Senators Twitter activity had on an individual's connection to the fan group based on Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did differ significantly beyond the .01 level: $F(7, 423) = 3.86$; $p < .01$. See Table 6.0 for full results. A Tukey post hoc showed that there was a significant difference between not reading the Senators handle (0) and 11 to 15, 16 to 20, and 31 (and above) minutes spent reading at $p < .05$. There was a significant difference between 1 to 5 minutes and 11 to 15 minutes and 31 minutes (and above) at $p < .05$. See Table 7.0 for full results. The two – way interaction Gender and Age did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(1, 423) = 3.55$; $p > .05$. The two – way interaction Gender and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(7, 423) = 1.20$; $p > .05$. Age and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(43, 423) = 1.13$; $p > .05$. The mean scores for Gender, Age and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(5, 423) = 1.36$; $p > .05$.

Furthermore, it was of interest to identify whether followers of the Senators believed that the Ottawa Senators tweets helped to create connections between their followers and if this was impacted by Age, Gender and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle. Therefore, another three – way ANOVA was performed. See Table 8.0 for full results. The impact the Senators Twitter activity had on creating connections between their followers based on gender did not differ significant beyond the .05 level: $F(1, 423) = 2.51$; $p < .05$. As well, the impact the Senators Twitter activity had on creating connections between their followers based on age did not differ

significantly: $F(1, 423) = 1.14$; $p > .05$. The impact the Senators Twitter activity had on creating connections between their followers based on Minutes spent reading the Senators handle differed significantly beyond the .01 level: $F(7, 423) = 3.56$; $p < .01$. A post hoc Tukey test showed that the not reading the Senators handle (0 minutes) group differed significantly from those who read the handle for 16 to 20 minutes a day at $p < .01$. 1 to 5 minutes differed significantly from 16 to 20 minutes at $p < .01$. See Table 9. For full results. The two – way interaction Gender and Age did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(1, 423) = 1.48$; $p > .05$. The two – way interaction Gender and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(7, 423) = .992$; $p > .05$. Age and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(43, 423) = 1.15$; $p > .05$. The mean scores for Gender, Age and Minutes spent reading the Senators handle did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level: $F(21, 423) = 1.959$; $p > .05$.

To assess if a followers interaction (i.e. reply and retweet the Senators tweets) impacts their identity formation based on age and gender a MANOVA was run. The only factor that had a significant impact was gender on fan identification at the .05 level: $F(1, 441) = 5.82$, $p < .05$. However gender did not impact whether an individual interacted with the Senators at the .05 level: $F(1, 441) = 2.81$, $p > .05$. Age had a significant impact on whether an individual interacted with the Senators at the .01 level: $F(1, 441) = 18.60$, $p < .01$. The interaction between Gender and Age did not differ significantly beyond the .05 level for either individual interaction with the Senators' handle and Fan Identification. See Table 10.0 for full results.

To assess if a followers length of time spent reading the Senators handle impacts their identity formation based on age and gender a MANOVA was run. Gender had no impact on Minutes reading the Senators' handle at the .05 level: $F(1, 441) = .53$, $p > .05$. Age had a

significant impact on Minutes reading at the Senators' handle at the .05 level: $F(1, 441) = 5.60$, $p < .05$. However, age had no impact on Fan Identification at the .05 level: $F(1, 441) = .79$, $p > .05$. The interaction between gender and age had no impact on either minutes reading or fan identification at the .05 level. See Table 11.0 for full results.

Discussion

The following section discusses how Twitter activity and Senators fans' sense of social identity are directly related to whether or not an individual feels connected to and participates in the fan group surrounding the Senators and how this is impacted by the organization – fan relationship. Furthermore, it discusses how factors of fan commitment are interrelated and how it impacts fan commitment as a whole.

When an individual begins to affiliate themselves with a sport team a component of their identity, that is how they define themselves, becomes entangled within that team. This identification is furthered when they self – identify as a member of the fan group as social identity theory claims that individuals are often defined by the group from which they derive membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Individuals strive to maintain membership within a group if it reflects positively on their self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This desire to assert one's placement within the group is then reflected in the individual's behaviour (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The further one becomes entrenched within a fan group, the greater their propensity to identify as a fan of the associated team (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

According to the multiple regression, the only predictor that reflected a significant impact on the construction of a Senators fans' social identity was the number of minutes an individual spent reading @Senators' tweets per day. The study showed that 45.03% of all participants only

read the Senators tweets 1 to 5 minutes a day. However the results show that there is a significant difference between the level of affiliation fans have with the Senators who do not read the Senators' Twitter handle daily compared to those who read the Senators' official tweets for 16 to 20 minutes per day. This suggests that if an individual were to choose whether or not to read the Senators' tweets to maximize their affiliation with the team, the optimal reading time would be between 16 and 25 minutes per day. Therefore the Senators have to analyze their Twitter feeds and find out what is causing the disparity between the amount of time spent reading and the optimal amount of time reading; in other words, what would promote their followers to check and read their handle for a greater length of time.

Engagement, particularly interaction has been found in previous research as a critical component in defining one's membership within a fan group; it is the interaction, and the establishment of relationships between individuals from which the creation of the group originates (Seo et al., 2007). The multiple regression and the survey results show that an individual's interaction with the Ottawa Senators organization thus, the follower – organization relationship, does not have a significant impact on social identity formation. Thus, it suggests that the organization does not influence identity formation as they are not an active member within their own fan group that surrounds the team. This is corroborated by, 35.3% of respondents reported that they rarely interact with the Senators handle. Therefore, interaction with the Senators' Twitter handle is not a behavioural requirement for social identity development of Ottawa Senators fans. From the Senators point of view, it is important to analyze why these individuals have Twitter if not to interact with whom they follow? Furthermore, will this lack of interaction result in a fan – organization disconnect? The Phoenix Suns of the NBA are an example of how a sport organization can engage and promote a relationship through

Twitter with their followers, preventing a disconnect. On Thursday March 19th 2015, the Phoenix Suns had a #SunsTBT¹⁰ night that featured both social media and in arena marketing (NBA.com, 2015). The Suns threw back to the '91 – '92 season, the last year Jeff Hornacek was head coach (NBA.com, 2015). For in – arena marketing: tickets were \$8/ticket and concessions were \$2; the first 5000 fans received a retro Hornacek jersey apron; and the Suns promoted an “old – school feel” during the in - game entertainment and digital and broadcast platforms (NBA.com, 2015). However, the Suns shined when it came to their mirrored Twitter campaign. Prior to the game the Suns engaged their fans by promoting three different TBT playlists hosted on Spotify and crafted original tweets that contained digital images from basketball video games that were created in the 1990's (Fadem, 2015). Furthermore, throughout the entirety of the game the Suns were replying to and retweeting their fans. One individual, @LittleBopsBops, who identifies in his blog that he is not an avid Suns supporter tweeted at 10:55pm on March 19th 2015, “I will be blogging further about this, but the @Suns are #winning the night with their #SunsTBT game night. Check out their feed! #IS6621 Z” which the Suns replied to, a minute later tweeting “@LittleBopBops Thanks for thinking our tweets tonight are so choice¹¹!” (Fadem, 2015). As Fadem (2015) mentioned in his blog, by the Suns replying to his tweet in an original way that also coincided with their throwback theme, it led him to feel a part of the overall event even though he was not in attendance; it was engaging and elicited a feeling of attraction toward the Suns. Thus, the Suns illustrated how to engage fans and elicit and foster feelings of affiliation using social media. Therefore, through Twitter the Senators have the ability to ignite the want for one to associate with the team; as long as the Senators recognize that their reply to each tweet

¹⁰ TBT stands for throw back Thursday

¹¹ “So choice” is a term used in the 1986 iconic film Ferris Bueller's Day off. It highlights the originality of the tweets crafted by @Suns

has to be original and done within a timely manner. It will elicit feelings of appreciation and recognition on behalf of the follower; possibly strengthening the bond between the follower and the organization. By promoting this interaction the Senators may be able to attract the 35.3% of the surveyed group who do not interact with their handle, to do so. Thus, increasing the fans sense of affiliation and strengthening the bond with the organization from which the team originates.

Despite a lack of interaction with @Senators, an online fan group still formed as 78.8% of respondents identified as members of the fan group. This is of interest as social identity forges out of group membership (Seo et al., 2007; Tajfel, 1982) that originates out of interaction with others (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This thereby implies that dialogue with @Senators is not reflective of what respondents perceive to be the norm required to obtain and sustain group membership. Therefore for group formation to occur, interaction outside of the @Senators handle, and between followers must be occurring. As the survey results showed, approximately 70% of participants believe the Senators facilitate connections between their followers. These connections are the basis for the development of bonds between individuals, eliciting feelings of camaraderie (Chen, 2011); and social norms develop as a result of interaction between group members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and when an individual wants to solidify their placement within the group their behaviour is congruent of that of the group norm. Therefore, the @Senators does not stimulate dialogue with their followers however, stimulates dialogue between followers. This is beneficial for the Senators because as fans identify with other fans, it will help to increase their identification with the team (Seo et al., 2007). As Wann (2006) stated, when a team helps to facilitate and increase social connections for their fans, it increases their overall well-being and team identification (as cited in Sadri, 2014).

For individuals to confirm and solidify their membership within the fan group some level of behavioural activity on Twitter is required. de Groot & Robinson (2008) define a behavioural norm as the adoption of specific spoken and written habits which signify an “unspoken understanding” between community members. The hashtag is an example of the specific text adopted by fans. In this study, 33.4% of participants said they occasionally use the hashtag and 22.1% said they very frequently use hashtags to show their association with the Senators’ central online fan group. Therefore, the results support previous research (see Smith and Smith, 2012) and highlights that the Senators are influential in bringing their fans together online and the development of Senators-specific hashtags that unite their followers. This suggests that fans actively tweet using Senators designated hashtags (ex: #Sens, #UnitedInSen, #SensArmy) to connect with other fans who show a similarly vested interest in the Senators. Therefore, this finding is congruent with other research (see Blaszkowski et al., 2012; Smith & Smith, 2012), in that the hashtag helps individuals to express interest, fandom, and connect and create dialogue with other fans, which results in the emergence of an online community.

Overall, the results suggest that it is not strictly an individual’s Twitter activity in relation to the Senators (i.e. replying and retweeting) which dictates their membership within the fan group rather, it is a person’s activity level with other Senators community members which determines their membership in the team’s fan nation. It is connections made with other community members that further one’s own place within the group. However, this also indicates that @Senators are not at the center of the online community, nor is the relationship with the fan via Twitter of high significance. This could be detrimental to the organization, as it gives opportunities for others to guide the conversation, and possibly position the organization in a negative light. Furthermore, it could affect one’s commitment to the team if they are not a highly

identified fan. A fan's attachment is not only based on their identification with the team and other fans, but the organization as well (Seo et al., 2007). Thus, if the team itself performs poorly, and the fan is not highly identified, and they lack a level of attachment, or psychological connection that makes the team intrinsically important to them (see Foster & Hyatt, 2008), the team's lack luster performance may cause them to no longer identify as a fan of the team. Therefore, the fan may no longer possess a vested interest in the Senators. Thus, due to the lack of the organization – fan relationship, the Senators are at risk of losing fans. However, if the organization had a strong presence within their own online community and with its members, they may be able to foster and create this psychological attachment. The bond the follower has with the organization may override any negativity that surrounds the team. Future research could be done in relation to a fans psychological attachment (see Funk and James (2006)) the Psychological Continuum Model) and how Twitter influences progression throughout the stages.

An increased level of identification can be reflected in one's commitment level to the team. Commitment impacts the individual's propensity to watch and attend sporting events (Smith, Patterson, Williams & Hogg, 1981). Highly committed fans are vital for the success of the franchise (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Furthermore, commitment is interrelated with social identity. As Tajfel (1981) describes, in order to achieve identification 3 components are necessary: a cognitive component: awareness of group membership; an evaluative component: membership has emotional significance; and an emotional component: investment in membership and the associated emotional significance. The research results suggests that the central online fan group is a powerful influence on fan commitment to the team, as 58% of participants claim their commitment to the Senators is influenced by their membership in the fan group. However, the results also highlighted that the Senators need to work on creating a more

inclusive online community: 21.4% of participants do not view themselves as members of the online community. This only furthers the argument as to why the Senators need to engage in dialogue with their followers. If their followers are new to Twitter and haven't developed Twitter 'relationships', the lack of connection with other individuals may be the reason as to why 21.4% identified as a non – member of the online fan group. If the organization were able to develop a Twitter relationship with these individuals, it may change the follower's position and subsequently positively impact their commitment to the team.

The age make-up of the online fan community is of interest. 25.9% of respondents were between 16 and 20; 24% were between 21 and 25; and 14.6% were between 26 and 50. If the ages of those who participated in the questionnaire were reflective of those within the central fan group, it shows that it is comprised of a younger generation. Table 12.0 highlights that the new age category (11 – 25) spends the most time reading the Senators' handle. This information coincides with the fact that the younger generation is more involved in social media channels such as Twitter. The Pew Research Center reported that the largest age group among all online adults who use Twitter, are between the ages of 18 and 29. This suggests that recruitment of new fans to the team may be possible via Twitter as the younger generation are more apt to adopt the newest social media technologies, as social media is becoming a new way in which socialization processes occur. Socialization process such as family, friends, peers, and co – workers (Jacobson, 2003) impact one's level of affiliation for a team. If an individual's friends, family, and peers are all online discussing the Senators it can lead to the recruitment of new fans as it may influence them to find out information about the team so they can also be active participants and fans online. Thus, the communication strategies of @Senators should be tailored to the younger generation to ensure the sustainability of the fan base. Furthermore, the Senators should

participate in direct communication with the fan as exhibited by the Phoenix Suns. This direct communication will not only elicit feelings of appreciation (which may in turn lead them to engage in a dialogue with @Senators) but, it will create another connection; another bond between the fan and with whom they socialize. The Senators' Twitter may help to create even more bonds between those who already have some connections thereby strengthening that relationship and adding another aspect of commonality between them. Thus, the Senators may do this to build and sustain their fan base with the younger generation.

Despite follower activity in relation to @Senators bearing no impact on social identity formation, the research shows that reading the Senators' handle and according to the multiple regression (see Table 2.0), interaction with the Senators handle impacted all measures of fan commitment. Of interest, when individuals interacted with the Senators it impacted their connection to the fan group. This is important because it is directly intertwined with social identity. As previously discussed, social identity is formed out of an individual's membership within a fan group (Tajfel, 1981) and membership is attained by the individual reflecting certain community behaviour (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Therefore, interacting with the Senators, an individual increases the felt connection with the online fan group which thereby influences their commitment to the team. This further highlights that the Senators need to engage with their followers because of its relation to fan commitment.

Overall, in response to RQ3, the resulting level of fan activity of the followers of the Ottawa Senators bears no impact on the creation of their social identity. It is the time they spend reading the tweets of the Senators which bears an impact. Furthermore, by reading the Senators tweets they are provided with information that positively impacts the follower's connection to the fan group, the team, their creation of online relationships, and online fan group membership;

elements all of which influence social identity creation. This is interesting to note because Tajfel and Turner (1986) believe membership is reflected through behaviour therefore, it would have been predicted that replying and retweeting – measures of ‘physical’ – or what can be considered ‘physical’ online behaviour – would have the largest impact as it would be reflective of one trying to show their association with the Ottawa Senators. However, as the research shows, by reading the tweets, the Senators are providing vital information for individuals to connect which leads to the assumption that in order for the fan group to form interaction or online ‘physical’ activity must be occurring outside of the Senators’ Twitter handle between fans.

Overall, in response to RQ4, the followers’ Twitter activity does impact their commitment to the team. It suggests that connection to the fan group, has the largest influence on commitment. The connection to the fan group promotes a sense of belonging for individuals (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). As society grows more distant, the sense of belonging grows more important to fulfil (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Thus, by interacting with @Senators, fans further increase their commitment because they are ‘physically’ active in the online community, and at the same time, reading and absorbing the information that helps them to facilitate conversation between individuals, because as shown, reading significantly impacts all measures of fan commitment.

Practical Importance

As highlighted within the discussion, the Senators organization and the relationship with their fans, can have a large impact on the individual’s level of identification with the team - particularly for those who are not highly identified; those who do not possess a psychological attachment to the team (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). To achieve a strong organization – fan

relationship, @Senators need to start by a), engaging the fan with their text and b) drawing the fan to the @Senators account. Similar to the Phoenix Suns, the Senators need to create original content; it needs to have an element of individuality it cannot appear ‘filtered, the text should not be generated for the sake of being generated. Furthermore, as an aside, if the Senators are to have ‘theme events’, the Twitter activity needs to mirror and compliment the in – arena, and traditional marketing schemes.

Once individuals are drawn to @Senators, the Senators need to promote interaction (i.e. tweeting, retweeting and replying) with their followers. To promote this activity, the Senators need to begin engaging with those who already interact with them. Thus, the Senators need to reply and retweet their fans in a timely manner, and again with an element of originality. An example would be to include the name of the individual they are tweeting at (the name can be found under the handle) – to make them feel recognized. Furthermore, to increase dialogue the Senators could host a question and answer period on their Twitter handle. They can have a period each week that Senators fans get to tweet questions about the organization, the team or specific players. This would not only draw fans to their handle but it would serve as an information source, provide an element of exclusivity for their fans, and it would also provide an opportunity for dialogue to begin.

If the Senators are finding that their followers are inactive, they could promote interaction on the handle, targeting new and existing fans, by hosting a Twitter contest, for example to win free tickets. The contest could be a paired competition. To participate both individuals must have a Twitter handle. To win, the individuals must tweet a photo to the Senators, and it must contain both participants’ handles. The guidelines of the contest can vary. This is an example of how to capitalize on a socialization process. By having a paired competition it facilitates connections

between their fans – placing the Senators as the bond between them. It also gets their followers more active on Twitter. To highlight the fact that the Senators took the time to analyze the photos, @Senators could comment on something unique about each entry, which may elicit feelings of recognition on behalf of the fan.

Conclusion

The research reveals that an individual's level of interaction with a sport organization's Twitter handle does not influence their social identity formation, reading the Senators tweets is what has the largest impact. According to social identity theory members execute particular behaviours that are associated with the group norm; thus, if the individual wishes to maintain their membership in the group they will execute this behaviour (Ashforth et al., 2008). Therefore, interacting with the Senators' Twitter handle is not reflective of the behaviour one must execute to obtain and sustain membership with the online central fan group. Thus, the Senators are not building the follower (fan) – organization relationship as there is not a dialogue between them. The fan – organization relationship is of importance because if a fan lacks a psychological connection; i.e. they do not possess a high level of identification with the team and, if the team has a poor performance the fan may not be inclined to associate themselves with the team hence, reducing fandom. However, if the Senators can promote a relationship with their fans, they can potentially disrupt this from happening. If the follower has a strong relationship, or a psychological connection with the organization, it may override any negative association with the team, as the team is directly linked with the organization. Thus the organization – follower relationship can aid in fan retention.

@Senators does not have a large impact on the online fan community development and sustainment due to the lack of dialogue with their followers. However, as previously mentioned, the amount of time an individual spends reading the Senators' tweets does have a large impact on a person's social identity formation and fan commitment level. Social identity is forged out of out of an individual's membership within a fan group (Tajfel, 1981). As interaction is required for social groups to emerge (Seo et al., 2007) tweeting information facilitates connections between fans by encouraging interaction which creates and sustains the online Twitter community. An example is the use of the Senators created hashtags. When a team encourages and facilitates the creation of bonds between fans, it increases the fans well – being, reflecting positively on the team and thereby increase the individuals team identification (Wann, 2006, as cited in Sadri, 2015). Therefore, highlighting again, the power of the follower – organization relationship.

Overall, the research highlights how elements of commitment, specifically; online relationships, connection to the fan group, and fan club membership all are related to social identity, as social identity is forged out of group membership (Tajfel, 1981). If the Senators, can position their sport organization as an active member of the online community by building relationships with their followers, they can influence their follower's membership within the fan group which thereby then impacts their commitment level to the team. Those fans who possess a higher level of identification, and an emotional involvement, as a collective can lead to increased attendance, viewership, licensed product sales, and sport – media use (Sadri, 2014; Seo et al., 2007).

Future Research

To further the advancement of research a study could be conducted focusing on the 21.4% of people who identified as not being a member of the fan group. The study might uncover inhibitions people about getting involved with an online fan group and furthermore, what the perceived barriers to membership are. This would help sport organizations identify ways to break down these barriers and to make their fan base more inclusive to all, increasing the prosperity of their organization.

This particular study could be conducted again, with questions related to Twitter interactions between followers. This could reveal if specific interactions between the team's Twitter followers cause individuals to feel more included within the team's fan group, be it through following specific people, tweeting, or retweeting other fans. The focus of such a study would be solely on fan behaviour, as opposed to how the organization impacts fan behaviour. It would also highlight the power of specific individuals in the online community not employed/directly related to the sport organization.

Another avenue for future study would be to compare types of fans and their Twitter activity. Specifically, season tickets holders and non – season ticket holders, and how Twitter impacts their social identity and fan commitment – if at all. In completing such a study, it would provide sport organizations with information on how to market their ticket sales to a particular fan base.

Additionally, not only could fans be broken down into specific categories but age categories could be divided as well. In this research there were two age categories (as equal sample sizing was needed) however, future research could look at the breakdown of these

categories and identify how they consume Twitter differently and if that impacts the potential communication patterns the Senators should use.

Limitations

This research and its results are specific to the Ottawa Senators and their Twitter followers. The sample size is of concern as there were only 455 respondents to the questionnaire, out of the team's 216 000 Twitter followers¹². A larger sample size would have enhanced the accuracy and generalizability of the results.

Another limitation is that of the method chosen for the research project: the online questionnaire. Individuals may have required clarification regarding certain queries and therefore some respondents may not have answered the survey with a full understanding of its questions. However, the researcher was able to overcome this limitation using Twitter. Since the Ottawa Senators retweeted the link from the researcher's Twitter handle, and because the researcher maintained an open profile, respondents had the opportunity to tweet or privately message questions about the questionnaire to the researcher.

Another limitation was the construction of the questionnaire. The questions were asking participants to self – report their time. The researcher did not check people's accuracy on self – reported time, which is often distorted. The questions were also not divided based on time spent on their mobile devices or on their desktop. Furthermore, the questionnaire did not include open-ended questions. Therefore, participants were unable to expand their thoughts on why or how they believed the Senators facilitated connections between their followers in general, or how the

¹² 216 000 followers as of May 20th 2014. It should be noted that the number of Senators Twitter followers dropped by 7% at the end of the season. The researcher attributes this loss to the end of playoffs.

Senators' Twitter activity influenced their membership within the fan group specifically.

Providing open-ended questions would have allowed each respondent to expand their answers, further clarifying their ideas and beliefs in relation to each question.

Finally, the number of respondents is a limitation as 453, out of 216 000 followers is not representative of the entire Senators' Twitter fan base.

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Table 1.0

Descriptive Statistics for Variables

Measure	Mean	SD	Range
Fan Activity			
1. Twitter Minutes	4.48	2.07	1.00 – 7.00
2. Reading Senators' Handle	2.04	1.54	0.00 – 7.00
3. Interacting with Senators' Handle	2.49	0.99	1.00 – 5.00
Identity			
1. Social identity	4.45	0.73	2.00 – 5.00
Commitment			
1. Team Connection	3.27	1.05	1.00 – 5.00
2. Fan Commitment	2.96	1.07	1.00 – 5.00
3. Connection to the Fan Group	2.79	1.10	1.00 – 5.00
4. Online Relationships	3.22	1.01	1.00 – 5.50
5. Fan Club Membership	2.70	1.15	1.00 – 5.00
6. Use of Senator Hashtags	3.05	1.24	1.00 – 5.00

Note. $n = 453$. Except Twitter Minutes has $n = 450$.

Table 2.0.

Multiple Regression Analyses for Fan Activity and Fan Commitment

Analysis	β	t	p	r^2	F	p
1. Team Connection				0.13	21.25	0.001
1. Twitter Minutes	-0.11	-2.19	0.001			
2. Reading Senators' Handle	0.16	3.04	0.029			
3. Interacting with Senators' Handle	0.28	5.92	0.002			
2. Fan Commitment				0.15	25.65	0.001
1. Twitter Minutes	-0.13	-2.79	0.006			
2. Reading Senators' Handle	0.20	3.95	0.001			
3. Interacting with Senators' Handle	0.28	6.05	0.001			
3. Connection to the Fan Group				0.15	27.19	0.001
1. Twitter Minutes	-0.04	-0.92	0.356			
2. Reading Senators' Handle	0.13	2.64	0.009			
3. Interacting with Senators' Handle	0.33	7.06	0.001			
4. Online Relationships				0.05	7.90	0.001
1. Twitter Minutes	-0.06	-1.12	0.264			
2. Reading Senators' Handle	0.15	2.73	0.007			
3. Interacting with Senators' Handle	0.14	2.82	0.005			
5. Fan Club Membership				0.08	13.68	0.001
1. Twitter Minutes	0.00	0.08	0.933			
2. Reading Senators' Handle	0.11	2.16	0.031			
3. Interacting with Senators' Handle	0.23	4.59	0.001			
6. Use of Senator Hashtags				0.33	73.30	0.001
1. Twitter Minutes	0.01	2.26	0.024			
2. Reading Senators' Handle	0.10	2.26	0.023			
3. Interacting with Senators' Handle	0.49	11.78	0.001			

Note. F-ratios are calculated using 3 and 446 degrees of freedom.

Table 3. 0

Total Responses for Age Categories

Total Responses		
	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Gender:		
Male	245	54.1
Female	208	45.9
Age:		
11 to 25	211	46.60
26 and over	242	53.40
Minutes Reading the Senators		
handle:	16	3.53
0	204	45.03
1 to 5	120	26.49
6 to 10	50	11.03
11 to 15	26	5.74
16 to 20	15	3.31
21 to 25	5	1.10
26 to 30	17	3.75
31 and above		

Table 4.0

Anova. Senators activity impacts fan commitment, based on Age, Gender and Minutes reading the Senators handle

Analysis	<i>df</i>	F	p
Gender	1	7.25	0.007
Age	1	1.81	0.180
Minutes Reading	7	5.00	0.001
Gender*Age	1	0.27	0.603
Gender*Minutes Reading	7	0.72	0.658
Age*Minutes Reading	7	0.52	0.819
Gender*Age*Minutes Reading	5	0.66	0.657

Note. n = 453 for Gender. n = 429 for Age

Table 5.0

Tukey post – hoc test. Minutes reading and Fan Commitment.

Minutes Reading	Minutes Reading	Mean difference	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
0	1 to 5	-.553	.443	-1.370	.265
	6 to 10	-.879	.032	-1.717	-.041
	11 to 15	-.993	.020	-1.897	-.088
	16 to 20	-1.389	.001	-2.390	-.389
	21 to 25	-1.412	.004	-2.544	-.281
	26 to 30	-1.012	.543	-2.625	.600
	31 and above	-1.283	.010		-.187
1 to 5	0	.553	.443	-.265	1.370
	6 to 10	-.327	.112	-.689	.036
	11 to 15	-.440	.126	-.937	.057
	16 to 20	-.837	.003	-1.492	-.181
	21 to 25	-.860	.042	-1.702	-.017
	26 to 30	-.460	.977	-1.885	.965
	31 and above	-.730	.098	-1.525	.064
6 to 10	0	.879	.032	.041	1.717
	1 to 5	.327	.112	-.036	.689
	11 to 15	-.113	.998	-.643	.417

	16 to 20	-.510	.306	-1.191	.170
	21 to 25	-.533	.563	-1.396	.329
	26 to 30	-.133	1.000	-1.570	1.303
	31 and above	-.404	.803	-1.220	.412
11 to 15	0	.993	.020	.088	1.897
	1 to 5	.440	.126	-.057	.937
	6 to 10	.113	.998	-.417	.643
	16 to 20	-.407	.757	-1.159	.364
	21 to 25	-.420	.866	-1.347	.507
	26 to 30	-.020	1.000	-1.497	1.457
	31 and above	-.291	.974	-1.174	.593
16 to 20	0	1.389	.001	.389	2.390
	1 to 5	.837	.003	.181	1.492
	6 to 10	.510	.306	-.170	1.191
	11 to 15	.397	.757	-.364	1.158
	21 to 25	.023	1.000	-1.044	.998
	26 to 30	.377	.995	-1.160	1.914
	31 and above	.106	1.000	-.876	1.088
21 to 25	0	1.412	.004	.281	2.543
	1 to 5	.860	.042	.018	1.70
	6 to 10	.533	.563	-.329	1.396
	11 to 15	.420	.866	-.507	1.347
	16 to 20	.023	1.00	-.998	1.044
	26 to 30	.400	.996	-1.226	2.026
	31 and above	.130	1.000	-.986	1.244

26 to 30	0	1.012	.543	-.600	2.625
	1 to 5	.460	.977	-.966	1.884
	6 to 10	.133	1.000	-1.304	1.570
	11 to 15	.020	1.000	-1.457	1.497
	16 to 20	-.377	.995	-1.914	1.160
	21 to 25	-.400	.995	-2.026	1.226
	31 and above	-.271	1.000	-1.331	1.331
31 and above	0	1.283	.010	.186	2.379
	1 to 5	.730	.098	-.064	1.525
	6 to 10	.404	.803	-.411	1.219
	11 to 15	.290	.974	-.593	1.174
	16 to 20	-.106	1.000	-1.088	.876
	21 to 25	-.129	1.000	-1.244	.986
	26 to 30	.271	1.000	-1.331	1.87

Table 6.0

Anova for the Senators Twitter activity influences connection to the fan group, based on age, gender and minutes spent reading the Senators handle

Analysis	<i>df</i>	F	P
Gender	1	1.04	0.306
Age	1	7.74	0.006
Minutes Reading	7	3.86	0.001
Gender*Age	1	3.55	0.060
Gender*Minutes Reading	7	1.20	0.304
Age*Minutes Reading	7	1.13	0.345
Gender*Age*Minutes Reading	5	1.36	0.238

Note. n = 453 for Gender. n = 429 for Age.

Table 7.0

Tukey post hoc for minutes reading , creating connections

Minutes Reading	Minutes Reading	Mean difference	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
0	1 to 5	-.347	.878	-1.128	.435
	6 to 10	-.654	.204	-1.455	.147
	11 to 15	-.733	.166	-1.597	.132
	16 to 20	-1.197	.004	-2.1533	-.241
	21 to 25	-.513	.837	-1.594	.569
	26 to 30	-.313	.999	-1.854	1.229
	31 and above	-.901	.153	-1.949	.148
1 to 5	0	.347	.878	-.435	1.128
	6 to 10	-.307	.124	-.654	.039
	11 to 15	-.386	.210	-.861	.089
	16 to 20	-.850	.001	-1.477	-.223
	21 to 25	-.166	.999	-.978	.639
	26 to 30	.034	1.000	-1.328	1.397
	31 and above	-.554	.341	-1.314	.206
6 to 10	0	.654	.204	-.147	1.455
	1 to 5	.307	.124	-.039	.654
	11 to 15	-.078	1.000	-.585	.428
	16 to 20	-.543	.182	-1.194	.108

	21 to 25	.141	1.000	-.683	.966
	26 to 30	.342	.995	-1.032	1.715
	31 and above	-.247	.979	-1.026	.533
11 to 15	0	.733	.166	-.132	1.597
	1 to 5	.386	.210	-.089	.860
	6 to 10	.078	1.000	-.428	.585
	16 to 20	-.465	.521	-1.192	.263
	21 to 25	.220	.995	-.666	1.106
	26 to 30	.420	.985	-.992	1.832
	31 and above	-.168	.999	-1.013	.677
16 to 20	0	1.197	.004	.240	2.153
	1 to 5	.850	.001	.223	1.477
	6 to 10	.543	.182	-.108	1.194
	11 to 15	.465	.521	-.263	1.192
	21 to 25	.685	.393	-.291	1.660
	26 to 30	.885	.598	-.585	2.354
	31 and above	.306	.979	-.642	1.235
21 to 25	0	.513	.837	-.570	1.594
	1 to 5	.166	.999	-.639	.971
	6 to 10	-.142	1.000	-.966	.682
	11 to 15	-.220	.995	-1.106	.666
	16 to 20	-.685	.393	-1.660	.291
	26 to 30	.200	1.000	-1.354	1.754
	31 and above	-.388	.955	-1.454	.678

26 to 30	0	.313	.999	-1.229	1.854
	1 to 5	-.034	1.000	-1.397	1.328
	6 to 10	-.342	.995	-1.715	1.032
	11 to 15	-.420	.985	-1.831	.992
	16 to 20	-.885	.598	-2.354	.585
	21 to 25	-.200	1.000	-1.754	1.354
	31 and above	-.558	.940	-2.120	.943
31 and above	0	.900	.153	-.148	1.950
	1 to 5	.554	.341	-.206	1.314
	6 to 10	.247	.980	-.533	1.026
	11 to 15	.169	.999	-.677	1.013
	16 to 20	-.296	.979	-1.235	.642
	21 to 25	.388	.955	-.678	1.454
	26 to 30	.588	.940	-.943	2.120

Table 8.0

Anova for creating connections based on age, gender and minutes reading the Senators handle

Analysis	<i>df</i>	F	P
Gender	1	2.51	0.113
Age	1	1.14	0.285
Minutes Reading	7	3.56	0.001
Gender*Age	1	1.48	0.224
Gender*Minutes Reading	7	0.992	0.437
Age*Minutes Reading	7	1.15	0.331
Gender*Age*Minutes Reading	5	1.96	0.08

Note. n = 453 for Gender. n = 429 for Age.

Table 9.0

Tukey post hoc. Creating Connections.

Minutes Reading	Minutes Reading	Mean difference	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
0	1 to 5	-.424	.788	-1.265	.417
	6 to 10	-.792	.099	-1.654	.071
	11 to 15	-.955	.040	-1.886	-.024
	16 to 20	-1.067	.036	-2.097	-.038
	21 to 25	-1.008	.146	-2.173	.156
	26 to 30	-1.075	.502	-2.735	.585
	31 and above	-1.287	.013	-2.415	-.158
1 to 5	0	.424	.788	-.417	1.265
	6 to 10	-.368	.056	-.740	.005
	11 to 15	-.531	.035	-1.042	-.020
	16 to 20	-.643	.074	-1.318	.031
	21 to 25	-.584	.448	-1.451	.283
	26 to 30	-.651	.878	-2.118	.816
	31 and above	-.863	.030	-1.680	-.045
6 to 10	0	.792	.099	-.070	1.654
	1 to 5	.368	.056	-.005	.740
	11 to 15	-.163	.985	-.709	.382
	16 to 20	-.276	.932	-.977	.425
	21 to 25	-.217	.996	-1.104	.671

	26 to 30	-.283	.999	-1.762	1.196
	31 and above	-.495	.623	-1.334	.345
11 to 15	0	.955	.040	.024	1.886
	1 to 5	.531	.035	.020	1.042
	6 to 10	.163	.985	-.382	.709
	16 to 20	-.112	1.000	-.896	.671
	21 to 25	-.053	1.000	-1.007	.901
	26 to 30	-.120	1.000	-1.640	1.400
	31 and above	-.332	.954	-1.241	.578
16 to 20	0	1.067	.036	.038	2.097
	1 to 5	.643	.074	-.031	1.318
	6 to 10	.276	.932	-.425	.977
	11 to 15	.112	1.000	-.671	.896
	21 to 25	.059	1.000	-.992	1.110
	26 to 30	.007	1.000	-1.590	1.575
	31 and above	-.220	.998	-1.230	.791
21 to 25	0	1.00	.146	-.156	2.173
	1 to 5	.584	.448	-.283	1.451
	6 to 10	.217	.996	-.671	1.104
	11 to 15	.053	1.000	-.901	1.007
	16 to 20	-.059	1.000	-1.110	.992
	26 to 30	-.067	1.000	-1.740	1.607
	31 and above	-.278	.996	-1.426	.870
26 to 30	0	1.075	.502	-.585	2.735

	1 to 5	.651	.878	-.816	2.118
	6 to 10	.283	.999	-1.196	1.762
	11 to 15	.120	1.000	-1.400	1.640
	16 to 20	.007	1.000	-1.575	1.590
	21 to 25	.067	1.000	-1.607	1.740
	31 and above	-.212	1.000	-1.860	1.437
31 and above	0	1.287	.013	.158	2.415
	1 to 5	.863	.030	.045	1.681
	6 to 10	.495	.623	-.345	1.335
	11 to 15	.332	.954	-.578	1.241
	16 to 20	.220	.998	-.791	1.230
	21 to 25	.278	.996	-.870	1.426
	26 to 30	.212		-1.437	1.860
			1.000		

Table 10.0

MANOVA. Interaction impacts identity formation based on age and gender

Analysis	df	F	P
Gender			
ReplyRetweetSens	1	2.80	.085
FanIdentification	1	5.82	.016
Age			
ReplyRetweetSens	1	18.60	.001
FanIdentification	1	.79	.374
Gender*Age			
ReplyRetweetSens	1	0.74	.786
FanIdentification	1	.194	.194

Note. n = 455 for Gender and Age

Table 11.0

MANOVA. Reading Senators tweets impacts identity formation based on age and gender

Analysis	<i>df</i>	F	p
Gender			
Minutes Reading	1	.53	.466
Fan Identification	1	5.82	.016
Age			
Minutes Reading	1	5.60	.018
Fan Identification	1	.79	.374
Gender*Age			
Minutes Reading	1	.09	.760
Fan Identification	1	1.70	.194

Note. n = 455 for Gender and Age

Table 12.0

Descriptive Statistics for Interaction (reply and retweet) with the Senators based on Gender

Total Responses					
	Gender	Age Category	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
ReplyRetweet	Male	1	2.63	0.94	109
		2	2.21	1.00	131
	Total		2.40	0.99	240
	Female	1	2.77	1.02	94
		2	2.40	0.867	111
	Total		2.57	0.96	205

Conclusion

Within this conclusion, I provide an overview of both articles. I then discuss the implications of both studies in relation to each other.

The results from both phase one and phase two of this research project provide insight into how the Ottawa Senators should conduct their online Twitter presence. The research suggests ways in which the Senators can improve upon their Twitter campaigns in order to (a) increase fan engagement, (b) bridge gaps between their fans and (c) strengthen the overall online community by focusing on the follower – organization relationship.

Paper one of this research project found that the players of the Ottawa Senators have the largest impact on fan engagement as there was a high level of Twitter activity in response to player coded tweets, highlighting a high level of fan interest. The Senators can further the PSI fan – athlete relationship by tweeting private, ‘behind the scenes’ information about their players from @Senators; thus, bypassing the actual player in the formation of these relationships.

Paper one showed that, the development of a PSI mediated relationship between the fan and the organization is non – existent. This is due to the Senators’ lack of follower engagement, specifically direct communication and interaction (replying and retweeting) with their followers. Only 2.38% of the Senators’ tweets were coded as fan engagement over the 4 month research period. The lack of interaction between @Senators and their followers, results in the online central fan group not originating on the Senators’ Twitter handle. The followers highlighted that the lack of interaction does not dictate their position within the online fan group. The largest determinant of the creation and inclusion within the online fan group is how active a follower is with other fans. Each individual, through their own handle, creates a subsection of the community. It is the amalgamation of these fan groups that create the community as a whole.

Therefore, by @Senators not engaging in dialogue with their followers they are allowing the creation of the online fan group to occur outside of their Twitter handle and, they are limiting themselves from occupying a powerful position within the fan group.

Paper one highlighted, that if utilized properly, Twitter can become a tool for fan recruitment. Within paper one, two different types of Senators' fans, those who are fans of the team, and those who are fans of the organization were identified. A way to facilitate connections between a fan of the team and a fan of the organization is to have players participate in the Senators community initiatives. In doing this, there is an element of commonality for both groups. Seeing the players active in the community may promote fans of the organization to learn more about the team in order to participate in a discussion with a fan of the team. Therefore, if the Twitter content engages both types of fans, relationships may result between fans of the team and fans of the organization and consequently, fan recruitment may result as fans of the organization may become fans of the team.

Paper two highlighted that the most influential Twitter activity on behalf of the Senators' Twitter followers was the amount of time a follower read the Senators' handle. Time spent reading the Senators handle impacted social identity formation, and all measures of fan commitment. The level of interaction with @Senators had no impact on a fan's social identity formation. This highlights that there is a lack of bond formation between the follower and the Senators' organization. Furthermore, it suggests that interaction with @Senators is not reflective of the 'group norm'; it is not a requirement of being a member of the Senators' online community.

The research within paper two highlighted a lack of follower – organization interaction, which suggests the formation of the online community is a result of the interaction between

members, outside of the Senators' Twitter handle. Outside of a respondent's affinity to use Senator generated hashtags, connection to the fan group had the largest impact on fan commitment as 38% of respondents believe membership within the online fan group has an impact, and 20.1% said it very much impacts their connection to the team. This suggests that the Senators' Twitter content helps to influence the follower's position in the fan group as it serves as the information needed to spark dialogue with other fans, increasing their connection to the fan group and subsequently impacting their commitment level.

Overall, both papers show that the information tweeted, plays an important role, as it is the building blocks of relationship development between followers, followers and players and between followers and the organization. All three relationships impact a fans placement within the community because as Seo et al., (2007) stated, "fans identify with the team, the organization, the sport, and other fans. These psychological relationships form, to a large degree, the fans attachment to the community" (p. 233). The Senators promote a follower – player relationship as they tweet player specific information. This may encourage fans to identify with the team as a player is a direct extension and is inherently influenced by the team. The Senators indirectly promote fan relationships by the content they tweet (i.e. player and community initiative coded tweets) which sparks dialogue between identified Senators fans. It is through Senator created hashtags how these fans can find and engage in dialogue with one another. However, the Senators need to determine the type of relationship they want to build with their fans and how they manage fan access. In doing so, this will determine the type of information they tweet and how they tweet it. Do the Senators view Twitter as another layer of one – way communication with their fans (they currently conduct their Twitter activity as so), or do they

want to use it to engage in two – way dialogue? Do the Senators want to encourage a follower – organization relationship?

The lack of a follower – organization relationship is problematic as the organization – follower relationship can have a large impact on fan recruitment and sustainment. When the organization interacts with a follower on Twitter, feelings of recognition and appreciation result (see statements from the focus group, 2015). If the organization – follower bond is strong, and if a fan who identifies with the team or a player, has a negative experience with either, this fan's psychological connection (the intrinsic importance the organization has for the follower) (see Funk and James, 2001) may override this negativity, preventing the fan from potentially losing interest within the team. If a customer has a positive relationship with an organization, it will result in customer retention due to customer satisfaction (Gronroos, 2004). Therefore, this research suggest that the Senators should develop their Twitter campaign so they can participate in two – way dialogue with their followers further developing the follower – organization relationship.

Twitter, as a social media channel, as highlighted within this research is a combination of sociology and technology as it is a vehicle that allows people to connect with whom they may have not otherwise interacted (Gailore & Leonard, 2009). As previously discussed, if fans of the team and fans of the organization are provided with tweets that contain information about the Senators' players involvement in community initiatives, it may bridge the gap between both types of fans as it serves as a central point of discussion for both groups. Consequently, this could also result in fan recruitment. If fans between both groups can build social connections with each other as a result of the Senators, it may reflect positively on the organization thus, indirectly strengthening the follower – organization. When an individual can find an element of

commonality which results in social connections (in this case through team identification), their well – being is positively impacted (Wann, 2006; Sadri, 2014) and this is thereby reflected onto the team.

The research highlighted how the online central fan group is not centralized on the Senators Twitter handle due to a lack of follower and @Senators interaction. Follower and @Senators interaction needs to occur because frequent communication will define what it means to be a Senators fan; it will facilitate member cohesion and get the members to internalise the goals and values of the organization (Seo et al., 2007). Those organizations who have the most successful online campaigns focus “on being active, relatable and, truthful – all in an effort to facilitate a community like – environment where organizations and consumers seamlessly exist” (Armstrong et al., 2014, p. 6). Therefore, the Senators can spear head the fan group, guiding their members in ways which will benefit the organization, which may result in increased fan loyalty, which, as previous research has shown, that identification is positively related to fan commitment and consumption (Cole & Burch, 2006; Seo et al., 2007).

Therefore, this research shows that the Senators need to be the ones who drive forth the creation, facilitation and maintenance of the online central fan group. Furthermore, the Senators need to tweet information that will bridge gaps between their followers and potentially increase their pool for fan recruitment. Finally, the Senators need to engage in dialogue with their followers, strengthen the follower – organization relationship, as it will impact fan identity formation, attachment to the community, and subsequently the commitment to the team.

Future Research

An avenue for further research could be to conduct a study that measures the Twitter activity of the followers of the Ottawa Senators for a full calendar year. Alongside this, financial behaviour could be monitored (i.e. how many games they attend and merchandise purchases). This study would highlight if Twitter activity can predict purchasing activity. To further extend this study, one could investigate the financial behaviour between fans who are online and those who are not.

Additionally, types of fans should be researched and how their Twitter activity not only differs but its residing impact on their identification and commitment specifically, season ticket holders versus non – season ticket holders.

Alongside this, a comparative between age groups could be conducted. In doing this, a researcher can determined the difference in how Twitter activity differs between groups, their perception of Twitter as a socialization process, and if the definition of being a fan varies between groups.

Finally, a study could be conducted using an organization identification theoretical backdrop (see Cole and Bruch, 2006). The study could examine how Twitter influences an individual's identity formation and if it becomes psychologically intertwined with the organization's identity; thus, how an organization's identity impacts and is mirrored within a follower's social identity.

Final Thought

My thesis demonstrates the importance of a sport organization analyzing the messages sent via their Twitter account; and furthermore, the response; the understanding; and the

resulting impact of these messages on their followers. A sport organization needs to ensure that the purpose for their Twitter activity coincides with the want of their followers to prevent a disconnect and ensure a cohesive relationship between the two.

Furthermore, my research highlights how sport organizations have limited power online within their own fan groups. As individuals define their social identity out of interaction with other fan's, the organization, unless they engage in two – way dialogue with their followers have no impact on a fans social identity formation. This could limit identification which could be consequential for commitment, as identification and commitment are strongly correlated (Cole & Bruch, 2006). Overall, my research extends the body of knowledge by showcasing, from a fan perspective, community formation by a professional sporting organization

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Directions: Answer the following questions based on how you feel about the Ottawa Senators. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, simply be honest in your responses.

1) Participant Consent

By clicking here, I agree to the above terms and conditions

2) Participant Consent

By clicking here, I agree to the above terms and conditions

3) Gender

Male

Female

4) Age

10 or younger

11 – 15

16 – 20

21 – 25

26 – 30

31 – 35

36 – 40

46 – 50

51 – 55

56 – 60

61 and older

5) Do you follow the Senators on Twitter? If you do not, what would prompt you to do so?

6) In a typical day how many minutes do you spend on Twitter (via computer, smart phone, iPad, etc.)?

Less than 10

11 – 20

21 – 30

31 – 40

41 – 50

51 – 60

More than one hour a day

- 7) In a typical day, how many minutes do you spend reading the Ottawa Senators Twitter handle @Senators (this includes reading the Senators tweets on the Twitter home page)?

0
 1 – 5
 6 – 10
 11 – 15
 16 – 20
 21 – 25
 26 – 30
 31 and above

- 8) How often do you interact with the Ottawa Senators on Twitter (this includes replying and retweeting one of their tweets)

Never Rarely Sometimes Frequently Very Frequently

- 9) How strongly do you identify as a fan of the Ottawa Senators?

Not at all Barely Somewhat Very Extremely

- 10) Does the Senators Twitter activity impact your connection to the team?

Not at all Barely Somewhat Very Extremely

- 11) Does the Senators Twitter activity increase your fan commitment level to the team?

Not at all Barely Somewhat Very Extremely

- 12) Do you view yourself as a member of the larger online fan group that surrounds the team?

Yes No

- 13) Does the Senators Twitter activity influence your connection to the larger fan group that surrounds the team?

Not at all Barely Somewhat Very Extremely

- 14) Do you believe that the Ottawa Senators Twitter activity facilitates the creation of connections (i.e. relationships) between Ottawa Senators fans?

Not at all Barely Somewhat Very Extremely

15) Does 'membership' within this larger fan group (i.e. Sens Army) impact your fan commitment level to the team?

Not at all Barely Somewhat Very Extremely

16) Do you use specific hashtags to show that you are a fan of the Ottawa Senators (i.e. #Sens, #PeskySens, #UnitedInRed)?

Never Rarely Sometimes Frequently Very Frequently

17) What can be done to improve the Ottawa Senators Twitter activity?

18) Please provide your Twitter handle. As stated above, it will be used for research purposes only.

Thank – you for your participation!