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## **SOCIAL MEDIA: TWITTER AND ITS ABILITY TO AFFECT FAN IDENTITY AND COMMITMENT**

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### **Abstract**

#### **PURPOSE**

Social media, specifically Twitter, has spawned a new method for the materialization of connections between sport teams and their fans, and between sport fans themselves. The communication presented online is influential as it may attract new sports fans and impact how the team becomes integrated within that fans social identity (O'Shea & Alonso, 2012). The connections which are of the utmost importance on behalf of a sports team is those formed between fans themselves, as those connections can lead to the development of a central fan group surrounding the team (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). However, these connections, formed online have yet to be studied in their entirety (Frederick, Lim, Clavio & Walsh, 2012). Thus, the primary purpose of this study is are to analyze the Ottawa Senators of the National Hockey League (NHL) utilization of their Twitter account and 1 how) how that impacts the social identity formation of their followers, 2) if it results in the establishment of emotional connections between other Ottawa Senators followers, 3); and if this impacts the fans' overall commitment level towards the team.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The establishment of online communication via social media can increase a fan's ability to not only connect with the team but other fans' as well – generating a sense of belonging to the community, to the central fan group, surrounding the team (Iokimidis, 2012). By residing and holding membership within this group, this can increase one's level of commitment towards the particular sports team, as membership can aid in the development of one's social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Identification and membership within this community can help define an individual's identity; iThus, being a part of the central fan group ties the team to one's identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Individuals then engage and derive satisfaction from activities congruent with their identity,

ultimately to view themselves as an exemplar of the group of which they are a part (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). 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 and invoking social identity formation within the individual.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE REVIEW

The review highlights the important role social media now plays in the creation of relationships between individuals, specifically sport fans. As more communication is now being conducted online, the importance in how to appropriately administer information via social media channels increases. Literature highlights that the utilization and effectiveness of social media in creating relationships between individuals has yet to be quantifiably measured. Thus, the proposed research will help to fill this void, and determine how Twitter can increase or decrease the ability to forge online relationships,; how these online relationships affect an individual's ability to define themselves,; and whether this impacts their allegiance to a sport team.

#### METHODOLOGY

The information tweeted by the Ottawa Senators between August 2013 and November 2013 was imported to NVIVO10 and coded for emergent themes. The activity level (the number of retweets, and replies to each comment) as a result of each tweet was recorded. A corresponding tally of each follower who retweeted and replied was recorded in an excel spread sheet. This was recorded to see if there was a correlation between an individual's Twitter activity level and their responses obtained from the questionnaire and focus group. The questionnaire was administered and the focus group was conducted in March of 2014. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions asking participants about their demographic, Twitter activity level, their membership within the fan community surrounding the Senators as well as their overall level of fan commitment towards the team. The questionnaire was conducted online and a link was tweeted on behalf of the Ottawa Senators Twitter account.

The focus group consisted of 7 participants, all of whom follow the Ottawa Senators on Twitter. It was conducted via Skype. The purpose of the focus group was to ask individuals how Twitter affects one's connection to the surrounding fan nation; if it impacts their social identity formation and finally if the connection solely between the Senators and the Twitter user, or the connections developed between other Twitter Ottawa Senators followers can increase one's fan commitment level towards the team. All information was imported to NVIVO as it can help to organize the connections made throughout each phase of the research process.

#### RESULTS/DISCUSSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

Results are not yet available but will be for the conference.

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