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Online Fan Communities: Welcoming Behavior, Brand Community Markers, and Multiple Identities in Sports Fandom

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Online Fan Communities: Welcoming Behavior, Brand Community Markers, and
Multiple Identities in Sports Fandom

A Dissertation Presented

by

BLAINE R. HUBER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FEBRUARY 2024

Isenberg School of Management

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Multiple Identities in Sports Fandom

A Dissertation Presented

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This dissertation is a testament to the collective support of these individuals, and for that, I am truly grateful.

ABSTRACT

ONLINE FAN COMMUNITIES: WELCOMING BEHAVIOR, BRAND COMMUNITY MARKERS, AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN SPORTS FANDOM

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Online fan communities have revolutionized the way sport consumers engage with fellow fans and the sports product. The traditional regional boundaries that once characterized sports fandom have been mitigated by the emergence of new media, social media platforms, and online fan communities. This dissertation explores the non-geographically bound nature of contemporary sports fan communities, examining the evolving dynamics of fan behavior in the digital age.

In Study 1, an interactional perspective is employed to explore online fan socialization. The focus is on how new fans' self-presentation influences acceptance within NFL team-specific Reddit communities. Utilizing data mining, textual analysis, and qualitative coding, the study reveals that the presentation of new fans significantly impacts community acceptance, shedding light on the foundations of online fan socialization.

Study 2 investigates a newly formed online fan community for a professional sports team, aiming to understand how sport fan communities negotiate and establish brand community markers through discourse. Drawing from the communities of practice framework and discursive psychology, the study explores the development of a collective identity over time. Analyzing posts from the team's announcement through their second season, this investigation provides insights into the negotiation of community meaning and the construction of norms and prototypes.

In Study 3, a holistic examination of online fan behavior explores how members engage with other communities beyond their primary team's community. Utilizing data mining and content analysis, the study investigates how online sports fans incorporate other online communities (e.g., other teams, sport-related communities) into their broader online fan experience. This exploration offers a nuanced understanding of diverse identities enacted within digital sports spaces, with a focus on sport fan maximizing behavior.

Collectively, this dissertation contributes to the expanding body of research on online sports fandom, providing valuable insights into the intricacies of fan socialization, the negotiation of collective identities, and the multifaceted nature of online fan behavior. As the sports landscape continues to evolve in the digital era, this research seeks to deepen our understanding and enhance the scholarship surrounding the online sports fan experience.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Sports fandom is a prominent social identity with significant consumer outcomes due to the fervor associated with fandom (Lock & Heere, 2017). Particularly for those who are highly identified with a team, they are avid consumers of sports products, purchasing team gear, attending games, and consuming sport content through television streaming, news content, and other forms of sport media (e.g., James & Trail, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2013; Stavros et al., 2014; Wakefield, 2016). Fandom is a central characteristic of sport and the sports industry. This particularly places the issue of finding and fostering new fans as a topic of industry and personal interest.

As a fan myself, I understand the deep psychological connection associated with being a fan. It can be an identity that permeates all aspects of life, influencing not only consumer behaviors, but also forming foundational aspects of how one connects with people and, for some, influences how one views the world. I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on how or if it is even possible for me to adopt a fandom today that is as meaningful or ingrained as my current fandom. What would it take to form another identity with a new team that is so deep-rooted and central to my self-concept? This has prompted a profound personal interest in how one becomes a fan, particularly today where fandom can be increasingly experienced with others through online mediums. What are the precursors to adopting an affiliation that can permeate so much of one's life?

The sources of fandom are not unknown and have been the subject of much research (e.g., Allison & Pope, 2021; Asada & Ko, 2022; Hyatt et al., 2018; James, 2001;

Katz & Heere, 2013; Kolbe & James, 2000; Lock et al., 2009; Lock et al., 2011; Mastromartino, Qian, et al., 2020, Mastromartino, Zhang, & Wann, 2020, Reifurth et al., 2020). So much of what we know about creating new fans is based on geographic location and local community factors. Fans, like myself, are traditionally thought of as byproducts of where they grew up and where they were raised. Teams may appeal to individuals for any number of reasons, but prior to the digital age, team affiliation was largely influenced by regional ties, whether through community influence or directly from parents and peers (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000). However, contemporary fandom exists in an increasingly online space (Abeza et al., 2015; Abeza & Sanderson, 2022; Filo et al., 2015; Watanabe et al., 2021). Community is an integral part of fandom and online fan communities are a modern take on the communal bar scene or the tailgating communities that characterize local fan experiences. Online fan communities are non-geographically bound communities where individuals can participate as a member of the fan group from anywhere with an internet connection. As such, it is not only easier than ever to support a team from afar, but it is also easier than ever for fans to find fan communities and become fans of teams that were once more regionally bound (e.g., Mastromartino, Qian, et al., 2020).

This is where my dissertation begins, with what I refer to as, *new fan posts*. As a fan of the Cincinnati Bengals living in Western Massachusetts, I utilize social media and online fan communities to maintain my connection with the Bengals and with my ties to Ohio. One day, I was on the Cincinnati Bengals subreddit, and I saw a post from a Reddit user titled, *New fan, what do I need to know?* As I investigated the post, I found that the user who submitted the post to the online Bengals fan community was an international

fan, seeking to get more involved in American football. They briefly introduced themselves and then explained why they decided they wanted to be a fan of the Bengals. They liked a team with a similar up-and-down history. They liked the logo and the team colors, and they felt a kinship with Cincinnati, Ohio, despite never setting foot in the state. Then they asked, “what do I need to know?”, reflecting a desire to get quickly up-to-speed on what is necessary to support the Bengals for the upcoming season. In response, existing community members populated the post with replies, explaining team history, discussing famous players, and lamenting how other fanbases and the national media have viewed the franchise over the decades. The community replies highlighted not only the history of the team, but also the wealth of knowledge that is required, or at least associated, with being a Bengals fan; this is information I have long taken for granted.

I found the post to be fascinating, providing a meaningful glimpse at the evolution of fandom in the era of new media and the technological advancements that have drawn fans virtually closer than ever before. An international sports fan had access to enough information to choose a professional American football team from the state of Ohio to support. They had the ability to then reach out to an existing online fan community to ask for a “how-to” on how to be a Bengals fan and then community members shared their interpretations of what being a Bengals fan means to them, including the important facts and details, as well as the unwritten perspectives of fandom that are learned through experience (e.g., emotional reflection on historical moments). These posts represent fan socialization in the online age and reflect a tremendous amount of meaning around fandom, what it means to be a fan, and how more fans may be welcomed into existing

communities. And, after a broader search across other sport-related subreddit communities, I realized this was far from the only new/prospective fan and far from the only instance of such a community-based interaction.

Online fan communities across Reddit (notably in sports) are populated with various *new fan posts*, online posts submitted to an existing online fan community where an individual introduces themselves as a new, or prospective, fan of a team. Oftentimes these users provide background about why they are choosing to support this team, explaining their motives, or rationalizing to the community why they have chosen the team they have. Additionally, they often pose some form of the question, “what do I need to know” to be a fan of the team in question.

Existing sport consumer behavior literature recognizes the importance of new media in the contemporary fan experience as a source of information, entertainment, and community connection (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Newman, 2020; Stavros et al., 2014). However, *new fan posts* also hint at another important purpose for new media as touchpoints or connection points for fans who may experience their fandom online. While sports fandom has long been considered a regionally bound identity, new media has broken down regional barriers. Fans from around the world can access information and online fan communities. Although this connects fans, it also theoretically puts strain and places importance on the health of these connections (e.g., Fenton et al., 2021). Communities are generally motivated to welcome new members for community longevity (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). More practically, sports marketers want to establish and foster connections with non-regional fans who may engage with their sports product or

purchase team-related merchandise as sport continues to globalize. But what if the online fan's *only* connection with a team is online? And what if that touchpoint is negative, unwelcoming, or toxic? For new and prospective fans, *new fan posts* represent not only a source of socialization, but also a first impression for the community and for the team fan base. As such, they warrant investigation as a glimpse into how community dynamics influence how new fans experience these increasingly important touchpoints, and practical opportunities to understand the role of these communities in fostering new fans.

That is where Study 1 of the current dissertation starts. *New fan posts* are online interactions. A new fan posts and then the community replies. Through these texts, meaning is exchanged in the form of historical context, famous games, and other important facts that any “real” fan should know. More specifically, these posts represent socialization interactions where a new fan is being socialized through a self-initiated crash-course about what it means to be a fan of the team in question. Socialization is defined in the current work as the way in which people come to internalize certain ways of understanding the social world from social interactions, effectively transitioning from being an outsider of a group or community to being an insider (Bauer et al., 2007; Guhin et al., 2021; Parsons, 1951). In respect to fandom, fans come to internalize what it means to be a fan of a team oftentimes from significant others, primarily parents and close peers (e.g., James, 2001) or other community-based social ties (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2013). Socialization as interactional is well established in the context of organizational behavior and on-boarding new employees but a live look at how new fans are on-boarded to a particular fandom has been thus far overlooked in the literature. Thus, Study 1 represents a look at fan socialization as an interactional process, specifically how a *new fan post*,

and the information the new fan provides, may or may not influence community response.

Fan socialization is far from a new topic in sport consumer literature, as finding and fostering new fans is central to the sport consumer product (e.g., Allison & Pope, 2021; Asada & Ko, 2022; Hyatt et al., 2018; James, 2001; Katz & Heere, 2013; Kolbe & James, 2000; Lock et al., 2009; Lock et al., 2011; Mastromartino, Qian, et al., 2020, Mastromartino, Zhang, & Wann, 2020, Reifurth et al., 2020). However, fan socialization as interactional has received less attention. Existing work has investigated by whom fan socialization may occur and the sources of fandom, but interactions are more than an information source. Interactions are characterized by interlocutors presenting and negotiating meaning (e.g., Shintel & Keysar, 2009). In the current work, I draw from Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles, 1973; Giles & Ogay, 2007) to examine interactions in this sense. According to CAT, interpersonal interactions are influenced by social identities in that people modify their communication in efforts to seek acceptance or distance themselves from those they are interacting with (Giles & Ogay, 2007). When a new fan shares personal information or rationalizes their choice of fandom, they are dictating and contributing to the interaction, influenced by various identities as well as the social context (i.e., online fan community). In response, community members engage in a similar process, evoking their salient social identity (i.e., a fan of the team) and then making communicative decisions that either accommodate or distance themselves from their interactant(s). By delving into these interactions, I can examine how an established community welcomes new members and how new fans influence community response from their side of the interaction with the

content of their posts (e.g., emotional sentiment, sharing personal information, supporting a similar team, etc.). To do so, I employ quantitative methods, notably web scraping techniques, textual analysis, independent-samples *t* tests, and regression analysis, to examine how and why existing online fan communities are more or less welcoming to this new age of fans who initiate fan socialization online.

For Study 2, I shift from Study 1's quantitative methodological approach to discursive psychology within a social constructionist paradigm to further examine *new fan posts*. In addition to reflecting interactional fan socialization, *new fan posts* are an exchange of meaning. New fans are engaging in self-presentation and the community is replying in kind with meaning about what they believe a new fan needs to know to be a fan of their team (i.e., an in-group member). Drawing from brand community literature, this meaning is exchanged through welcoming behavior, in that community members engage with new members, teaching them and socializing them on how to be a proper community member through formal (i.e., "here are the rules of the community") and informal (i.e., a new member's contribution is rejected or not well received) means (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). In social identity terms, welcoming behavior instructs new community members how to be and act as an in-group member (i.e., reflect the community prototype). As part of my analysis for Study 1, I found community members wanted new fans to know about team history, current team players, and regional connections. However, I also noticed that community members shared lesser-known information reflecting community-based stories (i.e., lesser-known fan-favorite players, historical perspectives as fans, how the media portrays the team, etc.) and inside jokes, specific to the community. These lesser-known details reflected community welcoming

practices, assisting in brand learning, and socializing new fans into the community (Schau et al., 2009), conveying not only trivia about the salient team, but richer details about the community identity and fandom. So, I then asked what do new fans *actually* need to know to be a fan of a team and how does the community itself come to establish what it means to be a community member? In other words, online fan communities have answers for new fans about what it means to be a fan of their team and *what they need to know*, but sport consumer behavior scholars have yet to more extensively examine how a community develops a collective identity of this nature.

In the growing body of literature on new media and sports fandom (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Newman, 2020; Stavros et al., 2014), many of the fan communities are well established with seasoned collective identities and community members who can speak to what it means to be a fan of the salient team. However, existing literature also points to the importance of understanding how collective identities are established, as new fans are not universally accepted by existing fans if they do not reflect the in-group prototype or behave consistently with community norms (e.g., Behrens & Uhrich, 2020; Fenton, Gillooly, & Vasilica, 2021; Sveinson & Hoerber, 2016). These meanings (i.e., prototypes) must come from somewhere. I realized that in investigating these questions, I needed to draw from a different epistemological lens to consider how meaning is developed and negotiated in the case of newly formed online fan communities that lack a clearly established collective identity or an established in-group prototype. To do so, I utilize discursive psychology, a methodological approach that presumes identity is negotiated through language and communication. As discursive psychology draws from a social constructionist paradigm,

this methodology allowed me to investigate a newly formed online fan community, examining how early community members navigate and negotiate the community's collective identity of what it means to be an in-group member. This epistemological shift allowed me to explore lingering questions about how a community's sense of "we" comes to be.

Study 2 adds to the current work's overall purpose by generating insights into how large-scale, virtual online communities, comprised of anonymous users, develop a sense of what it means to be a community member. In conjunction with Study 1, Study 2 highlights the nature of how an online fan community negotiates what it means to be a fan, offering insight into how an online fan community develops their collective identity and preferred in-group prototype over time.

Study 3 is a further extension of my interest in *new fan posts* and the non-geographically bound nature of contemporary sports fandom. In reviewing the *new fan posts* for my first two studies, I found many individuals discussed their *new* team as one of two or three teams they support. It was not uncommon for these fans to discuss their new team as their *second* team as if it were an addition to a sport fan portfolio, unable to replace their childhood team instead serving a supplemental rooting interest.

New fan posts are rarely the only involvement for users across Reddit's subreddit communities. Although the previously mentioned new fan may be interested in supporting the Bengals, they are also likely engaging with other communities beyond the Bengals community. For some, those communities are non-sport related. For others, they use their Reddit account to also interact with other sport-related communities, such as other teams they support, league-level communities (i.e., NFL, NBA), or communities of

rival teams. While scholars recognize the nature of new media as a tremendous tool for individuals to support teams within and beyond a regional location (Collins et al., 2016; Coombs, 2021; Foster & Hyatt, 2008; Hyatt & Andrijw, 2008; Kerr & Emery, 2011, 2016; Lianopoulos et al., 2020; Pu & James, 2017; Reifurth et al., 2019; Sveinson & Hoerber, 2016), the existing literature is lacking a holistic investigation of how fans are actively engaging with online fan communities beyond their primary rooting interest. Lock and Funk (2016) developed the multiple in-group identity framework (MIIF) to explain how fans use different communities to satisfy different psychological needs. A separate stream of literature has considered how fans may similarly create multiple team connections and identify with various teams as a means of balancing needs to belong, be distinct, or to improve their odds of supporting a winning team (Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). However, research considering how fans balance various identities through varied online fan community usage remains sparse. For example, a new fan may be well established as a member of their favorite basketball teams' online fan community, but also contributes to their football teams' community or comments to posts in relation to fantasy sports. Grounded in social identity theory, specifically how individuals construct identity structures through various group involvement (i.e., MIIF), I examine how the contemporary fan maximizes the interconnected nature of online fandom to engage with fan communities beyond a primary rooting interest. In doing so, I contribute to our understanding of how fans use online fan communities to engage with sports more holistically, highlighting the nuance of online fandom and identity. This contributes to our broader understanding of how and why fans utilize different communities across social media platforms (e.g., Reddit) for different purposes.

As such, Study 3 takes a more exploratory, qualitative approach to examining user involvement and participation across various subreddit communities. This study complements Studies 1 and 2 as *new fan posts* represent instances where users are expanding their network of communities they associate with. In Study 3, I examine how users interact with online communities more broadly using a combination of data mining and content analysis.

In sum, the following dissertation is concerned with online fan communities in sport, notably, how new fans come to be, the nature of what it means to be a fan within a fan community and how that is developed, and how online fans use the flexibility of online fan communities to engage with various fan communities beyond their primary rooting interest.

Collectively, these studies draw from a social identity perspective and utilize multiple epistemological perspectives to contribute to a growing body of research that seeks to better understand online sports fandom. This project addresses a theoretical gap in how we think about online sports fans. Notably, this project addresses how the absence of geographic barriers in online fan communities has altered the ways in which fans are welcomed and socialized into established fanbases. Finally, this project addresses how collective meaning is constructed in online community settings and how the interplay of access to other communities and interests contributes to how we conceptualize online sports fans. As such, the purpose of this project is to investigate online fan communities, specifically examining the interactional nature of fan socialization online, the discursive construction of a new online fan community's collective identity (i.e., a sense of "we"), and how online fans enact fandom beyond their primary team identity.

The remainder of this project presents three studies used to explore online fandom in relation to online fan communities and the nature of fandom in these spaces. For each study, I provide a brief introduction, a focused literature review of the study, the methodology, findings, and a discussion section that highlights the implications of each study. I conclude with a general discussion of the overall findings and how this work contributes to the sport management literature.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The following section addresses the overarching theoretical framework for this dissertation project. In this sense, this discussion of the theoretical framework positions and frames the following studies in the context of my chosen theoretical lens in relation to identity, community, and communication, drawing from the social identity approach (Hornsey, 2008). More specific related theories and concepts will be discussed in further detail in subsequent chapters.

2.1 The Social Identity Approach

The social identity approach was selected as my overarching theoretical lens as it is a metatheory that is concerned with social identities and the role of personally meaningful communities and groups in influencing human behavior (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023). The social identity approach is a broader framework comprised of both social identity theory of intergroup relations (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987). Both theories share similarities in terms of assumptions and methods, and collectively address various group-mediated phenomena, including group processes and intergroup/intragroup relations (Hornsey, 2008).

Originally developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), SIT focuses on the effect of social context on intergroup relations, notably how different groups are viewed and evaluated in terms of status, as well as how that awareness shapes behavior. SIT makes three general assumptions: 1) people strive to hold a favorable view of themselves, 2) social groups have positive and/or negative values attached to them, and 3) that these

values are assigned to a group in comparison to other relevant social groups (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023). In seeking positive self-esteem derived from their group membership, individuals are expected to find ways to improve their group's status or select groups that already reflect higher status amongst relevant other groups (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The awareness of preferred or higher status groups forms the basis for social change and conflict, as group members are motivated to improve their group's status in comparison to relevant other groups (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Although SCT shares the same assumptions about intragroup comparison as SIT and was conceptualized based on SIT, SCT is more focused on understanding how, when, and why individuals categorize themselves as part of a certain group (Turner et al., 1987). Self-categorization, or the cognitive grouping of oneself as similar to members of a social category (in contrast to members of another category), is considered part of a person's self-concept (Reimer et al., 2020). Self-concept is the set of cognitive representations a person holds about who they are and their sense of self in the social world (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023; Reimer et al., 2020). In other words, self-concept refers to the collection of beliefs and perceptions we hold about ourselves, including our abilities, values, personality traits, and other qualities that make us who we are. Social identities occupy an important part of one's self-concept, as our group associations and relevant social categories help us define ourselves within the social world (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023).

According to SCT, when one chooses to self-categorize themselves as a member of a group, such as choosing to support a particular sport team, they undergo a

process of depersonalization, in which an individual sets aside their own individuality for the sake of assimilating themselves to the group, coming to see themselves as interchangeable exemplars of a social group rather than as a unique individual (Turner et al., 1987). Thus, depersonalization reflects a process in which a new community member takes on normative behavior associated with the salient social category, not only informing others (i.e., community members) of their group membership, but also informing their own self-concept. In this sense, the social groups, and identities one associates with provide blueprints for how to act and behave in various social contexts, informing intergroup and intragroup behavior. Social identities provide individuals with the choice to identify with groups and communities for the sake of inclusion and/or for distinctiveness, shaping one's perceptions of themselves and others. As such, social identities are deeply tied to one's personal psychology, informing how one navigates the social world.

2.2 Team Identification

Sports fandom is commonly conceptualized as a social identity. Team identification is one's psychological connection with a meaningful social category, in this case a team (Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Catered to the sports context, team identification refers to one's sense of self derived from their knowledge that they are members of a particular fandom or fan community (Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). As such, it may be a source of psychological and social well-being as fans experience group connectedness and increased self-esteem stemming from their affiliation with a sports team and meaningful social connections associated with a related fan community (Wann, 2006).

Team identification can become a powerful driver of consumer behavior, as fans become more involved with their team affiliation (Funk & James, 2001; de Groot & Robinson, 2008). Consumption behavior, such as engaging with team-related products or experiences, provides symbolic meaning, contributing to one's self-concept (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Reed, 2002). As identification grows, one's fandom becomes more central to self-concept, influencing subsequent behavior, further reinforcing their identity (e.g., de Groot & Robinson, 2008). As such, highly identified fans are more likely to purchase fan apparel and team gear (James & Trail, 2008; Trail et al., 2005), attend games (Madrigal, 1995; Shapiro et al., 2013; Wakefield, 1995), travel on behalf of their team (Smith & Stewart, 2007), and support team affiliated brands, such as sponsors (Delia, 2014). Central to these outcomes is the role and importance of community in the experience of sports fandom. Shared group experiences and various social ties play key roles in shaping a fan's relationship with a team and community, influencing aspects of fandom such as fan socialization and subsequent sport consumer behavior.

2.3 Sports Fans and Community

Sports fan communities represent prominent brand communities (Heere et al., 2011; Underwood et al., 2001; Yoshida, Gordon, et al., 2015), in that they revolve around the consumption of a product or service, with members sharing a chosen affiliation or identification with a brand of personal meaning and significance, such as sports teams (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities are non-geographically bound and characterized by what Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) describe as the brand community triad, where social ties between community members provide a sense of connection which, in turn, helps bolster stronger ties with both the brand and the

community itself (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Carlson et al., 2008; Kim & Manoli, 2022). Through these ties, brand communities construct and enact markers, including consciousness of kind (i.e., a sense of “we”), rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility to defend the community/brand from out-groups (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Each of these markers contributes to how and why social ties occur in brand communities, influencing community norms and dynamics (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

From a theoretical perspective, Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) brand community markers provide a model for understanding how consumers form communities around brands and the dynamics of brand communities in consumer culture. From a practical perspective, brand communities are central to facilitating relationship marketing efforts as community members are motivated to engage with brand-related products due to their relationships with the brand and community members (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013; Algesheimer et al., 2005). Value is co-created through consumer relationships in these settings, as community members engage in various social behaviors that reinforce their relationship with the brand and dictate normative in-group behavior (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). For example, Schau et al. (2009) found that brand community members engage in various social behaviors, including social networking, community engagement, impression management, and brand use, which influence community norms and expectations (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Laroche et al., 2012). Other scholars similarly suggest that group activities and community involvement strengthen identification with the brand community and the brand more broadly, supporting lasting consumer-brand relationships, brand loyalty, trust, and commitment to the brand (e.g., Algesheimer et al.,

2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Carlson et al., 2008; Coelho et al., 2018; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Rooney et al., 2021).

Sports fandom and sport fan communities are a special form of brand community, characterized by passionate fan bases, strong brand image, a rich and lengthy history, and noteworthy competition from other teams (Heere et al., 2011; Underwood et al., 2001).

Yoshida, Gordon, James, and Heere (2015) define a sport fan community as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community based on sport fans’ personal identity with the cultural milieu surrounding a specific sport team” (p. 91). Sport fan community members perpetuate history, culture, and community norms through group experiences, and community rituals and traditions, consistent with Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) brand community markers (Grant et al., 2011). Sport fan communities also foster a strong collective sense of community and are populated by strong advocates of their community and team (e.g., Abeza, O’Reilly, & Seguin, 2019; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021).

Sport fan communities are increasingly online, with individuals using the non-geographically bound nature of social media platforms and online message boards to connect with similarly identified fans in real-time (e.g., Chang, 2019; Fan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). Online fan communities serve various roles in the contemporary fan experience. They are information and entertainment hubs (Gibbs et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Stavros et al., 2014) and facilitate real-time communication around live sporting events (Chang, 2019; Fan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). They also promote social outcomes, including social connection, social enhancement, and self-discovery (e.g., Belk, 2013; Dholakia et al., 2004; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021; Kirkwood et al., 2019). Online fan communities have also become prominent tools for distant, nonlocal

and displaced fans in developing and maintaining their connection with their favorite teams, fan communities, and regional identities (Collins et al., 2016; Foster & Hyatt, 2008; Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008; Kerr & Emery, 2011, 2016; Lianopoulos et al., 2020; Pu & James, 2017; Reifurth et al., 2019).

Scholars have taken note of the increasing importance of online communities, as a growing body of literature is examining these groups, as well as the individuals who comprise them (e.g., Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). Abeza and Sanderson (2022) highlight the need for more theoretically driven research on social media in sport, where theory has been traditionally lacking (Abeza et al. 2015; Filo et al., 2015). In the current work, I draw from the social identity approach (Hornsey, 2008) as an overarching theoretical framework with each study featuring different theories related to social identity and the role of social identity in online fan community. Each study features a more detailed explanation of my theoretical basis, but I have outlined the immediate ties between the social identity approach and each chapter's theoretical framework below.

In Study 1, I use communication accommodation theory (CAT; Giles & Ogay, 2007) as my theoretical lens. CAT is an interdisciplinary theory developed out of SIT to explain communication and how identities, notably social identities (e.g., SIT), influence communication behavior. CAT is one such theory Abeza and Sanderson (2022) highlight as a compelling interdisciplinary theory for social media research in sport. Study 1 examines how social identities influence communication behavior in the case of new fans who initiate fan socialization with an existing online fan community, specifically how the content of a new fan's post influences welcoming responses.

In Study 2, I use various theoretical lenses to investigate the development of collective identity (i.e., a sense of “we”) in the case of a newly formed online fan community, supporting a newly formed professional hockey team. Drawing from a social identity approach, online fan communities are characterized by prototypes and community norms as a result of self-categorization and depersonalization (Turner et al., 1987). In the case of a newly formed online fan community, these norms and collective identity are generated through community interaction and social practice (Wenger, 1998). To examine how a community develops these expectations about who “we” is, I draw from the theoretical framework of communities of practice (CoP; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and utilize discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) as a methodological approach to consider how language use, in the case of early online fan community members, forms the basis for a community’s collective identity.

In Study 3, I investigate online fan behavior beyond one’s primary rooting interest. As online mediums have made it increasingly easy for fans to engage with various communities, I explore how fans choose to engage with such communities. I draw from Lock and Funk’s (2016) multiple in-group identity framework (MIIF) to examine how online fans use the accessibility of other online fan communities beyond their primary team identity for different purposes and to satisfy different needs. MIIF is derived from a social identity perspective and highlights the utility of different social identities in shaping one’s sense of self and self-concept through community involvement.

In the next section, I present the purpose statements guiding this project.

2.4 Purpose Statements

To address the pressing gap in how we understand online fan communities, the current dissertation closely examines online fan communities, particularly in relation to how new fans are welcomed in these spaces, how communities develop brand community markers, and how fans enact multiple identities around their primary team.

The purpose of Study 1 is to examine how new fans are welcomed in online fan communities, specifically attending to what factors or qualities of self-presentation from new or prospective fans contribute to welcoming behavior from established online fan communities. This study extends our understanding of fan socialization into the online setting and contributes to brand community literature around welcoming behavior (e.g., Schau et al., 2009).

The purpose of Study 2 is to investigate a newly formed online fan community for a newly announced professional sports team, specifically examining how a sport fan community negotiates and generates a sense of “we” and collective identity through community discourse. This study contributes to brand community and sport consumer literature in shedding light on how fan prototypes and group norms are constructed, specifically in the online fan community setting.

The purpose Study 3 is to explore online sports fandom more holistically, examining the types of communities fans participate in online beyond their salient rooting interest and how their communication behavior translates across different online communities (i.e., other teams, sport-related communities, non-sport communities, etc.). This study adds to sport consumer literature and our current understanding of why and

how online sports fans utilize new media (e.g., Stavros et al., 2014) and construct their own sense of fandom and fan experience in the process.

CHAPTER 3

EXAMINING NEW FAN SOCIALIZATION ONLINE

3.1 Introduction

Team identification is a prominent social identity that not only provides psychological and social well-being benefits for fans (Wann, 2006), but also plays a central role in various consumer outcomes (Lock & Heere, 2017). Therefore, the question of *how* to cultivate and foster team identification in the case of new or prospective fans is a key one for both scholars and practitioners.

At the heart of this question is socialization, referring to the process by which people come to internalize certain ways of understanding the social world through the social co-construction of meaning through social interactions (Bauer et al., 2007; Guhin et al., 2021; Parsons, 1951). For sports fans, socialization is primarily attributed to two sources: socializing agents (e.g., Hyatt et al., 2018; James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000) and communities, particularly in the case of newly formed teams that lack existing history or established fans (e.g., Katz et al., 2013; Lock et al., 2009). Additionally, this work has largely considered fan socialization as an experience of the newcomer. However, socialization is an interactive process that warrants further study in the sports context. While we have a solid understanding of who socializes new and prospective sports fans (e.g., James, 2001; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015), our understanding of how this socialization occurs remains under-researched.

Fan socialization is crucial to sports consumer behavior, not only because it serves as the basis of one's fandom, but also because the nature of fan socialization and new fandom is evolving. In an increasingly connected digital world, fandom is less

regionally bound than ever before. Fans can use online media to support any team of interest and connect with existing fans through online fan communities, such as social media networks and online fan forums (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Kirkwood et al., 2019). As a result, online fan communities have become new venues for fan socialization. This represents an under-researched context for fan socialization and sheds light on a theoretical gap: we know very little about the interactional nature and process of fan socialization, particularly in online fan communities.

Understanding how to foster new fandom is crucial, especially considering the increasingly prominent role of online fan settings in new and prospective fandom. To address this gap, I utilized a combination of data mining, textual analysis, and manual qualitative coding to consider online fan socialization as an interaction between both the new fan and the established existing fan community. To do so, I examine “new fans” across NFL team-specific Reddit communities. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how new fans are welcomed in online fan communities, specifically attending to what factors or qualities of self-presentation from new or prospective fans contribute to welcoming behavior from established online fan communities.

3.2 Literature Review

Study 1 draws broadly from the social identity approach to examine a contemporary form of new fan socialization, *new fan posts*. In this study, I utilize communication accommodation theory (CAT; Ogay & Giles, 2007) to examine how new fans are welcomed by existing online fan communities based on various aspects of their communication style, including sentiment (i.e., valence, arousal, and dominance) and the content of their posts (e.g., mention historical players, asking specific questions). CAT is

my chosen theoretical lens for this study as CAT is an interdisciplinary theory, developed from SIT, that focuses on how social identities influence interpersonal communication behavior.

3.2.1 Fan Socialization and Developing New Fans

Sports fandom is commonly conceptualized as team identification, a psychologically meaningful social identity that strengthens as one gains an increasing awareness of their membership within a meaningful social group (Lock & Heere, 2017). Team identification is associated with positive outcomes for fans, including psychological and social well-being such as connectedness and self-esteem (Wann, 2006), as well as consumer behavior outcomes (e.g., James & Trail, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2013; Smith & Stewart, 2007; Wakefield, 1995; Wakefield, 2016). As individuals' identification with their team becomes more central to their sense of self, they are motivated to act in ways that are consistent with their social identity (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). For example, team identity may develop over time from an initial awareness to more highly identified fandom resulting in behavior such as attending games or consuming team-related media (Funk & James, 2001; de Groot & Robinson, 2008). Highly identified fans may also remain persistent and dedicated supporters, even in the face of challenges. These challenges can include a lack of on-field success (e.g., Doyle et al., 2017; Mansfield et al., 2020), athlete transgressions (Abeza, O'Reilly, Prior, et al., 2019; Nason, 2023), and team relocation (Andrijew & Hyatt, 2009; Wegner et al., 2020). Fans seek ways to maintain their fandom where possible. To explore further how team identification develops and how it affects fan behavior, it is important to consider the various ways in which fans become part of a meaningful social group.

The creation of new fans remains a prominent topic of interest within the sport consumer behavior literature as scholars have explored how socialization contributes to the process of new fandom (e.g., Allison & Pope, 2021; Asada & Ko, 2022; Mastromartino, Qian, et al., 2020; Mastromartino, Zhang, & Wann, 2020; Reifurth et al., 2020). Social interaction is at the core of the socialization process as meaning is socially constructed and individuals learn to imitate and identify with others in relation to salient roles and symbols, effectively transitioning from being an outsider of a group or community to being an insider (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 2007; Guhin et al., 2021; Parsons, 1951).

Sports fandom is an environment in which socialization frequently occurs, as fandom is often passed down within families through primary socialization (Charmaz et al., 2019). Parents, traditionally fathers, serve as primary influencers of their child's favorite team (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Melnick & Wann, 2010). Through familial ties, children pick up on team-related associations such as mascots, team colors, and other symbols, creating a foundation for team identification and potentially lasting fandom (Reifurth et al., 2020). While true commitment to a team typically develops in adolescence, socializing agents in early life play a significant role in passing down team identification (James, 2001). However, familial influences are not the only avenue to fandom. As individuals grow older and their social circle expands, secondary socialization occurs as they encounter new potential socializing agents (Charmaz et al., 2019), such as specific players or coaches they are motivated to support, peers, mass media, organizations they belong to (e.g., universities), or meaningful community connections (Allison & Pope, 2021; Kolbe & James, 2000; Mastromartino, Qian, et al.,

2020; Mastromartino et al., 2019; Melnick & Wann, 2010). In some cases, parents may even be socialized to identify with a particular team by their own children, who can use online technology to create socialization opportunities that were previously unavailable prior to the digital age (Hyatt et al., 2018). Thus, fan socialization occurs at various stages of life and is prompted by various social connections.

Additionally, social ties play a crucial role in socializing fans of newly formed sports teams (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2013; Lock et al., 2009; Lock et al., 2011). Newly formed teams lack key factors that commonly motivate fandom, such as history, traditions, or competitive success (Fink et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). In such cases, community and social ties can help overcome these effects by serving as foundations for initial group identification before identifying more closely with the team itself (Katz & Heere, 2013; Lock et al., 2011; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). For example, Katz and Heere (2013) examined tailgating groups of a new football team as networks of social ties. Although the groups were comprised of individuals with various (and often unrelated) relationships to fellow group members, team identification was fostered through the social involvement in their tailgating community (Katz & Heere, 2013). Similarly, attending games as a group has been shown to promote group connection and subsequent team identification (Lock et al., 2011; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015), as a sense of in-group may be developed collectively in the absence of team success (Doyle et al., 2017), or through communal aspects of the supporter experience, rather than the team specifically (Fairley, 2009). In this sense, fan communities that form around a team represent a prominent touchpoint for fans, with the capacity to facilitate team identification and socialize new fans.

While familial socializing agents and social ties are prominent factors in fan socialization, the dynamic process of learning how to be a fan and the communication inherent in fan socialization is often overlooked. Socialization is an interactive process (Bauer et al., 2007; Guhin et al., 2021). New fans are taught how to be a fan of their team including in-group norms and expectations about their role as a fan, as well as the meaning associated with what it means to be a fan (i.e., a member of the fan community). If the fan socialization process is successful, consumers may begin to identify with the team, promoting continued involvement with the sports product (e.g., de Groot & Robinson, 2008). If the process is unsuccessful, in that a new fan feels unwelcomed, they may shift allegiances or modify the ways they engage with the team. In either case, our understanding of the interaction process of fan socialization is lacking. Fan socialization has traditionally been viewed from a structuralist perspective in that newcomers are passive recipients of socialization processes (Charmaz et al., 2019; Guhin et al., 2021). For example, parents are considered primary socializing agents for fandom in that they teach their children how to be a fan of their favorite team (e.g., James, 2001; James, 2015; Kolbe & James, 2000; Mastromartino et al., 2019). This perspective assumes a one-way process, in which socialization occurs downward from the parent to the child (Charmaz et al., 2019). However, socialization is not a one-way process (e.g., Bauer et al., 2007; Guhin et al., 2021). Another way to examine fan socialization is from a sociological or symbolic interactionist perspective. A symbolic interactionist perspective assumes socialization is two-way, dynamic, and occurs through social interaction where each side of the socialization process can influence the form, content, and outcomes of their experience of socialization (Charmaz et al., 2019). Fan socialization from a

symbolic interactionist perspective presumes that learning to be a fan of a team is one of negotiation through social interaction (e.g., Allison & Pope, 2021).

Interaction in socialization is a crucial aspect of new and developing fandom, especially in online fan communities. The growth of online fan communities has made it easier for fans to connect with others and support nonlocal teams through various social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and fan message boards). These communities serve various purposes, such as maintaining a connection with a team (Collins et al., 2016; Lianopoulos et al., 2020; Pu & James, 2017), providing information and entertainment (Gibbs et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Stavros et al., 2014), and facilitating communication about real-time sporting events (Chang, 2019; Fan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). For sport managers, these communities not only support continued fandom, but also represent opportunities to expand their brand beyond their proximal region. For many sports teams, their local markets are now mostly saturated, driving a motivation to grow sport brands globally (Coombs, 2021). Online fan communities, notably in the case of new fans in these spaces, represent an opportunity to foster distant and nonlocal fandom in this respect (Coombs, 2021). However, scholars have yet to fully examine how socialization occurs in these spaces. Particularly in the case of new fans, how they are welcomed by the community may have a lasting effect on if a prospective fan becomes a more lasting, identified fan.

With the increasing accessibility of online fan communities, fans can initiate the socialization process online and ask existing fans what it means to be a fan of a particular team. In doing so, this prompts an exchange of meaning as existing fans communicate norms and expectations associated with being a fan of their team. Whereas extant

literature has largely attributed fan socialization to socializing agents (e.g., James, 2001) and examined the development of fandom in new team settings (e.g., Lock et al., 2011), we know very little about fans who initiate the socialization process, particularly fans who seek out established fan communities and explicitly ask what it means to be a fan of a particular team. We know even less about how these fans are welcomed or received by an established fan community. Yet, this represents a pressing gap in our understanding of contemporary fandom and the role of online fan communities in facilitating new fan growth.

To address this gap, I consider fan socialization as an interaction, specifically attending to how online fan communities receive and respond to prospective fans who initiate the process. In this sense, I shift from considering fan socialization as an experience of the newcomer and emphasize socialization as an interaction where meaning is socially constructed and communicated between existing fans and new and/or prospective fans (Ashforth et al., 2007; Guhin et al., 2021).

3.2.2 Welcoming Behavior in Brand Communities

Sports teams and their fan communities represent prominent brand communities as they are non-geographically bound community networks, united by a shared identification with a team (Heere et al., 2011; Underwood et al., 2001). Brand communities are an evolution on the consumer-brand dyadic relationship in that they promote the formation of relational ties between fellow consumers (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) describe brand communities as a triad with horizontal ties between community members, as well as vertical ties with the brand (consumer-brand-consumer). Brand communities are powerful allies for

relationship marketing efforts as value is created through consumer relationships, facilitating various behavioral outcomes, such as active community participation, a sense of community membership and increased brand loyalty (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

Whereas social identity presumes that identification with a brand is fostered through an increasing awareness of one's group membership (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002), Schau et al. (2009) argue that members strengthen their identification through community engagement and by participating in community practices. According to Schau et al. (2009), brand community members engage in various social practices, including social networking, community engagement, impression management, and brand use. Each of which add value to the community and achieve different community outcomes (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). Brand community practices contribute to the community's longevity (Brodie et al., 2013; Schau et al., 2009) and characterize community dynamics, as individuals use practices to achieve recognition and status associated with being a community expert or by achieving certain community markers of participation (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Kirkwood et al., 2019; McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009). Social networking practices, specifically, are central to the socialization of prospective community members (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009).

Social networking practices are particularly relevant to online fan communities and fan socialization. Welcoming behavior is a crucial component of social networking practices, referring to the community practice of greeting or welcoming new community members (Schau et al., 2009). This behavior often highlights community norms and

establishes behavioral expectations for new members (Schau et al., 2009). In online settings, welcoming behavior may serve as a form of initiation to encourage community involvement and repeat visits (Hollebeek et al., 2017). In some cases, community members may explicitly outline rules, regulations, or expectations for normative community participation (Hollebeek et al., 2017). Community members engage in welcoming behavior out of loyalty to the brand and with the purpose of initiating and onboarding new users to the community (Schau et al., 2009).

Welcoming behavior and social network practices are active socialization tactics. When new or prospective fans post to an online fan community and identify themselves as new fans, they may ask what they need to know to be a fan, seeking the necessary information needed to fit their role within the community (Bauer et al., 2007). From the other side of the interaction, existing community members may respond and share critical information, community norms, and communicate degrees of social acceptance, which are all key antecedents of effective socialization (Bauer et al., 2007). Although organizations may be particularly calculated in how they welcome and socialize new employees, online fan communities are more informal and increasingly consumer-led (e.g., Rooney et al., 2021). If a new fan posts to a message board, they are subject to responses of any community member who chooses to reply. This means new fans can receive various responses from different community members, including supportive or welcoming comments as well as replies that are less welcoming or even hostile. Therefore, it is essential to study these spaces and the nature of these interactions to understand why new or prospective fans may be received more or less positively.

From an interactionist perspective, socialization involves a reciprocal process in which both the community and new or prospective fans actively participate and influence each other (Guhin et al., 2021). While welcoming behavior is a significant aspect of the process, the ways in which a new fan may initiate socialization may vary, also influencing the interaction. For instance, some prospective fans may offer a long introduction, while others may mention their other team affiliations, or explain their decision to support a team. This raises the question of how new fans present themselves as new fans, how this impacts the socialization process, and how new fans can influence community welcoming behavior. To explore this perspective, we will examine the concepts of self-presentation and communication accommodation.

3.2.3 Communication Accommodation Theory

In viewing fan socialization as an interactive process, I adopt a symbolic interactionist perspective, in that values and norms are co-created through social interactions and language (Ashforth et al., 2007). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, socialization is an active and dynamic process in which individuals are participants, engaging, socially constructing, and attempting to alter their environment (Ashforth et al., 2007). In other words, individuals bring their own experiences, perspectives, and values to the process. In doing so, socialization reflects a negotiation of meaning and an exchange of symbols and symbolic interaction, which shape interactants' (i.e., communicators and respondents) identity and self-concept in the process. For instance, when a new or potential fan posts in an established online fan community, seeking advice on what it takes to be a fan, they not only initiate a conversation but also actively engage in the process of socialization. Their initial post often contains symbols,

such as greetings or references to different sports and other fan communities. Similarly, community responses convey team-specific jargon, anecdotes, and references to the team's history, which are considered essential knowledge for newcomers. Through this interaction, the new fan begins to shape their identity within the community and as a fan, while the act of defining their fandom prompts the community to negotiate their own sense of what it means to be a fan of their team and member of their community.

Online communication, such as interactions between new or prospective fans and online fan communities, can be conceptualized as expressions of identity and performances of self (Belk, 2013; Huang et al., 2021). Prospective fans are outsiders seeking to start a conversation with a relevant online fan community and communicate their new social identity as a fan and community member. From a socialization standpoint, this is the fan's attempt to alleviate the uncertainty surrounding their adoption of a new team and the roles and expectations associated with becoming a fan of the team and member of the community (Bauer et al., 2007). What emerges is the co-construction of self as related to the salient social identity (i.e., team identity). For example, identity may be defined through the lens of language use as the “linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories” (Kroskrity, 1999, p. 111). In this sense, the meaning of "fan" for online fans is formed through the linguistic content of the post and the replies to the post. In considering fan socialization as an outcome of interactions, it is not only the information conveyed by the community that matters but also how the prospective fan presents themselves, which influences these interactions. While previous research on brand communities emphasizes the significance of welcoming behavior as a brand community practice (Schau et al., 2009), we can also

examine how these behaviors are influenced by a prospective fan's initial post. To explore this interaction and the interplay between self-presentation (i.e., prospective fan posts) and community welcoming behavior in online fan communities, I draw from Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles & Ogay, 2007).

CAT is an interdisciplinary framework based on SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that suggests individuals constantly negotiate social distance in interpersonal interactions (Giles, 1973; Giles & Ogay, 2007). CAT posits that communication is shaped by personal and social identities and our desire to be viewed favorably or unfavorably by the other individual(s) in the interaction (Dragojevic et al., 2016). Social distance is manipulated through various interpersonal behaviors including verbal (e.g., tonal shifts, matching accents, specific vocabulary choices/slang, etc.) and nonverbal (e.g., body language, posture, gestures, eye contact, physically moving away) behavior (Giles & Ogay, 2007). When communicating with members of a salient social category (e.g., a fellow fan), we tend to decrease social distance by accommodating the communication behavior of our fellow interlocutor, a process known as convergence (Giles & Ogay, 2007). On the other hand, interpersonal interactions may also involve divergence or maintenance behaviors where individuals accentuate differences or maintain behavior to achieve social distance (Zhang & Giles, 2018). For example, if two sports fans run into one another at a game of their favorite team, CAT suggests both fans will negotiate that interaction in a way that accommodates the other, even if they are complete strangers. If one fan is exuberant, celebrating the success of their shared team, the other fan is likely to respond with similar celebratory behavior. As their shared social category as fans of the same team is salient, they are each motivated to match the other's communication behavior in seeking

approval and acceptance from the other. In contrast, fans of opposing teams are likely to diverge or maintain their communication to accentuate differences, perhaps using changing tone (e.g., raising one's voice) or by becoming argumentative.

CAT consists of four key components: *sociohistorical context*, *accommodative orientation*, *immediate situation*, and *evaluation and future intentions* (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010). Firstly, the sociohistorical context emphasizes the role of historical relations in shaping communication dynamics (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010), such as the historical dynamics between rival sports teams and how that history serves as a context for interpersonal communication between fans of each team. Secondly, accommodative orientation explores the factors influencing communication adaptation, such as personality and initial perceptions (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010). Accommodation orientation reflects one's predisposition to accommodate others. Thirdly, the immediate situation focuses on real-time communication factors, including emotions, goals, and strategies, such as convergence and divergence (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010). Lastly, evaluation and future intentions highlight how perceptions during interaction influence subsequent encounters, potentially fostering continued engagement among those who share a common social identity (Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010).

Accommodation behavior occurs in online interpersonal interaction as well (e.g., Tamburrini et al., 2015). CAT has been applied to virtual and online settings, including large-scale social networks such as Twitter (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2011). Existing research further suggests that communication accommodation occurs in non-sport contexts with specific fan groups utilizing similar communication patterns and converging linguistically (Tamburrini et al., 2015; Welbers & de Nooy, 2014). Thus,

CAT is a fruitful theoretical framework for considering how social identities influence communication behavior in online fan community settings (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). In the case of new fans who initiate the socialization process within established online fan communities, these users are theoretically motivated to adjust their communication in an effort to achieve approval and acceptance from the fan community. In this sense, the new fan post plays a role in how the user is welcomed by the existing community.

CAT posits that salient identities motivate individuals to make communicative adjustments with the intent to decrease social distance and achieve acceptance from a fellow communicator. In the case of new fans in online fan communities, this suggests new fans are more likely to be welcomed positively if they make efforts to decrease social distance with the community members. These adjustments can take many forms, such as matching communicative tone, using similar terminology, or demonstrating an existing in-group knowledge about the team or the community. CAT also suggests that if such efforts are not made, new fans are likely to receive less welcoming responses from a community that may interpret the lack of communicative accommodation as divergent or maintenance behavior.

In either case, a new fan's efforts to decrease social distance will theoretically correspond with more positive reception and welcoming behavior from an existing online fan community. As such, the following research questions were devised:

RQ1: What types of communicative adjustments in terms of content, are made by new fans when initiating the fan socialization process via *new fan posts*?

RQ2: How do the characteristics (i.e., communicative adjustments) of *new fan posts* and the ways a new fan presents themselves influence how an established

online fan communities welcomes the new/prospective fan (e.g., post score, number of comments, upvote ratio)?

When considering communicative adjustments, one must account for not only *what* is being said (i.e., the content), but also *how* it is being said. An important element of *new fan posts* is the emotional content embedded in the language, known as sentiment. While new fans may exhibit some intentionality in what they choose to share, such as anecdotes or team-related information, the sentiment conveyed in language remains a constant element in the communication process. Given the inherent emotional association with sports fandom (e.g., Chang, 2019; Cottingham, 2012; Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020), it becomes crucial to examine how sentiment, as a pervasive aspect, influences the way new fan posts contribute to welcoming behavior. Hence, a third research question is posed:

RQ3: How does the sentiment of *new fan posts* influence how an established online fan communities welcomes the new/prospective fan (e.g., post score, number of comments, upvote ratio)?

By examining this socialization interaction, we can explore a unique fan socialization context that has theoretical and practical implications for how new fans are generated through online mediums. As such, the purpose of the current study is to examine how new/prospective fans' presentation of self in an online fan community relates to the community's welcoming behavior, specifically the different ways in which the community responds, in the form of expressed emotion and approval behavior (i.e., upvotes, comments, responses). To achieve that end, I utilized data mining procedures,

qualitative coding, and textual analysis techniques to examine the fan socialization interaction with new fans across NFL online fan communities on Reddit (i.e., subreddits).

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Text Mining and Textual Analysis

Text mining is a popular data collection method that allows for investigating the unstructured user-generated content (UGC) that is prevalent across social media and new media platforms (Villarroel Ordenes & Zhang, 2019). Textual analysis refers to the analysis of unstructured data (Villarroel Ordenes & Zhang, 2019). Although textual analysis refers broadly to investigating the language content of UGC, it is an approach that is commonly associated with sentiment analysis, which more specifically considers the emotion conveyed through language (Villarroel Ordenes & Zhang, 2019).

Text mining and textual analysis are complementary approaches and are increasingly popular in sports consumer literature (e.g., Chang, 2019; Gong et al., 2021; Wegner et al., 2020). For example, textual analysis has been used to evaluate real-time responses to live sporting events, such as the Super Bowl (Chang, 2019) and has been used to investigate consumer perceptions of tanking in the NBA (Gong et al., 2021). In the current project, I use sentiment analysis to investigate welcoming behavior and self-presentation in relation to online fan socialization.

3.3.2 Research Context

For this study, I evaluated Reddit posts across various NFL-related subreddits. Reddit is a social media platform comprised of a litany of subreddits, which effectively serve as fan communities, or online fan forums. It is an online community-driven platform where users can share content, engage in discussions, and participate in various

communities by means of subreddits. Subreddits cover a wide range of topics, catering to diverse interests and niches, including sports teams, and individuals can engage in any of the over 130 thousand subreddit communities that populate Reddit (Reddit User Base, 2023).

For scholars, Reddit is a valuable data source because it offers access to real-time discussion and opinions. Compared to other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Reddit allows for more long-form posts (without character limits). Reddit also offers an Application Programming Interface (API), which allows researchers to retrieve historical data through data mining techniques. Reddit has an estimated 55.79 million daily active users with most users between the ages of 18 and 29 (Reddit User Base, 2023). The platform is most popular amongst men, as 63.8% of Reddit users are male (Reddit User Base, 2023).

3.3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected from Reddit subreddits using Python data mining procedures, more specifically the PRAW Reddit package. The PRAW package was a Python package that could access Reddit's API, allowing me to scrape posts, comments, and user data from various Reddit pages and communities (i.e., subreddits) using search parameters (i.e., search terms). The subreddits were team-specific subreddits from across the National Football League (NFL). This decision was made due to the relative popularity of the team-specific subreddits. The team-specific subreddits for the NFL were considered top 1% subreddits, in terms of popularity. As such, these subreddit pages offered a wealth of posts and a sizable collection of "new fan" posts.

Using the PRAW Reddit package, I searched and collected posts using the key word phrases “new fan,” “new supporter,” “new follower,” and “need to know.” These key word phrases were purposefully selected to reflect different terminology around fandom, as “fan” was not the only term for fandom. Other fans of sport might utilize the term “supporter” or “follower” to classify themselves as fans. Along with post content, I collected submission characteristics from each new fan post, including score (i.e., a raw number value based on upvotes and downvotes; community members upvote posts if they are deemed valuable contributions to the community), comments, and upvote ratio (i.e., the ratio of upvotes vs. downvotes). I also used PRAW to collect the comments associated with each new fan post. In total, the resulting dataset included new fan posts (and submission characteristics) and all comments to the new fan posts (and comment characteristics). While this data collection was expected to result in a sizable number of posts, it was also anticipated that not all these posts would be relevant to the present study, as my search parameters would also return posts where the search terms were more generally mentioned (e.g., “new” and “fan”). As such, I manually evaluated posts in terms of their relevance to the proposed study purpose (i.e., investigating new fans who initiate fan socialization), yielding a final dataset.

3.3.4 Procedure

After data collection, I manually coded the new fan posts based on the characteristics of the post. More specifically, I inductively coded the corpus based on the meaning being communicated by both interactants. I first coded the new fan posts, specifically the content of the submissions. New fan posts were evaluated based on identity expression, such as demonstrating in-group knowledge (e.g., "I knew Tom Brady

was a great player for you..."), positioning themselves as outsiders (e.g., "I was hoping you would accept a new fan."), describing themselves as nonlocal fans (e.g., "I was from Britain and looking for a team to support..."), and asking for information about the team (e.g., "What did I need to know?").

Additionally, the post content was evaluated through textual analysis procedures to assess the expressed sentiment of "new fan" posts. I used Knime Analytics' software (Tursi & Silipo, 2018) to evaluate the emotional content of each new fan post. Knime is a visual data analysis software that could be used to conduct sentiment analysis. Consistent with sentiment analysis, I imported the data and ran a spell check on the corpus before tagging parts of speech and words from the NRC Valence, Arousal, and Dominance (VAD) sentiment dictionary (Mohammad, 2018). Then, I preprocessed the corpus (e.g., stemmed, filtered numbers/punctuation/stop words, etc.) and used the bag of words approach to break down the corpus to the word-level (i.e., each word/term was separate, creating a "bag of words"). Next, I matched the words with their related sentiment values from the NRC VAD (Mohammad, 2018) lexicon and then re-constructed the posts, creating post-level scores based on the averaged sentiment values for the words included in each post. As a result, each new fan post received sentiment scores based on the NRC VAD lexicon. The same process was repeated for community replies, yielding a final dataset with posts and comments and related sentiment scores, at the post- and comment-level, respectively.

3.3.5 Measures

The NRC Valence, Arousal, and Dominance (VAD) sentiment dictionary (Mohammad, 2018) is a weighted soft dictionary that assesses words in terms of both the

polarity of emotion and quantifies emotion by intensity. The NRC VAD lexicon has been used in other online language research and is composed of nearly 20,000 English words that have been evaluated used best-worst scaling (Mohammad, 2018).

Table 3.1

Summary of NRC VAD Dictionary Dimensions

Dimension	Meaning	Scale
Valence	Displeasure (i.e., negative) to pleasure (i.e., positive)	0 to 1
Arousal	Bored (i.e., sluggish) to stimulated (active)	Very negative to very positive
Dominance	Weak (i.e., powerless) to strong (i.e., powerful)	

Note. NRC Valence, Arousal, and Dominance (VAD) Lexicon (Mohammad, 2018)

The NRC VAD lexicon is used to evaluate textual data on three emotional dimensions: valence (i.e., negative/displeasure to positive/pleasure), arousal (i.e., sluggish/bored to active/stimulated), and dominance (i.e., powerless/weak to powerful/strong) on a scale from 0 to 1 (0 = no emotion, 1 = most). Valence is commonly studied as the focus of sentiment analysis (e.g., Chang, 2019), referring to degree of pleasure (Russell & Mehrabian, 1977), and is often thought of as positive, negative, or neutral. Arousal and dominance are two dimensions of emotion that are less commonly considered by scholars. Arousal refers to the degree of excitement, ranging from bored to excited (Russell & Mehrabian, 1977). Dominance refers to the strength of language, ranging from submissive to strong or controlling (Russell & Mehrabian, 1977). The NRC VAD lexicon is purposefully selected, as the three dimensions of the NRC VAD reflect the full range of human emotional responses to environmental stimuli (Bakker et al.,

2014; Osgood et al., 1957; Russell & Mehrabian, 1977). Thus, the NRC VAD allows for a comprehensive look at human emotional responses in textual content (i.e., UGC).

One challenge associated with sentiment analysis is evaluating contextual text and language. Traditional hard sentiment dictionaries classify language in terms of what is defined as positive, negative, and (sometimes) neutral. While hard dictionaries allow for general takeaways from large corpus, they lack the nuance to assess language more accurately in more contextual spaces (Braun et al., 2022). For example, the word *sick* is often associated with a negative sentiment, yet the word may be used as a positive term in the case of sports fans who describe a play or event as *sick* denoting a positive or impressed reaction.

Soft, weighted dictionaries are not immune from contextual concerns, but the NRC VAD is considered an effective sentiment dictionary that is adaptable within sports contexts and with social media, such as soccer discussion on Reddit (Braun et al., 2022). Additionally, as a weighted lexicon (i.e., words are assigned values), this dictionary does not categorize words as positive or negative, but rather assigns values along the dimensions of the lexicon (i.e., valence, arousal, dominance). In other words, words are not judged as “positive” based on how the dictionary was designed but are rather given values associated with each of the three dimensions, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of sentiment in online communication.

In total, this lexicon allows for a comprehensive assessment of sentiment in the online context. In conjunction with post attributes (i.e., upvotes, upvote ratio, comments) and my manual qualitative coding, this language evaluation allows for the examination of

how the sentiment used by new fans within these settings relates to community welcoming behavior.

3.3.6 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used independent-samples t tests to compare mean differences across the manual codes. Regression analysis was used to examine expressed sentiment dimensions from the NRC VAD sentiment dictionary (i.e., valence, arousal, dominance). To do so, I first cleaned the data and imported the dataset into SPSS, where I conducted my analysis. My qualitative codes were treated as dichotomous, binary variables (e.g., 1 for presence, 0 for absence), allowing for quantitative analysis and use as independent variables.

Post attributes (i.e., upvotes, upvote ratio, comments) served as my dependent variables throughout this analysis as a proxy for welcoming behavior, as these attributes are representative of how a community evaluates “good” content and community activity. Upvotes and upvote ratio are effectively social measures of approval based on community feedback. Reddit users can upvote or downvote posts and comments if they deem the contribution valuable to the community. Upvote ratio refers to the degree of approval from the community, based on upvotes and downvotes. Posts that are upvoted are elevated within the subreddit community, effectively reflecting “hot” or popular community content. Comments are similarly deemed a suitable proxy for welcoming behavior as increased commenting behavior reflects community engagement.

In total, I scraped posts from Reddit, manually coded the posts, and used those variables to examine welcoming behavior in online fan communities, specifically how a new fan’s self-presentation relates to the community welcoming response and what

characteristics are well received by an established fan community in the case of new fan socialization online.

3.4 Results

To examine how new fans are welcomed into existing online fan communities I first inductively coded the collected *new fan posts* based on the characteristics of each post, such as how they presented themselves or the communicative adjustments they made in the post. The result of my inductive coding was seven codes: Need to Know, Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge, Behaving Like a Fan, Maintaining Outsider Status, Nonlocal Status, Explaining Motives, and Consumption Behavior. In total, 241 *new fan posts* were evaluated. Each of the codes are discussed below with examples. Appendix A provides a complete summary.

3.4.1 Research Question 1

To address my first research question about the types of communicative adjustments, I first reviewed the *new fan posts* and evaluated the content of each post, specifically attending to how new fans presented themselves, the information they shared, and the questions they asked. For instance, if a *new fan post* mentioned historical players, the post would be coded Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge, as team-specific information was shared in the post. If a *new fan post* provided an anecdote, describing why they are choosing to support a new team, that post was coded as Explaining Motives, and so on. *New fan posts* were coded based on the absence or presence of each code.

Need to Know. The code of Need to Know refers to new fans who ask the community directly about what information they need to be a fan of the salient team. Often new fans ask the community “what do I need to know?” initiating an exchange of

information about the team, history, and the outlook for the current season.

Communicatively, Need to Know reflect users’ direct initiation of the fan socialization process (i.e., asking directly prompts community responses that answer their questions).

See Table 3.2 for examples.

Table 3.2

Summary of Need to Know Code from New Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Need To Know	Ask the community directly "what do I need to know?" to be a fan of the salient team	<p>"What are some things I need to learn about Broncos culture and Fandom as a new fan?" I know every Fandom has some culture, inside jokes references, try to teach them to me lol."</p>	68%
		<p>"Hello, I followed the giants on a very, very casual scale. However, this season and on I want to dive deep into this team moving forward. What players on this team should I be excited for? Is Daniel Jones legit?"</p>	
		<p>"But I don't want to consider myself a fully-fledged fan year" I need to undergo initiation. So I'm just curious: what should I, a new fan, learn or do to become a proper member of Bills Mafia?"</p>	
		<p>"The rest of my family roots for the Bills since they are all from Western New York, so that's another reason. What should I know about the team, history, and traditions?"</p>	

Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge. Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge refers to instances when new fans demonstrate team-specific knowledge in their initial *new fan post*. In these instances, a new fan demonstrates cognitive in-group knowledge, such as sharing knowledge about the current team, team history, or the region where the team plays. Communicatively, these codes reflect users’ efforts to show they have some baseline knowledge of the team in question. In demonstrating knowledge in this sense,

these users are making communicative adjustments to close social distance with the group. See Table 3.3 for examples.

Table 3.3
Summary of Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge Code from New Fans' Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge	Demonstrate cognitive team-specific knowledge (e.g., knowledge about the current team, historical players)	"I know Pace was hated 4 days ago and now he is "almost" redeemed. That the ring was won on 1985. That Mack is a beast. But beyond that I know nothing. I want to learn more. Are we a defensive team historically? How good is Nagy? I read during the season all the drama with Trubisky, Foles and Russell."	42%
		"I didn't want to jump on the bandwagon of a winning franchise and wanted to immerse myself in fan base that's familiar in never winning a championship and consistently falling short of expectations (No offense). The Lions seemed like an obvious fit given their history as a perpetual underdog and also because I'm effing hate the Packers."	
		"I don't even know if it belongs or not, but with the lockdown in and being stuck inside, I finally got into NFL, it took me time to pick a team to latch onto but Flipping enjoyed cardinals play so much that I think I have finally jumped on the bandwagon. Kyle Murray is smart and fast it is brilliant watching him play. And The great Larry Fitzgerald! My goodness, the man has an aura, all the post match interviews, he just exudes respect. So I guess I'm joining the Cards from now till death do I part."	

Behaving Like a Fan. Behaving Like a Fan occurs when fans position themselves as in-group members through their communication behavior, such as basking in reflected glory (BIRGing; Cialdini et al., 1976) where the new fan refers to themselves as part of the collective “we” of fans. These posts also may have team-specific cheers (i.e., “Go Seahawks!) or reflect existing regional ties and connections (e.g., a Seattle Mariners fan announcing themselves as a new fan of the Seattle Seahawks as well). This

code reflects communicative adjustments being made in interaction, as the new fan is highlighting potential existing connection points and positioning themselves as an already existing member of the community. See Table 3.4 for examples.

Table 3.4

Summary of Behaving Like a Fan Code from New Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Behaving Like a Fan	Position as in-group members through behavior including BIRGing (using "we") and team-specific cheers	<p>"With that, I don't know much about the team itself, personnel, players or general outlook from fans. If you guys could just share some thoughts I'd appreciate it. Go Fins!?"</p> <p>"I am glad to be part of the family, but I am new to NFL and I would love to participate in discussion here. Sadly we lost our first match to Seahawks but what can we say?"</p> <p>"Can someone fill me in on what I need to know? What are the memes. Who do we love? Which teams do we dislike? How's the coaching staff? We optimistic for next season?"</p>	28%

Maintaining Outsider Status. Outsider refers to posts where users position themselves as outsiders of the community and ask the community if they will be welcomed and allowed to support the team. In these posts, users will directly ask the community if they will be accepted. See Table 3.5 for examples.

Table 3.5

Summary of Maintaining Outsider Status Code from New Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Maintaining Outsider Status	Position themselves as outsiders seeking acceptance from the salient community	"First of all, feel free to say no. I know from being a football (Soccer to you) fan over here in England that no one likes bandwagoning. I don't mind staying back from the community at all... ...I appreciate your consideration, and I will respect any comments of acceptance or rejection. " "Anyway I hope there is enough room for me because I really like your team. Ever since that NFC championship loss vs the saints you guys had a soft spot in my heart." " You all showed some good stuff last year so maybe now is a good time as ever to become a Lions fan. Should I? Am I welcome? What should I look forward to or not look forward to?"	20%

Nonlocal Status. Nonlocal Status refers to instances where new fans self-identify as nonlocal new fans of the salient team. Given the non-geographically bound nature of online fan communities, fans initiate fandom through online communities. When they do so, many choose to introduce themselves and where they are from. These disclosures represent potential instances of non-accommodation as this code may be considered a maintenance behavior given how the disclosure highlights social distance, but do not actively add to it. See Table 3.6 for examples.

Table 3.6

Summary of Nonlocal Status Code from New Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Nonlocal Status	Present themselves as nonlocal (e.g., international)	" I'm from Britain , and I'm a Buckeye fan. I'm looking for an NFL team to throw backing too. As a fan of Ezekiel Elliot, I'm drawn to the Cowboys"	35%
		"Hello. I am not a football guy. I am a hockey guy. However, I want to get closer to my brother-in-law who is a die hard bears fan living in Arizona. I myself live in Ohio. "	
		" I live in Canada , the closest teams to me are the Bills and the Patriots, my childhood team lost Andrew Luck to another injury and I feel like I'm done with the Colts and football in general."	

Explaining Motives. Explaining Motives is a code referring to new fans who rationalize and share their reasoning for choosing to support the team in question. For example, fans may highlight how they like the team's playstyle, branding, or certain players. Additionally, family ties are shared in this respect. Fans may also express their disidentification with the previous team, prompting this fan socialization process. See Table 3.7 for examples.

Table 3.7

Summary of Explaining Motives Code from New Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Explaining Motives	Providing a rationalization or reasoning for choosing to be a fan of the salient team (e.g., playstyle, family ties, disidentification, Hard Knocks, players)	"I've been wanting to change my allegiance from Washington since 2014 due to how poor the organization is run. After the name and rebrand I can't do it anymore.	66%
		The rest of my family roots for the Bills since they are all from Western New York , so that's another reason. What should I know about the team, history, and traditions?"	
		"Furthermore, I want to plant roots and call a team home and with Herbert leading the charge (no pun intended) the Chargers are geographically close enough and exciting enough to call my team and have it make sense. Plus the obvious answer of best jerseys in the league. The young talent is insane on both sides of the ball with Herbert and ASJ."	
		"**Backstory:** I wasn't sure which team to cheer for at first, and thought I'd let fate decide for me, but I *definitely* knew it wasn't going to be the Patriots. I'm not sure if it's because I like underdogs, or hate serial winners, but it was just *something* about the Patriots that ticked me off. Maybe it was the cockiness, or how luck always finds them when it mattered (*cough* Falcons *cough*) but I don't think it'd hurt for them to be humbled."	

Asking for Recommendations. Asking for Recommendations refers to *new fan posts* where new fans are asking for specific modes of consumption, such as recommended podcasts, reading, and ways to watch the team's games. See Table 3.8 for examples.

Table 3.8*Summary of Asking for Recommendations Code from New Fans' Post*

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Asking for Recommendations	New fans ask for specific modes of consumption, such as recommended podcasts, reading, and ways to watch the team's games	<p>"So I'm here to ask for vids and things I need to know/see before I become a real dolphins fan and where I can get good source of information like in twitter."</p> <p>"Anyway (sorry), can you all recommend good Cardinals Twitter feeds/websites to check out?"</p> <p>"I want to start cheering for a team in my adopted home and was wondering if you guys had advice for me? Who should I follow-on Twitter? What players should I be watching? What blogs should I read? Also, what's the latest on Herbert, how'd he look in camp?"</p>	31%

3.4.2 Research Question 2

To examine how the content of *new fan posts* (i.e., inductively coded self-presentation markers), influences community acceptance, I conducted a series of independent samples *t* tests to evaluate how the presence or absence of self-presentation markers relate to my dependent variables, post score, number of comments, and upvote ratio. Independent samples *t* tests were selected as they allowed me to specifically attend to community response as it relates to each self-presentation marker independently.

Independent samples *t* tests, specifically Welch's *t* tests, were conducted for each of the seven codes (i.e., self-presentation markers) to compare post scores, upvote ratio, and the number of comments on each post when new fans include or exclude self-presentation markers in the content of the *new fan post*. Welch's *t* tests were deemed appropriate as they account for unequal variance in the sample(s). As these data reflect real observed behavior, in the form of post scores, comments, and upvote ratio, equal

variance across all the analyses was not achieved, with five of the seven *t* tests demonstrating unequal variance for at least one of the DVs. Welch's *t* test is considered a more accurate and unbiased measure for comparing groups compared to the standard student *t* test (Delacre et al., 2017). Thus, it was deemed an appropriate approach to compare mean differences in terms of self-presentation codes and the welcoming behavior measures. See Table 3.9 for the correlations table across all the study variables. Table 3.10 lists means, standard deviations, and *t* test results.

Table 3.9
Correlations among Study Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Post Score	62.76	.12	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 Number of Comments	40.98	.10	.72**	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3 Upvote Ratio	.886	.096	.31**	.18**	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4 Valence ^a	.685	.205	-.18**	-.08	-.04	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5 Arousal ^a	.462	.168	.11	.08	.06	-.07	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6 Dominance ^a	.545	.304	-.07	.03	.06	.54**	.18**	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7 Need to Know	-	-	-.23**	-.01	-.14*	-.20**	-.15*	-.16*	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
8 Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge	-	-	.15*	.15*	.10	-.34**	.06	-.04	.09	1	-	-	-	-	-
9 Behaving Like a Fan	-	-	.11	.10	.02	-.18**	.08	-.04	-.01	.29**	1	-	-	-	-
10 Maintaining Outsider Status	-	-	.17**	.09	.10	-.17**	.03	-.04	-.08	.07	.05	1	-	-	-
11 Nonlocal Status	-	-	.05	.01	.07	.13*	.02	.22**	-.03	-.02	-.03	-.03	1	-	-
12 Explaining Motives	-	-	.12	.16*	.03	-.27**	-.06	-.03	.13*	.27**	.08	.09	-.16*	1	-
13 Asking for Recommendations	-	-	-.07	-.11	.06	-.07	.07	.02	-.01	.17**	.08	.09	-.03	-.03	1

Note. N = 241.

^aNRC Valence, Arousal, and Dominance (VAD) Lexicon (Mohammad, 2018). Scores range from 0 to 1 (very negative to very positive).

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 3.10*Results of the Independent Samples t tests by Code^a*

<i>Self-Presentation Code</i>	Included			Absent			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Need To Know										
Score	163	47.92	58.30	78	93.77	135.51	90.90	2.86	.005	.506
Number of Comments	163	40.77	36.82	78	41.42	48.26	121.39	0.11	.916	.016
Upvote Ratio	163	0.88	0.11	78	0.91	0.08	198.69	2.41	.017	.299
Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge										
Score	102	79.44	100.24	139	50.52	85.61	196.79	-2.35	.020	.314
Number of Comments	102	48.32	47.93	139	35.60	33.77	171.37	-2.30	.023	.315
Upvote Ratio	102	0.90	0.08	139	0.88	0.12	238.65	-1.63	.104	.202
Behaving Like a Fan										
Score	67	79.24	114.04	174	56.41	83.00	94.18	-1.49	.139	.246
Number of Comments	67	47.75	49.84	174	38.38	36.52	94.57	-1.40	.165	.231
Upvote Ratio	67	0.89	0.09	174	0.88	0.11	144.86	-0.31	.758	.041
Maintaining Outsider Status										
Score	47	94.60	133.24	194	55.05	78.84	54.04	-1.95	.056	.431
Number of Comments	47	48.53	57.32	194	39.15	35.59	54.88	-1.07	.288	.230
Upvote Ratio	47	0.91	0.06	194	0.88	0.11	141.94	-2.29	.023	.256
Nonlocal Status										
Score	85	69.56	98.91	156	59.05	89.71	158.89	-0.81	.417	.113
Number of Comments	85	41.62	40.37	156	40.63	41.11	175.38	-0.18	.857	.024
Upvote Ratio	85	0.90	0.09	156	0.88	0.11	192.90	-1.09	.278	.141
Explaining Motives										
Score	158	71.08	101.65	83	46.92	71.69	219.05	-2.14	.033	.261
Number of Comments	158	45.75	46.52	83	31.92	24.37	239.00	-3.03	.003	.343
Upvote Ratio	158	0.89	0.09	83	0.88	0.12	140.63	-0.49	.627	.070
Asking for Recommendations										
Score	75	53.61	53.41	166	66.89	106.04	236.24	1.29	.198	.143
Number of Comments	75	34.43	30.52	166	43.95	44.40	200.80	1.93	.055	.234
Upvote Ratio	75	0.90	0.10	166	0.88	0.10	147.46	-0.94	.348	.129

Note. *N* = 241.^a Welch's *t* test results

Post Score. Independent-samples Welch's t tests were conducted for each of the seven self-presentation codes to evaluate how the presence or absence of each code influenced differences in post score. Across the seven tests, three of the presentation codes demonstrated significant mean differences in relation to post score: Need to Know, Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge, and Explaining Motives. Maintaining Outsider Status was just above the $p = .05$ significance threshold ($p = .056$).

For Need to Know, the Welch's t test was significant in the case of post score, $t(90.90) = 2.86$, $p = .005$, with posts that included the Need to Know code scoring significantly lower ($M = 47.92$, $SD = 58.30$) compared to *new fan posts* that were not coded as Need to Know ($M = 93.77$, $SD = 135.51$). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = 0.51$, indicating a medium effect.

For Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge, the Welch's t test was significant in the case of post score, $t(196.79) = -2.35$, $p = .02$, with posts that included the Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge code scoring significantly higher ($M = 79.44$, $SD = 100.24$) compared to *new fan posts* that were not coded as Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge ($M = 50.52$, $SD = 85.61$). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = 0.31$, indicating a small effect.

For Explaining Motives, the Welch's t test was significant in the case of post score, $t(219.05) = -2.14$, $p = .03$, with posts that included the Explaining Motives code scoring significantly higher ($M = 71.08$, $SD = 101.65$) compared to *new fan posts* that were not coded as Explaining Motives ($M = 46.92$, $SD = 71.69$). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = 0.26$, indicating a small effect.

Number of Comments. Independent-samples Welch's t tests were conducted for each of the seven self-presentation codes to evaluate how the presence or absence of each code influenced differences in the number of comments on each post. Across the seven tests, two of the presentation codes demonstrated significant mean differences in relation to post score: Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge and Explaining Motives. Asking for Recommendations was just above the $p = .05$ significance threshold ($p = .055$).

For Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge, the Welch's t test was significant in the case of comments, $t(171.37) = -2.30$, $p = .02$, with posts that included the Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge code earning significantly more comments ($M = 48.32$, $SD = 47.93$) compared to *new fan posts* that were not coded as Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge ($M = 35.60$, $SD = 33.77$). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = 0.32$, indicating a small effect.

The Welch's t test was also significant for Explaining Motives in respect to the number of comments, $t(239) = -3.03$, $p = .003$, with posts that included the Explaining Motives code earning significantly more comments ($M = 45.75$, $SD = 46.52$) compared to *new fan posts* that were not coded as Explaining Motives ($M = 31.92$, $SD = 24.37$). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = 0.34$, indicating a small effect.

Upvote Ratio. Independent-samples Welch's t tests were conducted for each of the seven self-presentation codes to evaluate how the presence or absence of each code influenced differences in upvote ratio. Across the seven tests, two of the presentation codes demonstrated significant mean differences in relation to post score: Need to Know and Maintaining Outsider Status

In the case of Need to Know, the Welch's t test was significant in respect to upvote ratio, $t(198.69) = 2.41, p = .017$, with posts that included the Need to Know code earning a significantly lower upvote ratio ($M = .88, SD = .11$) compared to *new fan posts* that were not coded as Need to Know ($M = .91, SD = .08$). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = 0.30$, indicating a small effect.

The Welch's t test for Maintaining Outsider Status was also significant in relation to upvote ratio, $t(141.94) = -2.29, p = .023$, with posts that included the Need to Know code earning a significantly higher upvote ratio ($M = .91, SD = .06$) compared to *new fan posts* that were not coded as Maintaining Outsider Status ($M = .88, SD = .11$). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , was $d = 0.26$, indicating a small effect.

3.4.3 Research Question 3

To examine my third research question, I conducted three multiple linear regressions (MLR) to evaluate how well the three dimensions of the NRC VAD lexicon (i.e., valence, arousal, dominance) predicted welcoming behavior (i.e., post score, upvote ratio, and number of comments). Refer to Table 3.9 for descriptive statistics and correlations.

I conducted my first MLR with valence, arousal, and dominance as my predictors for post score. During my initial analysis, the necessary normality and homoscedasticity assumptions were not met. The distribution was positively skewed and the plot of studentized residuals and predicted values showed an increasing funnel, indicating heteroskedasticity. To address these violations, I applied a logarithmic transformation to my post score variable (Laerd, 2015). I then reran the MLR with the transformed post score variable. The result was an MLR model that statistically significantly predicted post

score, $F(3, 234) = 2.81, p = .04, \text{adj. } R^2 = .02$. Valence was the only variable to add statistically significantly to the prediction, $p = .028$. Regression coefficients and standard errors can be found in Table 3.11.

Table 3.11

Multiple regression results for post score

Post Score	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	R^2	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>							
Model								.03	.02	2.81
(Constant)	1.89	.74	3.04	.58		3.24	.00			
Valence	-1.53	-2.88	-.17	.69	-.17	-2.21	.03*			
Arousal	1.13	-.63	2.88	.89	.08	1.27	.21			
Dominance	.33	-1.36	2.02	.86	.03	.38	.70			

Note. Post score transformed with logarithmic transformation

DV = Post Score; N = 241; Model = "Enter" method in SPSS Statistics; *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE B* = standard error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; R^2 = coefficient of determination; ΔR^2 = adjusted R²

DV = Post Score; N = 241; * $p < .05$

A second MLR was run, testing valence, arousal, and dominance as a predictor of the number of comments on a post. Like the first MLR, normality and homoscedasticity assumptions were not initially met, requiring variable transformation. I applied a logarithmic transformation on the number of comments variable (Laerd, 2015) and reran my analysis. The result was a nonsignificant MLR model, $F(3, 236) = .846, p = .47, \text{adj. } R^2 = .00$. Regression coefficients and standard errors can be found in Table 3.12.

Table 3.12*Multiple regression results for number of comments*

Number of Comments	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>							
Model								.01	.00	.85
(Constant)	.98	.00	1.97	.50		1.97	.05			
Valence	-.38	-1.54	.77	.58	-.05	-.66	.51			
Arousal	.65	-.84	2.14	.76	.06	.86	.39			
Dominance	.78	-.66	2.21	.73	.08	1.07	.29			

Note. Number of comments transformed with logarithmic transformation

DV = Post Score; N = 241; Model = "Enter" method in SPSS Statistics; *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE B* = standard error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; *R*² = coefficient of determination; ΔR^2 = adjusted R2

DV = Post Score; N = 241; * *p* < .05

A third MLR was conducted, testing valence, arousal, and dominance as predictors of upvote ratio. Normality and homoscedasticity assumptions were not initially met, requiring variable transformation. The distribution was negatively skewed in this case, requiring the reflect and square root transformation (Laerd, 2015), which satisfied concerns about normality and heteroskedasticity. I then reran the MLR with the transformed upvote ratio variable. The result was a nonsignificant MLR model, $F(3, 237) = .786, p = .50, \text{adj. } R^2 = .00$. Regression coefficients and standard errors can be found in Table 3.13.

Table 3.13*Multiple regression results for upvote ratio*

Upvote Ratio	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>							
Model								.01	.00	.79
(Constant)	1.08	.56	1.08	.06		18.09	.00			
Valence	.07	-.47	.13	.07	.08	1.04	.30			
Arousal	-.05	-.28	.50	.09	-.04	-.52	.60			
Dominance	-.10	-.13	.61	.09	-.09	-1.16	.25			

Note. Upvote ratio transformed with reflect and square root transformation

DV = Post Score; N = 241; Model = "Enter" method in SPSS Statistics; *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE B* = standard error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; *R*² = coefficient of determination; ΔR^2 = adjusted R2

DV = Post Score; N = 241; * *p* <.05

3.5 Discussion

The purpose of this study is to examine how new/prospective fans' presentation of self in an online fan community relates to the community's welcoming behavior, specifically how a community responds, in the form of expressed emotion and approval behavior (i.e., upvotes, comments, responses). I sought to explore how new fans use online Reddit posts to initiate fan socialization with an established online fan community, as well as how communicative adjustments, in the form of asking particular questions or sharing specific details, influence community acceptance of a new or prospective fan. I used web scraping to collect *new fan posts* from Reddit and then used a combination of qualitative coding and textual analysis to assess the interactional nature of fan socialization and online fan community welcoming behavior.

Research Question 1 sought to examine the content of *new fan posts* and how new fans initiate fan socialization with an established online fan community. My findings

suggest new fans present themselves in various ways, choosing to ask questions, share information, and demonstrate in-group knowledge as part of how they introduce themselves to an online fan community as a new or prospective fan. The codes I derived from my qualitative analysis were Need to Know (i.e., asking the community what they need to know to be a fan), Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge (i.e., demonstrating cognitive in-group knowledge for the new team or community), Behaving Like a Fan (i.e., demonstrating in-group behaviors valued by the new community), Maintaining Outsider Status (i.e., positioning oneself as an outsider; “will you accept me?”), Nonlocal Status (i.e., sharing that oneself is a nonlocal fan), Explaining Motives (i.e., describing the motivation for choosing *this* team), and Asking for Recommendations (i.e., asking the community for recommended podcasts, media outlets, streaming platforms for the team). These findings highlight the variety of presentation techniques new fans employed when initiating fan socialization in online fan communities.

Research Question 2 sought to examine how new and prospective fans engage with existing online fan communities for the purpose of initiating fan socialization with an established fan base. My findings indicate that the content of a *new fan post* can have a tangible impact on how a community welcomes a new or prospective fan. Specifically, new or prospective fans who demonstrate a cognitive knowledge of their new team, recognize and maintain their outsider status, or explain their motivations for choosing their new team are more likely to receive more positive reception in the form of post score, upvote ratio, and/or comments. In contrast, new or prospective fans who ask a community “what [they] need to know” directly is shown to score significantly lower in terms of post score and upvote ratio. These results suggest that communicative decisions

made by new or prospective fans can influence how they are welcomed by an established fan community.

Research Question 3 aimed to investigate how the sentiment (i.e., valence, arousal, dominance dimensions of the NRC VAD lexicon) of *new fan posts* predict welcoming behavior. My findings indicate that the valence of a *new fan post* is a negative predictor of post score (i.e., for each unit change in valence, post score decreases). The remaining sentiment dimensions were nonsignificant predictors of post score. Upvote ratio and the number of comments were not significantly predicted by the sentiment dictionaries. These results suggest that sentiment has comparatively little impact in predicting how an online fan community will welcome new or prospective fans.

3.5.1 Theoretical Implications

The current study makes several theoretical contributions in relation to contemporary online fan socialization, as well as the nature of brand community welcoming behavior. This work also extends CAT into sports fan literature.

3.5.1.1 Non-Geographically Bound.

The findings from this study indicate that a new fans' nonlocal status does not influence welcoming behavior from an established community. Brand communities are non-geographically bound (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and are often treated as valuable spaces for fans to connect with a team and fan community from a geographically distant location (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Pu & James, 2017; Reifurth et al., 2019). An interpretation of these results could be that nonlocal fandom is not exceptional or unique in this space as a defining characteristic or indicator of fandom. In other words, nonlocal fans may feel as though they must work harder and be more active as fans to maintain a

connection with their team (Goldman et al., 2016; Mastromartino et al., 2019). For example, international fans may wake up at early hours to watch their favorite NHL hockey team on a streaming platform that they purchased beyond their local television offerings. In this case, one might perceive nonlocal fandom as a sign of legitimacy or dedicated effort that is associated with being a fan (e.g., Norris et al., 2015).

While nonlocal fandom may demand extra effort and dedication, our findings suggest that these efforts may not be immediately apparent or recognized within the community. The lack of differentiation in welcoming behavior towards nonlocal fans may stem from the ubiquity of such fans within these online communities. In these brand communities, the nonlocal identity might not be perceived as distinctive or rare, but rather as an integral and commonplace aspect of the collective fandom experience.

Moreover, the notion of legitimacy and dedication associated with nonlocal fandom, as suggested by previous research (e.g., Goldman et al., 2016; Mastromartino et al., 2019), may be internalized by the fans themselves rather than explicitly acknowledged by the community. Nonlocal fans might feel a personal sense of commitment and connection, yet the community as a whole may not attribute special significance to this characteristic.

As demonstrated through the results of other self-presentation codes and welcoming behavior, it is also plausible that these brand communities simply prioritize other aspects of fandom, such as in-group knowledge or relatable stories of why a new fan is choosing to support a team (i.e., Explaining Motives). In this sense, one's geographic distance from a team's home base is a taken for granted aspect of online fandom, reflecting a general acceptance of the global reach of online fan communities.

3.5.1.2 Initiating Fan Socialization Online.

These findings shed light on contemporary fan behavior, specifically focusing on the trend of online fan socialization initiated by new or potential fans. While existing literature has explored fan socialization in relation to socializing agents (e.g., James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Mastromartino et al., 2019), and the impact of community and social connections in cultivating team identification, particularly for new teams (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2013; Lock et al., 2009; Lock et al., 2011), the phenomenon of online fan socialization, driven by the initiative of new fans themselves, is under-researched.

This behavior is a departure from how fan socialization generally occurs, either through primary socialization (e.g., James, 2001) or through community driven social ties (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2013). From a symbolic interactionist perspective online fan socialization is interactional, with new fans communicating information about themselves, their decision to support a new team, and other markers of self that can influence the socialization process and how the existing community members respond to the new fan.

The current findings demonstrate how different characteristics of online fan behavior can influence a community's welcoming behavior. New fans may present different aspects of themselves or share different information to initiate the socialization process, each of which potentially influencing how or if members of a particular fan community will accept or reject the new fan. Although sport consumer scholars have taken sociological approaches to studying fan socialization (e.g., Allison & Pope, 2021; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011), these results highlight the dynamic nature of socialization and how factors like demonstrating in-group knowledge can influence the response of a

fan community. This sheds light on how socialization is negotiated in practice and the factors that can contribute to this process.

3.5.1.3 Content Versus Sentiment.

Another takeaway from this work is a question of substance over style in how new fans initiate the socialization process. The purpose of this study is to examine how the characteristics of new fan posts influenced welcoming behavior. The findings highlight how characteristics related to the content of these posts are associated with positive welcoming behavior rather than the sentiment expressed in the post.

Thus, *how* new fans initiate fan socialization, in terms of sentiment, is less important than *what* is communicated as part of the interaction (i.e., self-presentation codes/markers). Sports fandom can be emotional and is often associated with emotive fan behavior (e.g., Chang, 2019; Cottingham, 2012; Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020). The NRC VAD sentiment lexicon allows for investigation into how emotional language is associated with community acceptance and welcoming responses. However, these results indicate that emotional language, in the form of valence, arousal, and dominance are either nonsignificant or negative predictors of welcoming behavior from an established online fan community. Valence, in particular, was negatively associated with post score. Valence refers to the degree of pleasure or displeasure of a particular post, meaning that as *new fan posts* communicate higher degrees of pleasure through their language, these posts are likely to receive lower post scores. Contrary to expectations rooted in the emotional nature of sports fandom, the results indicate that the initiation of fan socialization through sentiment-laden language does not guarantee a warmer reception.

Even amongst self-presentation codes, this distinction between *substance* and *style* is present, with cognitive displays of team-specific knowledge associated with higher post scores and more comments, compared to behavioral displays of alignment with the in-group (e.g., BIRGing) which were not significantly related to welcoming responses. This underscores the importance of cognitive familiarity with the team or community, emphasizing that new fans are warmly received when they showcase a genuine understanding of the shared narratives and intricacies of the fandom, rather than simply acting the part. These findings collectively affirm that the substance and relevance of new fan contributions are paramount in shaping the dynamics of fan socialization within online spaces.

3.5.1.4 A Matter of Respect and Effort.

A surprising finding from this work is the negative relationship between Need to Know and welcoming responses. *New fan posts* that asked the community about “what they need to know” to be a fan of their team received significantly lower posts scores and lower upvote ratios compared to *new fan posts* that did not ask. Relatedly, *new fan posts* asking for recommendations yielded no significant differences in relation to welcoming behavior.

These findings are unexpected as welcoming new fans is a key brand community practice (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). As such, it would be expected that when a new fan is directly asking for information about how to be a fan or asking for podcast recommendations, community members would be active in onboarding and welcoming the fan. Welcoming behavior is central in supporting community longevity and properly onboarding new community members (Schau et al., 2009).

These findings suggest that for these Reddit communities, perceptions of effort play a pivotal role in shaping welcoming behavior. For new fans who are asking what they need to know or where to learn about the team, these questions could be interpreted as a low effort attempts to learn about a given team. Particularly in these communities focused on NFL teams, plenty of information is available to new or prospective fans across the Internet whether in the form of new media, other community forums, or through actively watching the team in question through Internet streaming. In asking Need to Know and recommendation questions, new fans put the onus on community members to synthesize a team history and fan experience into a single Reddit comment. This perception of a lack of effort may inadvertently cast these questions as disrespectful to community members.

In contrast, my findings about users being more positively welcomed when they maintain their outsider status (i.e., position as an outsider seeking acceptance), suggests these communities were more receptive to fans who recognize the legitimacy of the community and do not make assumptions about their acceptance. According to CAT, in actively highlighting one's status as an outsider, these fans are maintaining or increasing social distance with the community. However, these findings suggest this behavior is valued, being met with a higher upvote ratio (i.e., more upvotes and fewer downvotes).

In essence, our findings suggest a delicate balance in the expectations surrounding new fan interactions within these digital spaces. While *new fan posts* represent proactive engagement, the nature of the inquiry and the perceived effort involved play a crucial role in determining the warmth of the community's reception.

3.5.1.5 Examining Online Fandom with CAT.

The current work extends CAT into the sport consumer literature, considering how language use influences, and is influenced by, online fan interactions. CAT is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, born from SIT, that assumes personal and social identity are managed through interpersonal interactions and behavioral adjustments. This is consistent with the findings of this study, with fans who demonstrated in-group knowledge, and acted like fans being more well received than users who did not position themselves as in-group members through their self-presentation language.

Although the results show support for CAT, new fans were not universally well received. Specifically in the case of new fans who behaved like an existing fan in their post, the result is unexpected. According to CAT, if an individual makes communicative adjustments (e.g., linguistic, behavioral, etc.) to decrease social distance with another communicator, they are more likely to be accepted. Here, behavioral adjustments are not resulting in greater acceptance from the existing community members. One interpretation is that the community members simply do not value this type of adjustment. Communicative accommodations are made by the individual, but that does not mean the other communicator will appreciate or respond to the effort (Giles & Ogay, 2007).

Another explanation could be that while the new fan believes acting the part will be appreciated, the community finds it off-putting or undeserved. The significant result for Maintaining Outsider Status suggests that new fans are better served to acknowledge their out-group status until they are accepted by the community. This suggests there might be more to this interaction in respect to CAT and the accommodations being made in this context.

In sum, these findings indicate CAT is a fruitful framework for investigating fan communication, particularly in online fan community settings (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). Sports fandom is a social endeavor. As contemporary fandom continues to turn to online mediums, theoretical frameworks that can explain online interactions are valuable.

3.5.2 Practical Implications

There are several practical implications for this work, most notably in relation to supporting new or prospective fans. Central to these implications is opportunity for sport managers to support new fans and ensure they are welcomed appropriately.

3.5.2.1 Development of Comprehensive New Fan Resources.

There are opportunities for sports managers to foster lasting fandom from new fans who initiate fan socialization online. The current work indicates that new and prospective fans are not only populating online fan communities, but that they may encounter a variety of responses from existing fan community members, that may be positive or negative welcoming responses. In this sense, online fan communities play an important role in the globalization of sports fandom. Given the non-geographically bound nature of these communities, these new, potential fans may be accessing the community nonlocally, creating an opportunity for a team to expand their market reach beyond an increasingly saturated local market (Coombs, 2021).

To aid new fans, sports managers could create specific opportunities and resources for new fans. As the current study suggests, new fans want to know about the team and the resources available to them. Sports managers could create those resources, providing prospective fans with a how-to guide of sorts with popular media/information outlets, key historical details, and a dedicated discussion area for new fans to ask

questions and interact directly with the team. Based on my findings, this information would not only promote goodwill with new fans, but also may help new fans learn about their new fandom to an extent that promotes healthier and more positive interactions with existing community members.

3.5.2.2 Active Engagement of Sport Managers in Online Fan Communities.

Another practical recommendation stemming from this work is the recommendation that sports managers become more active and involved with online fan communities. The current work highlights the interactional nature of online fandom and how community activity can potentially impact the fan experience for both new and established community members. Brand communities are powerful tools for achieving relationship marketing outcomes (Abeza et al., 2013). Particularly in communities like Reddit subreddits, sports managers could facilitate relationships and goodwill with fans, even beyond the social media impressions and engagement metrics.

This presents an opportunity for sport managers to host Q&A sessions and actively acknowledge fan contributions, in addition to supporting new fans. Such proactive involvement not only enhances the overall community experience but also aligns with the practice of welcoming new fans into the fold.

3.6 Limitations and Future Research

This work is not without limitations. One limitation concerns the model fit of the multiple linear regressions evaluating sentiment in relation to welcoming behaviors. The model fit across each of the three regression was poor, indicating that the sentiment dictionaries explain very little of the variance in relation to the welcoming behavior variables. Future research should consider other sentiment measures, including machine

learning techniques that allow for a more context-specific assessment of sentiment. While the NRC VAD lexicon is considered an adaptable dictionary, other sentiment analysis approaches may result in better model fit.

Another limitation of this current work is its generalizability to other social media or online fan community settings. The study focused on the analysis of 241 Reddit posts and their content concerning welcoming behavior within NFL subreddit pages. This sample, while informative, represents only a fraction of the numerous posts submitted to the 32 NFL subreddit pages on any given day. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of interactions and dynamics present in other online fan communities or social media platforms.

Moreover, this study provides a snapshot of how new fans engage with communities to express support for a new team at a specific moment in time. Online communities are dynamic, and user behavior can evolve over time, influenced by various factors such as team performance, current events, or changes in the broader online landscape. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the context of this specific timeframe and may not necessarily reflect long-term trends or shifts in online fan behavior.

Additionally, the study acknowledges the challenge of generalizing its results to the broader online user population. Estimates suggest that only a small percentage, approximately 10%, of online users actively contribute through posting or commenting (Carron-Arthur et al., 2014; Vuorio & Horne, 2023). While the present study provides valuable insights into the behaviors of active contributors, future research could explore how non-participatory users experience and perceive welcoming dynamics within online

fan communities. Understanding the perspectives and engagement patterns of this sizable portion of the online audience would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play within these digital spaces.

3.7 Conclusion

The current study examines online fan socialization, specifically how characteristics of *new fan posts* influence welcoming behavior from established online fan communities. Findings indicate that the content of *new fan posts* was related to welcoming behavior (i.e., post score, upvote ratio, number of comments). With this study, I wanted to better understand the interactional nature of fan socialization online and how the increased accessibility of online fan communities have prompted new avenues for fostering team identification in new fans.

In the broader context of fan socialization literature, this study contributes valuable insights, utilizing CAT as a robust theoretical framework for dissecting online fan behavior. As a next step with this project, I wanted to delve deeper into the elements of fan socialization and the meaning conveyed as part of that process. While the initial study of this project indicates that direct inquiries such as "what do I need to know" might receive a less welcoming response, Study 2 aims to illuminate the responses to such questions. What does a new fan need to know about a team to be a fan? Crucially, what processes does a community employ to establish a consensus or define a response?

CHAPTER 4

CONSTRUCTING A TEAM IDENTITY ONLINE

4.1 Introduction

Building on my investigation into how new fans are welcomed by existing online fan communities from Study 1, I sought to better understand how a fan community develops a collective identity and, subsequently, a fan prototype. In Study 1, new fans are welcomed by an existing community through communication and social interaction. Through these interactions, the established community describes “what you need to know” to be a member of the online fan community. In doing so, the community is communicating a collective identity and informing the new fan about how to be a fan of the salient team. But how does the community come to establish a collective identity?

In Study 2, I draw from the social identity perspective, notably SCT, to consider how social groups, such as online fan communities, develop a collective sense of “we” (i.e., collective identity) and a group prototype. According to SCT, groups form group prototypes as a means of creating a blueprint for group membership. New members engage in depersonalization (i.e., setting aside individuality to assimilate with the group prototype) to better reflect the values and norms of the community, seeking acceptance in the process (Turner et al., 1987). Brand communities operate similarly, with Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) conceptualizing brand communities according to three markers, consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a moral sense of responsibility. Each of these markers defines characteristics of brand communities, but also provide a similar blueprint of sorts for new members.

Of note, consciousness of kind shares conceptual similarities with SCT's group prototypes in that it represents a collective identity or a sense of "we" that inform community behavior (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Although groups are often characterized by their group prototypes, or the sense of "we" that characterizes what it means to be a community member, the origins of these markers are under-researched. This has implications for such communities, as prototypes represent a key touchpoint of what it means to be a member, influencing how/if prospective members feel welcomed or accepted. In this sense, group prototypes can be a form of gatekeeping. As such, there is value in examining how these prototypes are formed.

The implications of exploring the development of group prototypes are particularly important in sport consumer behavior, where prototypes around fandom can be exclusionary and unwelcoming for some groups of fans. Although sport consumer behavior has thoroughly investigated the nature of new fandom (i.e., individuals adopting a meaningful social category and engaging in the group prototype), we know very little about how such prototypes are established, despite the problems that persist once a prototype around "real fans" has been established (e.g., Behrens & Uhrich, 2020; Fenton, Gillooly, & Vasilica, 2021; Sveinson & Hoerber, 2016).

To examine how prototypes are established, I turn to an online fan community for a newly formed professional hockey team (i.e., Seattle Kraken). Building on Study 1, I adopt a symbolic interactionist perspective, in that values and norms are co-created through social interaction and language (Ashforth et al., 2007). From this perspective, a newly formed community around a newly formed team, is a fruitful context for examining how a group of individuals develop a collective identity (i.e., a sense of "we")

and, subsequently, a sense of what it means to be a fan of the team and member of the community (i.e., fan prototype).

To consider how fan prototypes are developed, I make an epistemological shift in Study 2 to a social constructionist and qualitative approach, drawing from the theoretical framework of communities of practice (CoP; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and the methodology of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wiggins, 2017) to examine the interplay between psychology and language. This merging of frameworks is consistent with the social identity approach in that it is well-suited for examining how identity is reflected in language usage, even on sub-conscious levels. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the discourse of online interactions that occur in a newly formed online fan community to investigate how brand community markers are organically constructed through member discourse.

4.2 Literature Review

Study 2 draws broadly from the social identity approach, specifically SCT, to examine how a newly formed online fan community, for a newly formed professional team, develops a collective identity from the announcement of the team through their second season. In this study, I am guided by the social learning theory, communities of practice (CoP; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which emphasizes the role of the community in facilitating the development of shared identities, knowledge sharing, and prototypes within a community of practice. Used in conjunction with discursive psychology, I focus on the role of language use in developing community consensus and the foundation for community norms and prototypes.

4.2.1 Defining Brand Community In-group

Sports teams and their associated fan communities are prominent brand communities (Heere et al., 2011; Underwood et al., 2001). Brand communities are characterized by the brand community triad, wherein consumers form relational ties and value through their united connection and shared identification with a salient brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Brand communities are valuable tools for marketers to actualize relationship marketing efforts and serve as essential venues for belonging and interpersonal connection for consumers who identify with a brand and the salient community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Rooney et al., 2021). In their foundational work on brand communities, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) identified three markers of brand community: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Each of these markers are present in brand communities and play essential roles in the longevity and well-being of the community (Kirkwood et al., 2019; Schau et al., 2009).

Consciousness of kind is the sense of “we” that arises from a brand community affiliation (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). It is the most important element of brand communities, as it helps demarcate between the salient in-group and out-groups (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Consciousness of kind intersects with social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as both are characterized by an intrinsic sense of connection to a social affiliation (i.e., a brand) and fellow in-group members (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). As such, it reflects a community's collective identity; shared characteristics, promoting a sense of connection with other members within the group (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). In the sports fan community context, consciousness of kind materializes in various ways, most notably in the form of BIRGing (i.e., basking in

reflected glory), where fans who identify with a team use “we” when describing their favorite team, despite not actively participating as a team member (Cialdini et al., 1976; Delia, 2015). Consciousness of kind plays a pivotal role in how brand communities operate and establish in-groups, as well as contributes to a collective sense of self and identity (Laroche et al., 2012).

Rituals and traditions are a social process that helps to maintain and transmit the culture of brand community through ritualized behaviors (Grant et al., 2011; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). These behaviors are often centered around consumption experiences, with community members engaging with a brand in a particular way or developing rituals around its use (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). These behaviors are not only performative for a community but are also socially meaningful as they inform *proper* brand use (Schau et al., 2009). Rituals and traditions are especially prevalent in sport-related brand communities, where the significance of history in sport and the link between team identification and fan behavior make them a defining feature (Grant et al., 2011; Underwood et al., 2001). For example, fans are known to engage in rituals around their team such as tailgating traditions (Drenten et al., 2009), wearing team apparel after a win (Cialdini et al., 1976), or participating in ritualized gameday behaviors such as Pittsburgh Steelers fans waving “Terrible Towels” (Cottingham, 2012). Thus, rituals and traditions perpetuate history, culture, and consciousness for sport fan communities, and can lead to greater levels of fan community identification (Grant et al., 2011). In this sense, these behaviors define normative in-group behavior, support fan community (i.e., collective) identity and help differentiate from salient out-groups.

The third marker of brand community is moral responsibility, which refers to a sense of duty to the community and fellow community members (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). This duty is reflected in behaviors such as defending the brand from out-groups and promoting the community in-group (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Members may take on various roles within the community structure to support and foster its continued longevity and health (Kirkwood et al., 2019; Schau et al., 2009). Moral responsibility is essential to integrating and retaining members and informing them about the proper use of the brand. It is through these behaviors that a brand community can form group solidarity as they negotiate what it means to be a member of the community and the proper use of the brand (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Together, Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) three markers of brand community contribute to group cohesion and meaning at the community-level. These elements are not only central to how brand communities are conceptualized but are also informative to community members, instructing new and existing members about normative behavior and expectations around community involvement (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009).

Brand communities and community markers are socially constructed by their members (e.g., Cottingham, 2012) and enhance value creation practices (i.e., social networking, community engagement, impression management, and brand use; Laroche et al., 2012; Schau et al., 2009). The sense of what it means to be a prototypical member stems from consciousness of kind and a community’s sense of “we”. Consumption experiences and behaviors establish and perpetuate the community’s culture through rituals and traditions (Grant et al., 2011), while moral responsibility dictates prototypical

behaviors in relation to defending the brand and community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Although brand community markers are central to shaping and characterizing the nature of brand communities and defining community prototypes, little research has explored how the community constructs these markers, particularly in sport (Yoshida, Gordon, et al., 2015).

Fan communities are similarly instructive, providing fans with opportunities to develop meaning around their experience as a fan. For example, fans may develop an intrinsic connection to a community (i.e., consciousness of kind) through their social ties and group involvement (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015) or may similarly derive group norms from rituals and traditions in a fan group, such as traveling supporter groups (e.g., Fairley, 2009). Relatedly, Davies et al. (2021) found fans may even formulate expectations around what *might* be prototypical or normative behavior for a fan community of a new team, based on external identities and fan expectations. In this sense, brand community markers are socially constructed by fans in community contexts, contributing to a sense of what it means to be a fan of a particular team or a member of a particular fan community.

Understanding how fan communities construct the idea of “prototypical” membership through their practices and social interaction is valuable, as prototypes dictate in-group fan behavior and impact the types of future fans welcomed by the community. In sum, brand community markers are socially constructed and form a basis for what is considered prototypical or normative within a community. However, there is a gap in knowledge regarding how these markers and prototypes are established in fan communities, despite their importance.

4.2.2 Prototypicality in Brand Community

The development of prototypes and prototypicality in social identity stem from a desire to achieve group acceptance and cohesiveness (Reimer et al., 2020). According to SCT, prototypes are “fuzzy sets of attributes (e.g., thoughts, feelings, behaviors) that simultaneously embody intragroup similarities and intergroup differences, thus capturing the essence of a group as a distinct and internally coherent entity” (Hogg & Rinella, 2018, p. 7). In other words, prototypes are loosely defined based on group norms and can have a significant impact on individual behavior within social contexts.

Individuals adopt social identities to inform their sense of self-concept (i.e., self-definition) and to balance their needs for belongingness and distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In choosing to identify with a social group category, individuals adopt characteristics of the group to better exemplify their values and behaviors. This is accomplished through self-categorization, specifically the process of depersonalization (Turner et al., 1987). Depersonalization involves adopting normative cognitions and behaviors consistent with the group with which one strives to identify (Hogg, 2001; Turner et al., 1987; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). In order to better conform to the group prototype, depersonalization presumes that an individual will suppress parts of their individual identity to better conform to a group prototype and begin to perceive themselves as interchangeable representatives of their group (Turner et al., 1994).

For instance, when someone becomes a fan of a team, they are expected to align themselves cognitively with the appropriate in-group stereotype and integrate the group into their sense of self-concept (Smith & Henry, 1996). Adopting a social identity creates uncertainty about one's role and ability to convincingly conform to the salient group

(Hogg, 2001). To reduce this uncertainty, new fans may adopt certain perspectives or fan behaviors to better enact the idealized and normative fan prototype. This can mean engaging in normative consumption behaviors, such as purchasing team apparel and consuming team-related media, or adopting normative attitudinal behaviors, such as BIRGing or blasting a newly identified out-group (Delia, 2015). Prototypical behavior is rewarded as groups value those who best conform to group values and cognitions and can even be predictive of community perceptions of leadership, even if influence is not actually exercised (Hogg, 2001). Thus, the more prototypical a member is, the more attractive they are to the community at large (Hogg et al., 1995; Reimer et al., 2020).

For fans, prototypes play a crucial role in determining community acceptance and behavior. Scholars have found that perceptions of prototypicality within a community can significantly motivate community members to support a local sports team (Asada & Ko, 2022; Asada et al., 2020). Prototypes are contextually sensitive to intergroup comparison, as they provide a basis for what characterizes in-group and out-group (Hogg, 2001). However, prototypicality can also cause intragroup conflicts, particularly in sports, where fans may evaluate the authenticity of other fans based on how well they conform to group ideals and norms (Cottingham, 2012).

Intragroup distinctions can impact fans and fan communities in various ways, especially as sport becomes more global and online mediated, drawing in more fans from different locations and backgrounds. For instance, Behrens and Urich (2020) found that new fans were better received by established online fan communities when they demonstrated prototypical in-group knowledge. Similarly, Fenton, Keegan, and Parry (2021) found that local fans of an online fan community may reject nonlocal fans who

lack precursory knowledge about the history of the team or geographic region, which local fans may consider normative group knowledge. Together these studies suggest that while online fan communities can serve as a valuable connection point for fans from around the world, fan prototypes and community norms in these spaces can form a basis for contention and conflict, undermining the value associated with digitally connected fan bases (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Kirkwood et al., 2019).

The concept of authentic and prototypical fandom also has implications for marginalized groups in the sports space, such as female fans, who may be dismissed as inauthentic in fan contexts (e.g., Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016) and, as a result, may feel the need to distance themselves from larger fan communities and create their own (Fenton, Gillooly, & Vasilica, 2021). Fan communities play prominent roles in fostering and maintaining fandom (Allison & Pope, 2021). Therefore, understanding how prototypes are constructed and maintained in fan communities is crucial, as they can contribute to online fan communities' spaces being less inclusive, accepting, or welcoming for those fans who do not know or do not reflect the community prototype (e.g., Behrens & Uhrich, 2020; Fenton, Gillooly, & Vasilica, 2021; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016).

The development of prototypes within online fan communities represents an important issue that is overlooked by scholars and practitioners, despite their significant impact on community behavior and the acceptance of fans. In investigating initial brand associations made with a new sports team, Davies et al. (2021) demonstrate that fans may begin making assessments on what they expect to be prototypical fan behavior well before a team even has a team name or logo to affiliate with. While expectations around normative behavior may begin early, norms take time to develop. Particularly in online

communities, group consensus develops over time, as individuals within the group socially construct group norms through accommodating social behavior and communication (Postmes et al., 2000). Once norms are established, they are influential drivers of behavior. Rösner and Kramer (2016) found group norms to be more predictive of aggressive online behavior than a shared community identification (e.g., team identity), suggesting that even amongst similarly identified fans, a hostile community predicts hostile behavior. Community norms and prototypes are shaped by the practices within a community (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). These shared practices are then reflected in the markers of a brand community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), such as consciousness of kind (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Consciousness of kind effectively represents the collective identity of a brand community, encapsulating its norms and prototypes. Based on our current understanding of norms and prototypes around fandom, having a collective sense of identity and “we” can foster continuity and belonging within a group. New fans engage in depersonalization, as a means to better reflect community values. However, such norms and expectations around what it means to be an authentic fan in these spaces also highlight how fans and fan communities can gatekeep group membership, either explicitly or implicitly, with implications for fans who experience exclusion, as well as sports brands who are associated with ostracizing or non-welcoming communities. If we want to better understand how such “gates” are constructed, we need to examine communities from their onset, prior to and during the construction of the community and, subsequently, their collective identity, norms, and associated prototypes.

Community practices and brand community markers are socially constructed through interpersonal interactions over time (Postmes et al., 2000). To examine their

construction, we need to observe how community identity is negotiated through social interactions amongst community members. Thus, online fan communities represent compelling research contexts for such inquiry, presenting documented interactions (i.e., posts and replies) that occurred many years prior. To interpret such interactions and how they inform and construct collective identity in an online fan community, I draw from two complementary theoretical lenses: the communities of practice (CoP) framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and discursive psychology (DP) (Wiggins, 2017).

4.2.3 Developing “We” Through Language

The communities of practice (CoP) framework, a social theory of learning and knowledge management, defines CoPs as groups of individuals who share common interests, domains of knowledge, or professional practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000). These groups interact regularly to collaboratively learn, develop expertise, and solve problems within their chosen domain (Wenger, 1998). At the core of this framework is the recognition of social interactions as pivotal in the acquisition and exchange of knowledge (Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010). Within a CoP, shared interests form the basis for ongoing social interactions, enabling community members to engage in practices that facilitate learning, the exchange of experiences, competencies, and the co-creation of meaning pertinent to their domain (Wenger, 1998, 2010). This learning occurs primarily through active participation within the community, such as when a fan engages in discussions within an online fan community. Through these participatory experiences and knowledge sharing, community members collectively shape and negotiate meaning, thereby fostering the development of a shared repertoire of practices, norms, values, and a collective identity (Wenger, 1998, 2010).

The CoP theory occupies a unique space within the intersection of practice and identity theories, highlighting that individual participation in a community leads to the construction of personal identity (Wenger, 1998). This constructionist perspective extends to the collective level, where individuals immerse themselves in the community's knowledge, acquire its practices, and engage with fellow members (Wenger, 1998). In doing so, they contribute to the development of community norms and the collective identity. Wenger (1998) highlights three dimensions of practice as the source of coherence of a community, specifically in relation to how a CoP negotiates meaning and develops collective consensus (i.e., identity, norms). The first dimension is mutual engagement, where communicators share experiences (e.g., their experience of attending a game), discuss problems (e.g., how they think the coach should manage their athletes), and collectively find solutions (e.g., recommendations about ticketing or parking; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) argues that practice “resides in the community of people and the relationship of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do” (p. 73). This dimension fosters a sense of collective involvement and commitment, allowing members to collectively explore, adapt, and refine their practices, contributing to the negotiation of meaning.

The second dimension is joint enterprise, referring to the shared goals, objectives, and purposes that unite members of a CoP (Wenger, 1998). Perhaps the CoP is united by a desire to solve specific problems, advance knowledge, or achieve specific outcomes. For an online fan community, such a joint enterprise may be supporting a team through the exchange of knowledge (e.g., Kirkwood et al., 2019). With a shared purpose,

community members align their interpretations and the significance of practices among community members (Wenger, 1998).

The third and final dimension of practice as the source of coherence in a community is shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). This dimension encompasses the tools, resources, language, symbols, rituals, and artifacts that hold special meaning within the CoP (Wenger, 1998). Mutual engagement (i.e., negotiating meaning through interaction) enables members to interact and explore practices, while the joint enterprise (i.e., solving a problem or advancing knowledge) provides a purpose for these interactions. The shared repertoire serves as a common language as a community will create resources for negotiating meaning around these pursuits. Community specific jokes, routines, stories, gestures, or terminology may create a coherence to the community and contribute to the community's collective identity and sense of who "we" are.

Schau et al. (2009) underscore the significance of practices in shaping community dynamics and how these practices inform the negotiation of meaning within brand communities. A parallel phenomenon unfolds within online fan communities, where members actively participate in discussions, contributing to the emergence of mutual engagement. Dialogues revolving around topics like dissecting the "real reason the team lost" are instrumental in shaping a dynamic sense of community, fostering the development of collective identity and the associated norms and prototypes.

Using a communities of practice (CoP) theoretical framework for studying online fan communities provides a robust approach to understanding how fan prototypes and collective identities are constructed within these digital spaces. CoP theory places a strong emphasis on social learning and knowledge co-construction, highlighting that fans

acquire their identities and competencies through interactions with other community members. In the context of online fan communities, this means exploring how fans collectively learn the norms, values, and practices associated with their fan identity. CoP also underscores that knowledge within the community is not merely transmitted but is co-generated through shared experiences and discussions. This is especially relevant for investigating how fan prototypes are developed and how collective identity evolves. Furthermore, CoP emphasizes the importance of competence and participation, offering insights into how fans become competent community members and how this competence relates to their identity. Lastly, CoP highlights that collective identity formation is rooted in shared practices, rituals, and behaviors, aligning well with the dynamics of online fan communities. In essence, CoP provides a comprehensive framework for delving into the social, interactive, and knowledge-based processes that underlie fan identity development in digital fan spaces.

Discursive psychology (DP) emerges as a complementary and highly valuable methodological approach for examining the construction of collective meaning within online fan communities. While CoP helps us understand how fan identities are developed through shared practices and knowledge exchange, DP delves deeper into the intricate dynamics of language, discourse, and communication within these communities. DP integrates psychology and linguistics as it assumes that discourse (i.e., text, talk) is a part of social practice (Edwards, 2012; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wiggins, 2017). In other words, discursive psychology assumes that talk and text is “doing things” in interaction and there is intentionality in how and why interactions occur (Wiggins, 2017). Discourse refers to any form of spoken or written language (i.e., talk or text), but may be more

broadly considered any way in which meaning is produced in interpersonal interaction (i.e., gestures, symbols, objects; Johnstone, 2007). Discursive psychology focuses more specifically on how psychological concepts, such as identity, are shaped and enacted within communication and social interactions (Wiggins, 2017). It is a methodology that is concerned with psychological issues as lived by people in everyday life, such as how people make their minds or construct identities, by their practices and interactions (Wiggins, 2017).

While discourse analysis has been utilized in sport management and communication literature, particularly in relation to questions of gender and power (e.g., Meân & Kassing, 2008; Simon-Maeda, 2013; Sveinson et al., 2021), discursive psychology has received relatively little attention from sports management and consumer behavior scholars (e.g., Sveinson & Hoerber, 2023). However, discursive psychology is an interdisciplinary approach and rigorous methodology for examining questions of identity, identity presentation, and identity construction through language. Although social identities (i.e., team identity) are often conceptualized in sport consumer literature in terms of group membership and psychological connection (e.g., Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), identity may also be defined in terms of language as the “linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories” (Kroskrity, 1999, p. 111). Thus, to examine identity construction, attending to discourse and language is a warranted, and necessary approach to further our understanding of sports fans and contribute to emergent qualitative methodological approaches in sport management literature (Sveinson et al., 2021).

Existing work using discursive psychology has considered identity in relation to topics including food consumption (e.g., Sneijder & te Molder, 2009), education (e.g., McLean, 2012), children's youth sport participation (Apse et al., 2021, 2022), and athlete mental health (Cosh et al., 2022). For sports consumers, the consumption experience is inherently tied to community, social ties, and social construction (Holt, 1995). Sports fandom is commonly learned through observation (Holt, 1995), or more directly through socialization practices where a fan adopts group norms based on their identification with a favorite team via socializing agents or community influence (e.g., James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Lock et al., 2009). As interpersonal interaction sits at the center of sports fandom, discursive psychology is an effective way to consider how meanings are communicated and/or co-constructed through the social interaction of fans and fan community members.

Online, individuals may initiate the socialization process themselves, by commenting or posting in a fan community with the intention of deriving meaning from their interaction (i.e., "I'm a new fan, what do I need to know?"). In the case of a new professional team, the meaning around what it means to be a fan is created from scratch, as there is no history or past success to pull from in establishing fan prototypes (Fink et al., 2002). DP allows us to explore not only what fans talk about but how they talk about it—the linguistic and discursive strategies they employ to negotiate and construct shared meanings. By applying DP, we can uncover the nuances of how fan prototypes and collective identities are linguistically framed, challenged, and reshaped in online interactions. This methodological approach enables a fine-grained analysis of fan discourse, revealing how fans collectively create and negotiate their identities through

language, further enriching our understanding of the complex processes of identity formation and meaning-making within online fan communities. In essence, the combination of CoP as a theoretical lens and DP as a methodological tool offers a comprehensive framework for unraveling the multifaceted dynamics of online fan identity and the construction of collective meaning in these digital spaces.

In merging the CoP theoretical framework and a DP methodology, I examine a developing online fan community through the eyes of new or prospective fans to better understand the interactive elements of how a community develops collective identity, community norms, and a sense of “we”. Thus, the guiding research question for Study 2 of this project is, how do online fan communities, and their community members, develop a sense of “we” (i.e., consciousness of kind) through online discourse in the case of a newly established professional team and online fan community? To answer this question, I focus on one online fan community (i.e., Reddit) for a newly formed professional team and employ discursive psychology to investigate how fan meaning and fan prototypes are constructed and negotiated through online discourse.

4.3 Methodology

4.3.1 Discursive Psychology

Discursive psychology is characterized by three core principles. First, discourse is both socially constructed through cultural resources (i.e., words, intonation, gestures, phrases, expressions) and actively constructs different versions of the world through talk (Wiggins, 2017). As such, discursive psychology draws from a social constructionist paradigm in that meaning, specifically psychological concepts, are constantly negotiated through communication (i.e., discourse). Second, it assumes discourse is situated in a

particular context in that the meaning of any given utterance or text is shaped by the social, cultural, and historical context in which it is produced (McMullen, 2021; Wiggins, 2017). Finally, it is a methodology that presumes that functions or actions are accomplished through discourse, acting on and in the context in different ways (Wiggins, 2017).

The action orientation of language is emphasized when drawing from a discursive psychology methodological approach, presuming that language and communication is purposeful and intentional, even if at a subconscious level. This approach presumes individuals are seeking to accomplish some goal through discursive interaction, such as garnering attention, receiving assistance with a task, or positioning oneself as a member of a meaningful group and negotiating one's identity in that respect. In the context of sports fans, individuals are similarly negotiating and communicating identity through discursive interaction, whether engaging in sport discussion with a fellow fan or posting their opinions to an online message board. Particularly in the case of online fan communities, identity is managed through language and the ways individuals communicate through largely text-mediated interactions. When an individual posts in an online community forum, they engage in various discursive practices to manage their presentation of self as well as potential salient identities, such as a shared fandom or community affiliation (e.g., Tamburrini et al., 2015; Welburs & de Nooy, 2014). These actions reflect an overlap in discursive practice (i.e., communication and interpersonal interaction) and psychological constructs (i.e., identity), highlighting a strength of discursive psychology as a methodological approach. Discursive psychology is particularly well-suited for understanding the complex interplay between language, social

interaction, and the formation of individual and collective identities in online fan communities. Consistent with this study's aims to examine how a community develops a sense of collective identity through community discourse, discursive psychology is a powerful analytical framework. Thus, discursive psychology is employed to examine the guiding research question in the current study, how do online fan communities, and their community members, develop a sense of "we" (i.e., consciousness of kind) through online discourse in the case of a newly established professional team and online fan community?

4.3.2 Data Sources

The focal online fan community is the Reddit community (i.e., subreddit) centered around the Seattle Kraken (NHL), a professional hockey team that played their inaugural season in 2021. Although Seattle, WA was granted an expansion NHL team on December 4, 2018 (Belson, 2018), it would not be until July 23, 2020, that the franchise would finally announce the team's name, team colors, branding, and home jersey (Booth, 2020). An expansion draft was held nearly a year later, on July 21, 2021, where the Kraken selected players from a pool of NHL players, setting the Kraken's first roster in franchise history (Hertel, 2021). The Kraken then played their first regular season game on October 12, 2021. In their second season, the Kraken made the playoffs for the first time in franchise history.

The Seattle Kraken (i.e., r/SeattleKraken) subreddit was purposefully selected as the online fan community of interest because of their status as a relatively new expansion team. Reddit is a social media platform comprised of a litany of subreddits, which effectively serve as fan communities, or online fan forums. It is an online community-

driven platform where users can share content, engage in discussions, and participate in various communities by means of subreddits. Subreddits cover a wide range of topics, catering to diverse interests and niches, including sports teams, and individuals can engage in any of the over 130 thousand subreddit communities that populate Reddit (Reddit User Base, 2023).

Reddit is a valuable data source for academic researchers providing access to real-time discussion and opinions. Unlike other social media platforms like Twitter, Reddit allows for more long-form posts without the constraints of character limits. Additionally, researchers can leverage Reddit's Application Programming Interface (API) to extract historical data with data mining techniques. Of the estimated 55.79 million daily active users, most are men (63.8%) and are between the ages of 18 and 29 (Reddit User Base, 2023).

Extant literature on online fan behavior tends to focus on well-established, existing online communities (e.g., Chang, 2019; Gong et al., 2021). By focusing on established communities, scholars overlook the ways an online community evolves and grows over time. Communities engage in various social practices through community interaction and involvement, influencing normative community behavior over time (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2017). But how are those normative behaviors adopted and negotiated over time in the case of online community? By investigating a new online community for a new team (absent established norms), I can examine how a community is born and how early members navigate the development of what it means to be a community member. This may be particularly insightful in the case of a new online fan community revolving around a professional sports team, as these represent large-scale communities with many

new and prospective members who are learning, engaging, and constructing the community context. Thus, the Seattle Kraken subreddit is the chosen data source for the current study, representing a new, large-scale community, ripe for investigating how “we” is developed in the case of a new online fan community.

In the case of the Seattle Kraken subreddit community, an initial subreddit was formed in 2018, at the time Seattle was granted an expansion team. As it would be nearly two years before the brand was announced, the subreddit was called “r/SeattleNHL”. Yet, users joined the community and began discussing the unbranded franchise, speculating about potential nicknames, and learning about the sport. The current Kraken subreddit (i.e., r/SeattleKraken) was created when the franchise officially announced their branding in 2020. The “r/SeattleNHL” subreddit still exists, but the community discussion shifted over to the “r/SeattleKraken” community and is no longer a prominent discussion forum amongst Kraken fans.

Both Seattle Kraken subreddit communities provide a unique opportunity to derive insights from a new, growing online fan community, in the case of a new professional sports team. By employing a discursive psychology methodology within this setting, I can examine what it means to be a member of the community in the early days of the community into the first couple years of the team’s existence, and how an online fan community’s meaning of “we” is constructed in parallel with the Seattle Kraken franchise itself.

4.3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using Python programming language with the PRAW package to access the Reddit Application Protocol Interface (API) and collect posts from

the subreddit of a new professional sports team (i.e., r/SeattleNHL & r/SeattleKraken). Across both Seattle Kraken subreddit communities, countless posts and comments have been contributed since the announcement of the Seattle franchise. From a discursive psychological perspective, it is this collection of discourse (i.e., corpus) that has constructed, and continues to construct, what it means to be a Kraken fan within the online fan community. However, it is unrealistic to closely analyze every one of these posts using a discursive psychological approach. Thus, for the current study, I purposefully identify *new fan posts*.

New fan posts are posts that are submitted within the subreddit community where users identify themselves as, or discuss, new fans. Most commonly, these posts are individuals who introduce themselves to the community, identify themselves as a new or prospective fan of the salient team, and then ask questions about what they need to know to be a fan of the team (i.e., a member of the salient group category). These posts are novel, observable ways of examining online behavior, specifically how online fandom is increasingly connected and non-geographically bound, allowing individuals to learn about other teams and support teams from afar. *New fan posts* are valuable in considering how a sense of “we” is constructed over time, as these posts represent instances of fan-initiated socialization.

Fan socialization refers to the process of individuals learning how to be a member of a particular fandom and/or fan group (James, 2001). In these posts, new or prospective fans trigger the socialization process themselves, prompting responses from community members who then discuss what it means to be a fan of the team and a member of the community. This is welcoming behavior, where community norms are introduced to new

or prospective fans as they are “on-boarded” and told what they need to know to be a proper community member (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009). Additionally, it is through these socialization interactions we can see real-time construction of “we” from a community. As existing members express what it means to be a fan of a team or a member of a community, these users are effectively communicating the community’s consciousness of kind in the process. While evaluating each community as a complete corpus while closely attending to the discursive construction of “we” is impractical, identifying and analyzing new fan posts still effectively investigates what it means to be a Seattle Kraken community member as the members themselves discuss and describe “we” to new and prospective community members.

To collect *new fan* posts, I used the PRAW Reddit package to scrape the Seattle Kraken subreddits (i.e., r/SeattleNHL & r/SeattleKraken) using the key word phrases “new fan,” “new supporter,” “new follower,” and “need to know.” These key word phrases were purposefully selected to reflect different terminology around fandom, as “fan” is not the only term for fandom. Other fans of sport may utilize the term “supporter” or “follower” to classify themselves as fans. By identifying new fans with this approach, I can see fan socialization in action and instances where the community’s collective identity (i.e., discourse of “we”) is actively discussed by community members (i.e., welcoming behavior). It is worth noting that these posts still only offer a snapshot of community discourse. Additionally, these posts reflect individuals who are willing to initiate the fan socialization process by posting and identifying as a new fan, which may not reflect the majority of online users, much less new community members. Some estimates suggest that only 10% of users online actively post or comment (~1% are most

active while ~9% are active contributors and commenters), with the other 90% being *lurkers*, or users who only observe the community (i.e., the *90-9-1 Principle*; Carron-Arthur et al., 2014; Vuorio & Horne, 2023). While this approach offers an insightful snapshot of community discourse and communicated “we”, new fan posts are submitted by users who choose to engage with these communities and initiate these conversations for any number of personal or social motivations.

I manually evaluated posts in terms of their relevance to the proposed research question, how do online fan communities develop a sense of “we” through online discourse in the case of a newly established professional team and online fan community? Given the research question, I retained new fan posts submitted by new or prospective fans, as well as posts about new fans, such as “New Fan Guides” and related submissions that are not initiated by new fans, but still represent the community’s efforts to teach or inform new fans about the community’s consciousness of kind. This yielded a final dataset of 171 posts.

Posts were then classified based on their publish date, reflecting different time frames spanning the first four years of the community and the team. Time Frame 1 consists of *new fan posts* that were published between the announcement that Seattle was awarded a team (i.e., December 8, 2018) and the announcement of the team’s branding (July 23, 2020), Time Frame 2 consists of new fan posts published between the announcement of the team brand to the expansion draft (July 21, 2021). Time Frame 3 consists of posts from the expansion draft to the start of the Kraken’s first regular season (October 12, 2021). Time Frame 4 and 5 include new fan posts during the Kraken’s first season (spanning October 2021 to October 2022) and second season (spanning October

2022 until time of data collection; July 2023), respectively. In classifying new fan posts in this manner, I will be able to evaluate how the meaning of “we” is constructed and evolves in the case of a new online fan community, in the case of a newly formed professional team.

4.3.4 Data Analysis

To address the aims of this study, I utilized both content analysis and discursive psychology to understand the interplay between community discourse and the psychological construct of collective identity (i.e., consciousness of kind and sense of “we”). First, I used content analysis to develop a greater familiarity with the dataset, as well as the context of the new fan posts. In the current study, it was expected that the dataset would be sizable, given not only the collection of new fan posts but also the resulting comments and replies linked to each post. Additionally, one of the aims of this research was to examine how a community’s collective identity evolved over time, meaning the context of these posts and subsequent replies shifted and evolved as well. Thus, as part of my initial familiarization with the corpus, I used content analysis to better understand the nature of the new fan posts over time. In this first stage of analysis, I familiarized myself with the new fan posts by reviewing each of the posts within a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. When collected using the PRAW package, post information, such as post content, number of comments, author, and permalink, was organized into columns. Community replies (i.e., comments) were not included on the spreadsheet.

I read the content of each new fan post and open-coded each post, treating social actions as my unit of analysis. Social actions referred to what was “done” through talk

and interaction and could be thought of as “functions” of talk such as making requests, complaining, or asking questions (Wiggins, 2017). Discursive psychology assumes social actions are omnipresent in interaction, as we are always trying to accomplish social action through talk. Notably, social actions are not merely the textual content of an interaction but only become actions through an understanding of what is (or is expected to be) accomplished through discourse and social interaction in a given context (Wiggins, 2017). Each new fan post represented an instance where a new, prospective, or established fan (commenting on new fans) initiated community discourse around what it meant to be a member of the Kraken subreddit community and entered the community conversation in the process. Within each post, users tried to achieve various social functions by asking questions or by disclosing certain information. In doing so, they were actively “doing things” in interaction and prompting an exchange of meaning in relation to the community’s collective identity as constructed through community discourse. As such, social actions, specifically the social function(s) of the new fan posts, were treated as the unit of analysis in this first round of open coding.

Consistent with content analysis, I then used the resulting codes (i.e., types of social action) to create categories that better described the content and purpose of new fan posts within the Seattle Kraken community, as well as how these categories of posts evolved with the community. Both in terms of new fans who were initiating fan socialization and community members who were discussing new fans more broadly (i.e., New Fan Guides), I sought to identify how the content of new fan posts shifted over time, providing meaningful insights into the situated context for how the discourse of “we” was constructed by community members through interactions (i.e., community comments and

replies). The purpose of using content analysis as part of this initial familiarization stage was to better understand the community context of new fan posts over time. For example, a new fan initiating community discussion before the Kraken had a roster existed in a very different context than a new fan post submitted following the Kraken's recent playoff run. In having a greater awareness of the context of new fan posts, I could more appropriately utilize discursive psychology to situate my findings.

My second stage of analysis shifted focus to the community discourse and interactions (i.e., community replies and comments) and used a discursive psychological approach. Wiggins (2017) outlined the discursive psychology analytical process as six stages: 1) read the data, 2) describe the data, 3) identify social actions and psychological constructs, 4) focus on a specific analytical issue, 5) collect other instances of the analytical focus in the data corpus, and 6) focus and refine the analysis. As the focus of this project was community interactions, I applied the discursive psychology analytical process to each post and the related community replies. To do so, I started with the set of posts from my first time frame (i.e., granted expansion until announced branding) in the Excel spreadsheet. I then used the collected permalinks (i.e., permanent URLs that allowed me to access the post online) from the spreadsheet to access and save PDF files of the related webpages (posts and community replies). I then used a PDF annotator software to manually analyze each post in conjunction with Wiggins' (2017) analytical process.

Starting with the first post from the first time frame, I read the post and the community replies. At this stage, I also reviewed my codes and categories from my content analysis to better familiarize myself with the post. Second, I reread the post and

comments, describing the data. Wiggins (2017) recommended taking notes on what was written (i.e., the content of the discourse and what was being constructed), how it was written (i.e., the style or structure of the discourse; how the talk was constructed), and when it was written (i.e., the organization and situatedness of the discourse). I made these descriptive notes in the margins of each PDF file (i.e., each post). This stage of analysis was notably not about interpreting the interaction but was focused on what was said and what happened in the discourse (Wiggins, 2017).

Stage three of Wiggins' (2017) approach was identifying social actions and psychological constructs. While social actions are considered omnipresent in interaction, they are not always easy to identify, particularly within an interactional context. Thus, discursive psychology makes use of discursive devices, as core analytical tools of discursive psychology that enable researchers to better examine discourse and related psychological concepts (Wiggins, 2017). Discursive devices are linguistic and discursive resources that are recognizable features of how we write, talk, interact, and perform social actions (Wiggins, 2017). These devices allowed me to examine the interplay between social actions and the focal psychological construct of collective identity and how identity was managed through discursive practices (Wiggins, 2017).

Specifically, I manually annotated the post and comments for a second time, this time attending to discursive devices, including pronoun use and footing shifts, assessments, hedging, extreme case formulations, affect displays, consensus, detail vs. vagueness, and category entitlements (see Table 4.1 for the complete list; Wiggins, 2017). The discursive devices I used were informed by Wiggins (2017) with the lone exception being ranking, which was an emergent device I identified through my analysis.

Each of these devices is concerned with how one constructs and negotiates identity through discourse, making them valuable tools for the current work. I noted the discursive devices present in the post, before repeating Wiggins' (2017) first three stages of analysis for the next post.

Consistent with Wiggins' (2017) recommendation, I examined up to half of the new fan posts that comprised each time frame to generate possible analytical findings. As Wiggins (2017) discusses, identifying social actions and discursive devices could result in numerous potential analytical findings or issues related to how individuals negotiate identity through discourse. Thus, for the fourth stage of my analysis, I began narrowing down my analysis, focusing on a specific analytical finding or issue. In focusing on a portion of the larger corpus, I could develop an awareness of potential analytical issues and then narrow my focus on a specific analytical issue that characterized the time frame and related to my focal research question: how did online fan communities, and their community members, develop a sense of "we" (i.e., consciousness of kind) through online discourse in the case of a newly established professional team and online fan community?

Once I had identified the focal analytical issue, I collected other instances of my analytical focus in the rest of my data corpus. In practice, this meant I identified my focal issue and then reviewed the remaining new fan posts from the related time frame, specifically looking for other instances of the focal issue (e.g., discursive devices). This was repeated for each time frame, as the focal issue might change depending on the time frame.

Finally, I refined the analysis, working through coded segments, and analyzed my findings in terms of emergent patterns or insights (Wiggins, 2017). Specifically, I considered both how users initiated and entered the community through new fan posts, including how they used social action in that process (in line with my third stage of analysis), and how respondents constructed a collective identity and discourse of “we” in response. While I had awareness of the overall themes across the entire corpus, I focused on how the discourse of “we” was similar and different across the five time frames. This approach should provide insight into not only the nature of new fan posts across time and how they initiated community involvement but also should provide insight into how a new community developed a sense of “we” through discourse, forming the basis of brand community markers (e.g., consciousness of kind) and prototypes of community membership.

Table 4.1*Summary of Used Discursive Devices and Definitions (Wiggins, 2017)*

Device	Meaning	Example
Assessments	Assessments involve making judgments or evaluations about a person, situation, or event. They can reflect the speaker's attitudes, opinions, or interpretations.	B- overall. Our Defense is absolutely great, great job there. Goalies are pretty good. Forwards are not fantastic.
Hedging	Hedging involves using language that softens the impact of a statement, expressing uncertainty or caution. It allows speakers to qualify their claims and acknowledge alternative perspectives.	Seems initially... ...he might truly...
Disclaimers	Disclaimers are statements used to distance oneself from a particular position or to mitigate potential negative reactions. They often precede statements that might be controversial or unpopular.	Bengals fan coming in peace.
Affect Displays	Affect displays involve the expression of emotions through language. In the current work, exclamations of fandom are considered affect displays. Speakers use words and tone to convey their emotional state or to influence the emotional response of the audience.	You're the best!
Pronoun Shifting	Pronoun shifting involves changing the use of pronouns to indicate shifts in perspective or speaker roles.	Admit it: Somebody had to teach you, too, at one point. To that end, please be cordial with people that don't know and teach them politely
Detail	Detail refers to the amount of information provided in a statement. Including or omitting details can shape the listener's understanding and interpretation of an event.	We got a pretty solid defense but tomorrow at 10am pst will give a huge hint as to the future when the trade freeze lifts.
Vagueness	Vagueness involves using imprecise language or lacking specificity. It can serve various functions, such as avoiding commitment or providing room for interpretation.	I also recommend looking into how the Las Vegas expansion draft functioned. It will be the same rules, and you will get a better feel for the whole process.
Category Entitlement	Using a category to refer to a person or category-bound activity (e.g., age, gender, job/career, family position); inferences can be made from the category.	Welcome to the family , things have gotten a bit quiet lately but we had a slew of injuries and the expansion draft didn't quite work out as intended so our performance this season was lower than expected.
Self-Disclosure	Self-disclosure involves revealing personal information about oneself. It can be a strategic move to build trust, establish rapport, or influence perceptions.	Welcome friend! I too am a new fan to hockey , and here's what I find helpful.
Extreme Case Formulation	A phrase or word that is semantically extreme. It can be a rhetorical strategy to emphasize a particular perspective.	Everything Kraken!
Narrative Structure	Narrative structure involves organizing information in a storytelling format. Narratives help make sense of experiences and events by creating a coherent and meaningful sequence.	I root for the penguins because for some reason I've been a fan of all Pittsburgh sports franchises since I was a kid in the 90s and my brother has lived there for several years as well.
Ranking	Ranking involves ordering items or ideas based on perceived importance, relevance, or value. It can influence how listeners prioritize and interpret information.	Got really connected/hyped with the Kraken name and all the possibilities and now here we are. Fucking ecstatic right now! Immediately my second favorite team and I'm going to show up to every possible home game that I can.
Minimization	Treats the object or account a minimal, often using the terms 'just', 'only', 'little', 'bit'. Can be used to downplay significance or importance of something.	You haven't missed much

4.4 Analysis and Findings

4.4.1 The Changing “We”

The current study was designed to examine how online fan communities, and their community members, develop a sense of “we” or collective identity (i.e., consciousness of kind) through online discourse in the case of a newly established professional team and online fan community. What I discovered in my analysis of the Seattle Kraken subreddit community is that the definition of “we” evolves at the community-level over time, informed by how “we” is negotiated between users.

From when the team is originally announced, through the Seattle Kraken’s second season, the subreddit community defines “we” in terms of valued competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge and behaviors considered important and desirable within a CoP) and knowledge bases, which inform the norms and prototypes of the community. Community members actively negotiate these developing norms through language use, notably the usage of various discursive devices. As users contribute to the collective “we” through their active participation, what “we” is evolves, becoming increasingly more defined over time. To demonstrate this evolution, I present my analysis chronologically, beginning with Time Frame 1 and progressing through the Seattle Kraken’s first and second regular seasons. At the end of each section, I briefly discuss the findings and how they fit into brand community and sport consumer behavior literature. Users mentioned in provided examples have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

4.4.2 Time Frame 1 (Announcement of Franchise to Branding)

Time Frame 1 is a period that spans the initial announcement of the Seattle franchise (December 2018) until the announcement of the franchise’s branding, including

the logo, team colors, and uniform (July 2020). During this period, the first Reddit community was formed around the new NHL franchise. This community is “r/Seattle/NHL” reflecting a community bounded around the promise of an eventual franchise, but without a brand or players.

There is only one *new fan post* during this period, where a user from New Orleans introduces themselves as a new fan of the unnamed Seattle franchise and asks questions about how the team will be constructed (via a draft or through free agency) and specific players to watch in that regard. Community members who respond to the post are welcoming and helpful, providing details to answer the poster’s questions and generally welcoming the new fan, as demonstrated by the following excerpt.

u/KrakenFan_OP1 (OP; Original Poster, 12 points, 84% upvote ratio, 17 comments)

New Orleans Fan here

So I’ve been looking for a team to be a fan of since New Orleans doesn’t have its own team. I decided to be a fan of a new franchise and obviously that’s gonna be Seattle.

I just have a few questions since I’m fairly new to the NHL in general.

1. Where will players come from, a draft or just free agents?
2. Any potential players I should keep an eye on?

u/KrakenFan1 (11 pts)

There will be an expansion draft; likely a few months before the full league draft. This takes place in June; so probably April-ish of 2021.

The Hockey News did a mock-draft based on contracts that could likely be moved to the new team.

<https://thehockeynews.com/news/article/seattle-expansion-the-mock-draft>

I also recommend looking into how the Las Vegas expansion draft functioned. It will be the same rules, and you will get a better feel for the whole process.

Essentially the players could come from anywhere. Since you are new to the league, watch as much hockey as you can. This will familiarize yourself with the players and the league as a whole (if you already don't).

The expansion draft is way too far away to accurately predict who will be taken. There are players who aren't in the league yet who will likely be in the mix (too young to be drafted as of this moment, or currently in the minors etc). Jumping

on board with a brand new team is fine, but you will enjoy it more if you follow the trail and understand how this all comes together. Trust me, it's much more fun, rewarding and engaging as a fan.

Welcome to the NHL! I'm happy to assist anyway I can. I'm from Chicago and have been engrossed in hockey and the culture of the sport for over a decade. I moved to Seattle a year ago and have my season tickets on lock.

u/KrakenFan_OP1 (3 pts)

You're the best!

I've been watching hockey here and there. Since it's still football season and my Saints are in the NFC championship that's been taking all my time. I plan on getting a jersey as soon as we know who star players are and flying up to Seattle at least once a season.

I used to live in the Quad Cities in western Illinois while I was in the army so I tried to get into it with St Louis or the blackhawks but it didn't feel right if that makes sense.

u/KrakenFan1 (2 pts)

Glad I can help! I started watching the Blackhawks in 2008 and was hooked instantly. The more I watched and researched different teams and players, the more interest I gathered in everything else.

I think I get that. I follow the whole league, but my "teams" are Colorado, Toronto, Chicago (obviously) and Vancouver since moving up here. Don't feel restricted to like a certain team just because of proximity. The fun part (for me) was seeing the differences and history of all the teams and connecting that way.

Go Saints.

u/KrakenFan2 (2 pts)

I'm from New Orleans too! Welcome aboard.

I root for the penguins because for some reason I've been a fan of all Pittsburgh sports franchises since I was a kid in the 90s and my brother has lived there for several years as well. I moved to Seattle about four years ago so obviously the team here will be my new favorite.

It'll be really exciting to see what kind of team we put together. Some teams will have to make very difficult decisions about who to protect from the expansion draft -- we should acquire some real talent for sure, though I'd caution against expecting a playoff team like Vegas got. For now, we need to hire the right GM. Stay tuned

At this time, the collective “we” is outwardly welcoming, demonstrated through affect displays, such as exclamation points when welcoming the fan. Affect displays are

apparent displays of emotion, such as laughing or crying, and can be helpful in examining how displays of affect help manage psychological issues, such as identity (Wiggins, 2017). Although affect displays are more visible offline, I identified exclamation points as affect displays as they help individuals negotiate identity in text-mediated communication. As is the case with the above excerpt, exclamation points are heavily used by community members to demonstrate excitement over the team or community and are commonly employed to welcome new fans throughout the dataset into later time frames.

The collective “we” from a discursive psychology lens is one of emerging competencies as competence is communicated as a core part of “we” through the use, or absence, of detail. As demonstrated in the above excerpt, community members respond to the new fan with details, explanations, and personal narrative. During this time period, the community lacks identifiable markers of a brand, a roster, or much in the way of a franchise beyond the promise of an eventual NHL team. While those details remain far off in the future, community members are defining a primitive collective identity and sense of “we” as reflected in this *new fan post*. Users identify commonalities in backgrounds and experiences, forming a basis of community (e.g., u/KrakenFan1; “Go Saints.”). Community members are excited and welcoming, but they are also actively conveying the importance of competence within the community. At this point, without much in the way of Kraken-specific information, hockey knowledge and competence around being a hockey supporter is emphasized.

The new fan may or may not possess relevant competency in this respect, but the community responses revolve around being an active fan of hockey. u/KrakenFan1 tells

the new fan that “Jumping on board with a brand-new team is fine, but you will enjoy it more if you follow the trail and understand how this all comes together,” suggesting that being a Seattle hockey fan is more than an announcement (i.e., it is just “fine”), but requires work and dedication in the form of “following the trail”. In this way, u/KrakenFan1 is conveying a competency in being a fan, using detail, in the form of their self-disclosed decade-long fandom. The use of detail is often used to lend credibility to one’s perspective (Wiggins, 2017). In this case, detail is used to present u/KrakenFan1 as a credible, knowledgeable fan within the community.

In contrast, vagueness is a discursive device often used by one who wants to convey they are not heavily invested, presenting a degree of aloofness (Wiggins, 2017). u/KrakenFan1 is vague, urging the new fan to be an active participant in their newly announced fandom by linking to outbound links and recommending that the new fan read about the last expansion draft that occurred in the NHL (i.e., Vegas Golden Knights) to “familiarize [themselves] with the players and league as a whole”. Vagueness, in this sense, is used to indicate the large body of knowledge needed to fully understand the sport. This hints at not only the implied work needed to be a fan, but also the importance of becoming knowledgeable about the sport.

u/KrakenFan2 similarly reflects a collective “we” that prioritizes competencies revolving around fandom and hockey but does so in a slightly different way. As reflected in the above excerpt, u/KrakenFan2 welcomes the new fan and then uses narrative to inform the new fan, and community more broadly, about their other fandom of the Pittsburgh Penguins (i.e., competencies as a fan). Narratives are often used to similarly convey credibility, in this case communicating an understanding and familiarity of being

a hockey fan. What is also communicated through the narrative, is the role of physical location in this community. While the original poster is nonlocal, u/KrakenFan2 presents their own Seattle fandom as matter of fact because they live in Seattle. In doing so, they communicate that being a Seattle native is a valued prototypical aspect of this community, because “obviously” living in Seattle for four years means one should make the local franchise the new favorite, despite the history of their Penguins’ fandom.

Finally, u/KrakenFan2 similarly emphasizes the importance of learning hockey more broadly and acquiring/reflecting hockey competence, using context specific language about expansion draft protections, implying an understanding of the “playoff team like Vegas got” and turning attention to the importance of the GM (i.e., general manager) hire. This use of detail can be interpreted as a way of lending credibility to their perspective, but also as a way of negotiating and constructing the collective “we” in the r/SeattleNHL community. During this first time frame, absent identifiable brand markers or even a team name, the valued collective “we” is one that suggests credibility in this space (i.e., prototypical community membership) is earned over time by “following the trail” and consuming everything hockey. As demonstrated by affect displays, community members are excited and welcoming of new fans, while also conveying early community markers. In just the two replies from u/KrakenFan1 and u/KrakenFan2, “we” is recognized as a collection of competencies bounded around specific hockey awareness and knowledge, as well as a genre of sports fandom in which fandom is associated with supporting the local team, a deep understanding of the sport, and a dedicated connection to the team.

As it relates to CoP theory, Time Frame 1 reflects an early form of the community where social interactions are central to the acquisition and exchange of knowledge. According to CoP theory, knowledgeable and experienced users will participate within the community, actively shaping and negotiating meaning in these spaces, including meaning around the collective identity and “we” of the subreddit. Meaning is refined through language and through social interactions bounded around the community’s shared goal or purpose, such as supporting a team. At this time, the purpose is not so much focused on the Seattle franchise itself, rather a more holistic desire to learn the sport overall. There are not specific problems or discussions to have about the team, yet, but there is an awareness that learning the sport will be a process that the community needs to support.

Additionally, consciousness of kind and in-group prototypes are partly informed by the rituals and behaviors associated with being a community member. The post above suggests that these behaviors have yet to be formed. Community-specific terms or welcomes are not present to this point as the CoP lacks a shared repertoire. At this time, the community conveys a “we” that is characterized by different users, from different backgrounds, waiting for a brand to latch onto and build a CoP around.

4.4.3 Time Frame 2 (Branding to Expansion Draft)

Time Frame 2 is a period that spans the announcement of the franchise’s branding, including the logo, team colors, and uniform (July 2020), until the expansion draft, which occurred nearly a year later (July 2021). Upon the announcement of the brand, the r/SeattleKraken subreddit community was created and the r/SeattleNHL community was left largely abandoned. With the newly branded franchise, and branded

subreddit community, the community became more active, reflected in more posts (particularly revolving around new fans), more comments, and higher post scores.

In terms of the content of *new fan posts*, and related discussions around new fans, community members were particularly concerned with the origins of its new community members, taking interest in what is drawing fellow members to the community and the growing fan base. Posts, such as the one shown in the excerpt below, demonstrate how new fans engage with the community through *new fan posts*, introducing themselves, often using narratives to describe their rationale for becoming a Kraken fan. This creates a melding of various backgrounds, with users from all over the world drawing connections, either as existing fans of Seattle sports, displaced Seattle natives, fans of the Kraken branding, or locals who have been waiting for a local NHL team to support.

u/KrakenFan_OP2 (OP; 49 pts, 93% upvote ratio, 22 comments)

East Coast Introduction

Hi Everybody!!

The name is [] and I am excited to be part of this community!

I live on the East Coast in Virginia and I am a relatively new Hockey fan (in the past I was indifferent to the sport). I chose the Kraken because like me they are new to the NHL but also Seattle says “hockeytown” to me unlike cities like Phoenix, Vegas, LA, San Jose which typically do not see snow nor ice plus the city has a hockey tradition even if it isn’t NHL. Then there is the Logo which pays homage to Seattle’s hockey roots and the unique color scheme which to me is wicked cool and makes me want a jersey. Then there is the fact that the organization while respecting Seattle’s hockey roots is also against the status quo of the NHL by being inclusive. I am excited to be becoming a fan at such a time as this and I look forward to growing as a fan along Seattle as it grows.

With fans flooding into the community with different experiences and backgrounds, community members are welcoming and inclusive, with users seeking commonalities with other users. These commonalities may be similar geographic location, other shared team identities, or merely an excitement for the Seattle Kraken franchise. These efforts are reflected in replies to the *new fan post* from above.

u/KrakenFan3: Welcome aboard! It's gonna be so much fun being able to tell our kids we were here from the beginning.

u/KrakenFan4: Virginia Blues fan here! You should still go over to Capital One for a game some time cause it's still a hell of a time.

u/KrakenFan5: Welcome! I recently became interested in this team and hockey as well!

In the above comments, community members are bridging connections with the new fan, and establishing a sense of belonging within the community. u/KrakenFan3 and u/KrakenFan5 connect with the user who created the original post through their shared excitement for being new to the Kraken and hockey, demonstrating affect displays. u/KrakenFan4 highlights a potential connection as a fan of a Virginia-based hockey team which may be a local team for the original poster. Across many of the posts in this time frame, new fans are excitedly welcomed to the community and met with similar efforts by community members to bridge connections.

During this period, there is also a concerted effort by community members to create resources for new fans, specifically new fans of hockey. As the Kraken still do not have a roster at this point, these posts focus on initiating new fans to how hockey is played, through Hockey 101 videos, and through discussion posts where users explain why and what new fans should be watching for in the active NHL season. These posts cover basic hockey information, but also discuss potential future rivals, possible players, and how to learn to love the game.

In the excerpt below, users provide outbound links to a new fan to help them learn more about hockey. The use of outbound links serves a direct purpose of providing a new fan with resources that are commonly shared in the community, indicating they are widely accepted as on-boarding and socializing materials for new fans. The discursive

purpose of outbound links, however, can be interpreted as a way to promote agency in fandom. Being a fan, for those who are fans in this community, is about consuming the hockey product and becoming knowledgeable. As such, using outbound links, rather than attempting to answer themselves, could indicate that fandom is about doing the work of fandom, meaning that new fans are expected to work for their information, even if that means clicking through the links to watch or learn about the linked topic.

Although community members convey a welcoming and inclusive environment overall, the collective identity of “we” is shaped and reinforced through various discursive devices, including signaling and category entitlement. During this time frame, users are demonstrating prominent competencies, or genres of knowledge, around various social categories including fandom, hockey, and ties to the Seattle, WA region. Every member of this community is, by definition, a new fan of the newly branded Seattle Kraken, regardless of their knowledge of hockey, the NHL, or the franchise. Every member of the community is beginning their relationship with the franchise at the same point, each with their own narrative, or reason for supporting the team. However, not every narrative is structured the same way, with some fans describing themselves as new fans of hockey, whereas others describe other team identities they are affiliated with. In the excerpt below, u/KrakenFan_OP3 tells their story of fandom, tracking back to where they grew up, who they supported while growing up, and the various teams they have supported since.

u/KrakenFan_OP3 (OP; 14 pts, 94% upvote ratio, 33 comments)

Who else is migrating from a different fanbase?

Hello, fellow Krakheads.

Figured it'd be interesting to see how many people are joining hockey and/or this fan base as new fans v. moving on from a different team?

Personally, I grew up in Ohio as a Leafs fan before the Jackets came around in my teen years, but I ended up moving to Missouri before HS. I'm a die hard Cleveland fan for every other sport, but have always been a more casual hockey/Jackets fan because of that.

Moved to Seattle a few years ago, and I'm definitely hyped up to be a little more invested in the sports culture of this beautiful city I'm making my forever home in.

What's everyone else's story?

u/KrakenFan6 (3 pts)

Minnesotan born and raised, diehard Minnesota Wild fan. Been living in Seattle since almost the same time they announced the franchise. Got really connected/hyped with the Kraken name and all the possibilities and now here we are. Fucking ecstatic right now! Immediately my second favorite team and I'm going to show up to every possible home game that I can. Only time I'll ever root against them is when they play the Wild personally but every other night I'll be a screaming Krakhead! Let's go Kraken!!!

u/KrakenFan7 (2 pts)

Red Wings fan, die hard at that. I cannot go away from the wings.

however, I am a sucker for a fun expansion team. Ive got a soft spot for VGK and now I am all in for the Kraken.

u/KrakenFan6 (1 pt)

Hell yeah dude! I was wondering if the wings might be the kraken's rival because of the dead octopuses thrown on the ice lol. Glad to have ya bud, go Kraken!!

u/KrakenFan7 (2 pts)

I really hope so, I would love that rivalry.

thanks man, go kraken! pumped for you guys.

u/KrakenFan8 (2 pts)

As a Sharks fan, I'm ridin both

u/KrakenFan9 (2 pts)

Portland resident and former Minnesota Wild fan here. The wild will always have a place in my heart, but I'm all Kraken now. So happy to have another NHL team in the PNW, and can't wait to see the rivalry between us and the Canucks. Let's go Kraken!!!

In telling the narrative they do, u/KrakenFan_OP3 demonstrates their competencies around fandom, signaling their experience and familiarity with the genre of sports fandom (how to be a fan of a sports team). For example, they describe their

Cleveland sports fandom as “diehard” invoking a category entitlement. Category entitlements are often used to manage identity in interaction as they convey meaning beyond the term itself (Wiggins, 2017). The term “diehard” is one loaded with meaning, communicating the knowledge (e.g., avid consumer), experiences (e.g., attends games), and skills or responsibilities (e.g., dedicated, and loyal) that the category is entitled to own. Other language usage by u/KrakenFan_OP3, such as “Leafs fan” and “Jackets fan” similarly reflects category entitlement as fans of those NHL teams, using abbreviated terms to refer to each category of respective fans. Using the term “Kraakeads” similarly signals potential competency around online fandom, using an edgy play on words to label the community and fellow members. Together, this user positions themselves as an experienced fan of sport with an understanding of hockey and potentially a comfort level within online fan forums.

Other users position themselves as experts or legitimate fans through their community interactions. For example, in the excerpt above, u/KrakenFan6 and u/KrakenFan7 represent users who rank their new Kraken team amongst previous fandoms. Some rank the Kraken as their new number one team, while the Kraken are a supplemental team for others, either as a secondary rooting interest or their “West” team to the Eastern Conference team they currently support.

Ranking team identities in this manner is widely accepted by community members and not uncommon in *new fan posts* before the start of the team’s first regular season. It also serves a similar purpose in identity management to that of category entitlement, in that the user may be new to the Kraken but is well-versed and knowledgeable as a fan of the sport. In this sense, ranking could serve a discursive

purpose of legitimizing their place because they are an experienced fan who is already an active consumer of the sport. In contrast, new fans are quick to self-disclose their ignorance in their narratives, often explicitly in their post.

The collective identity, or “we”, during this time is one of transition and negotiation. Although users are arriving to the community from different backgrounds and geographical locations, the “we” is informed, early on, by the organizational identity of the franchise. For example, one community member suggests a tradition of throwing squid or salmon on the ice, which is promptly shot down by community members with users highlighting the franchise’s emphasis on being environmentally conscious.

u/KrakenFan_OP4 (OP; 3 pts, 57% upvote ratio, 22 comments)

Throwing squid or salmon onto the ice

Detroit has octopus. Nashville has catfish. Coming into this I thought we should throw a salmon onto the ice (Pike Place Market and all) now that we’re named the Kraken. Should we be throwing a squid?

Also... shout out to all of the new NHL fans in Seattle who have no idea what I’m talking about. Welcome to the greatest game in the world.

u/KrakenFan10 (35 pts)

Interesting thought for a tradition, but tossing dead animals is wasteful and not a good look for sustainability-minded Climate Pledge Arena. Salmon especially doesn't sit right given their ongoing struggle to survive... Maybe there's a spin on this that would be environmentally impactful in a positive way?

u/KrakenFan11 (7 pts)

FWIW the squid that people catch off the piers on the sound is one of the most abundant and sustainable fisheries there is. Not that I think it’s okay to waste, but if we’re gonna waste anything that’s the best option lol.

u/KrakenFan12 (26 pts)

Two words: sea shanties.

u/KrakenFan13 (42 pts)

I hope not. Throwing dead seafood on the ice is Detroit’s thing. I thought it was lame when Nashville copied it with catfish, and I think it would be lame if we

did it with squid or salmon or whatever. I'd rather we start our own traditions rather than rip off something other fan bases are doing

u/KrakenFan14 (19 pts)

Seems a little tonedeaf to throw dead animals onto the ice inside a building named Climate Pledge Arena lol

u/KrakenFan_OP4 (OP; 11 pts)

Alright ... feedback received: no throwing seafood onto the ice. Curious what kind of traditions we come up with.

In this instance, community members are negotiating their collective identity, informed by organizational values from the franchise, such as environmental concern, sustainability, and inclusiveness. u/KrakenFan10 and several other users highlight the connection between Seattle's Climate Pledge Arena, an arena designed to be environmentally friendly, and the proposed tradition. Although the Seattle region may be reasonably more concerned with environmental sustainability than most, this connection point with the organization is instructive for a community that is actively negotiating who "we" are and what types of rituals have value.

This is also a representative example of how "we" is being constructed in the community, with appropriate and normative values receiving community support, eventually being folded into the collective identity of the community. In this case, the original poster made a recommendation and eventually acknowledged that it was rejected by the collective, as evidenced by the comments, the score of the post, and upvote ratio (as compared to the scores on each of the community replies). This is similarly reflected in community member's eventual rejection of the term "Kraheads", which is collectively deemed as disrespectful and dismissive of those who suffer with drug use and homelessness.

In terms of CoP theory, this time frame is one of active negotiation. Shared repertoires, such as in-game traditions and “Krakheads”, are being discussed and effectively voted on by users. Each time a user, such as u/KrakenFan_OP4, contributes their knowledge and/or experiences, community members can accept or reject the contribution. Additionally, with the introduction of the team brand, the community discussion shifts, using organizational markers, such as the brand or organizational values to inform their discussion about what should or should not be a part of who “we” are. At the same time, users are using discursive practices to manage their own identity within the larger collective, using details, category entitlements, and ranking techniques to position themselves as knowledgeable within the community. Members of CoPs are motivated to be competent and be viewed as competent in that space, becoming full participants in the CoP (Wenger, 1998). As a full participant, an individual knows all the rules, how to interact, and how people are expected to behave (Wenger, 1998). As the community is still being defined during this time, users are projecting and communicating different types of competencies. As a result, the community is becoming increasingly defined by the valued competencies within this space, notably valued knowledge around hockey, Seattle (Seattle values, etc.), and what it takes to be a fan of a team.

4.4.4 Time Frame 3 (Expansion Draft to 1st Regular Season Game)

Time Frame 3 spans a shorter period of time, only occurring between the NHL Expansion Draft (July 21, 2021) up until the start of the Seattle Kraken’s inaugural season, specifically their first regular season game, just a couple months later (October 12, 2021). The expansion draft is an event where an expansion team, in this case the

Kraken, select (i.e., draft) players from around the NHL to add to their roster. The other NHL teams can use certain protections on their most valuable players, but the draft allows for an expansion team to pick players from any team in the league with the goal of constructing a competitive roster.

The expansion draft is a central focus within the community at this time, even amongst new fan discussions. New fans post here asking for evaluations on the team, what to think about the roster construction and for general takeaways as the inaugural season approaches. Community members are somewhat split on their assessments of the draft, with some expressing excitement, while others are disappointed with the roster. Many fans fall somewhere in between, with the franchise prioritizing roster flexibility for the future. Comparisons and mentions of the Vegas Golden Knights, the NHL's most recent expansion team prior to the Kraken, are prevalent. Across this dataset, there are many assessments, as the content of these posts become more detailed and oriented towards hockey discussion.

Similar to posts during Time Frame 2, there remains a concerted effort to educate the community, with deep dives on players and Hockey 101 posts around free agency. As they were in Time Frame 2, these posts are well received, scoring highly and receiving predominantly upvotes in the process. Education of new fans also occurs in other posts, where users use outbound links to instructional YouTube videos. Some users make other consumption recommendations, such as the comment below that was posted by a fan of a different team in response to a new Kraken fan.

u/KrakenFan_OP5 (OP; 120 pts; 99% upvote ratio, 22 comments)

Boy did I get caught up in the NHL experience, I'm all in now!

The draft was great, Free agency was crazy, Booked Vegas and Colorado away games, Was able to get 4 games today. I'm ready to become a true NHL fan now. Just need my jersey. I'm also dragging along 8 new fans to games with me.

u/KrakenFan15 (2 pts)

Want to become a really really good fan? Watch every player and every play on the ice real closely and you'll truly understand a players level and what type of player they are, from puck control to IQ to skating. -Peaceful Bruins fan.

Despite u/KrakenFan_OP5 expressing excitement for the Kraken, sharing that they have already committed to attending four games with eight of their peers, and that they are planning to purchase a jersey, one respondent emphasizes that u/KrakenFan_OP5 could be an even better fan if they “watch every player and every play” to “truly understand” the sport on a deeper level. Although this comment comes from an out-group member (i.e., a Bruins fan), this opinion is reflected in community members’ focus on creating new fan resources. For example, on a separate *new fan post*, where a fan is asking for information on the team’s best players, u/KrakenFan16 makes a community call for dedicated new fan resources. In doing so, u/KrakenFan16 highlights the community’s concern with educating new fans and draws attention to a growing distinction between “regulars” and “newer fans” defined around one’s knowledge or understanding of hockey and the Kraken.

u/KrakenFan16 (4 pts)

Oh you're fine, it's just coming up a ton since the expansion draft (unsurprisingly). A number of regulars on here are discussing organizing a resource for newer fans like you who are all looking for the same information.

1. Who are our best players
2. Which jersey should I get
3. What are the rules to hockey
4. Etc

Knowing we are a totally new team, I think that should be expected. And we should do a much better job writing these resources and surfacing them on the main page to make them obvious to people finding the sub.

But I'm not a mod.

Discursively, the community “we” shifts to a more hockey-focused discussion where competencies around hockey, Seattle, and fandom are valued and negotiated. With the expansion draft, the franchise changes from an organization, characterized by branding and organizational values, into a sports team with a roster to be discussed and debated. Across these discussions, users use different strategies to convey competencies around the team, essentially earning their place within the community in the process. This is demonstrated in the excerpt below. The replies below are just a handful of the 32 comments on this post.

u/KrakenFan_OP6 (OP; 51 pts, 96% upvote ratio, 33 comments)

What excites you?

u/KrakenFan17 (29 pts)

I'm excited for the amount of two way forwards we have. I love forechecking and backchecking

u/KrakenFan18 (17 pts)

Everything Kraken!

u/KrakenFan19 (17 pts)

I am excited to see our defense. I want to see some hard hits and just brutal play, scrappy and annoying to play against. They seem like they will be very old fashioned which I love.

u/KrakenFan20 (13 pts)

This team is shaping up to be extremely physical and frustrating to play against. I'm looking forward to the intense forecheck and backchecking game of our forwards and physical size and pressure this deep defensive core will create.

We may not be a high scoring potent offense, but its going to be really hard for opponents to get good offensive chances from high percentage locations in the offensive zone.

Teams are going to have a hard time getting the puck on net against us, and if they want to get into the crease and set up offensive opportunities, there will be a hefty price to pay.

It seems this kraken is going to have a real strong set of physical tentacles, that will pressure opponents clear through the neutral zone.

LETS GET KRAKEN!

u/KrakenFan21 (12 pts)

I am hilariously amused by the size of the defensive corps. Yes, they are all pretty good, but their size suggests an ability to play physical that should be fun to watch.

u/KrakenFan22 (10 pts)

I'm excited to see Alexander True back in the PNW. He was an awesome part to those successful Thunderbirds teams from a few years back including having a monster postseason during the year they won the WHL cup! ('16-'17)

u/KrakenFan23 (12 pts)

I'm excited to finally have invested interest in a sport I've always admired from afar. It's tough to care when you don't have a team to feel a home connection with.

This excerpt exemplifies how the expansion draft elevates the value of knowledge within the collective “we”. “We” is characterized by the presence or absence of related competencies in and around Seattle Kraken hockey. As the hockey product takes a central stage in the community discussion, members find ways to position themselves favorably, using discursive devices and actions to accentuate the ways they fit or reflect the community prototype, or “we”. Community members not only assess the post using upvotes and downvotes, but also can similarly evaluate the replies or comments made in response. As you can see above, the comments listed comprise the top upvoted comments on the post, suggesting community acceptance and adoption into the community “we”. Across these comments, various valued competencies are accentuated.

For example, u/KrakenFan17, and u/KrakenFan19 reply to the above post with comments about the anticipated style of play, based on the roster. These assessments demonstrate an understanding of hockey, but are somewhat vague, doing enough to position themselves as knowledgeable, but not as experts. The fact that they stop short of greater hockey detail could indicate a limit on their hockey knowledge or could be a way they are managing their identity as a hockey fan, not wanting to be interpreted as caring

too much. Their use of emotion categories (i.e., “love”) would suggest they are trying to convey authenticity in their excitement for the team, using weighted language to explain their deep excitement. In their comments, both users communicate a level of hockey knowledge and a genuine excitement for the roster.

u/KrakenFan18 is less detailed in their reply, stating they are excited for “everything Kraken”. This can be interpreted as an extreme case formulation, in that u/KrakenFan18 is over-emphasizing their excitement to demonstrate their investment in the Kraken, even if they know little about the on-ice product at this time. Extreme case formulations are used by a speaker to position themselves within a particular category and manage their stake or investment in what they are saying (Wiggins, 2017). Based on their reply, u/KrakenFan18 may have little hockey-specific knowledge, but accounts for that by over-emphasizing their commitment to “everything” related to the Kraken.

Compare these users to the reply from u/KrakenFan20, who expresses hockey-based reasons for their excitement, similar to u/KrakenFan17 and u/KrakenFan19, but does so with hockey-laden description, discussing their expectation that it will be difficult for “opponents to get good offensive chances from high percentage locations in the offensive zone.” Such detailed description positions this user as a community member who understands the nuance of the game. These types of users are prominent across the dataset during this time period, as being knowledgeable and reflecting competence in the sport, specifically the new Kraken players, takes an increasingly central role to group membership.

Relatedly, u/KrakenFan22 uses detail to position themselves within the larger “we”, highlighting their competency as a supporter of local Seattle hockey, discussing

their excitement for a former minor league player returning to the Seattle area. This reflects a different type of competency that comprises the collective “we”, demonstrating a deeper appreciation for the history of hockey in the Seattle region, prior to the Kraken’s arrival.

In the case of new fans, they may have little hockey knowledge to bring to the community discussion. For those fans, anecdotes and detail around their reasoning for choosing to support the Kraken are emphasized. In the above excerpt, u/KrakenFan23 portrays themselves as a new fan, but does so by highlighting aspects of their reasoning that might reasonably resonate with the community. They describe an existing admiration for the sport, an explanation for why it has been difficult to care to this point and evoke a category entitlement around what a “fan” is supposed to be (i.e., “home connection with” the local team), demonstrating a competency around fandom more broadly.

There remains a community interest in educating and properly on-boarding new fans about the new roster and the sport more broadly. In the dataset, a number of new fans ask questions about the draft and what they should think about the quality of the draft. Community members reply with detail, sometimes even using other sports or Seattle teams to answer in more familiar terms. For example, one new fan created a post, asking the community how “the draft was”. As shown below, the top reply, with a score of 49 points (i.e., upvote = +1, downvote = -1, score = upvotes + downvotes), is a detailed explanation of their interpretation of Seattle’s decisions and plans around the roster.

u/KrakenFan_OP7 (OP; 24 pts, 96% upvote ratio, 27 comments)

I’m a new Hockey fan seeking some knowledge, how was our draft?

u/KrakenFan24 (49 pts)

We got a pretty solid defense but tomorrow at 10am pst will give a huge hint as to the future when the trade freeze lifts. There's more than a couple picks that people are scratching their heads about and that moment will give much needed clarity to the overall picture. Seems initially like the GM Ron Francis was/is asking an astronomical price for teams to retain players which teams have completely refused to do following the Vegas expansion revelation. However, he might truly have looked at his analytics and decided the hyped players have garbage contracts and the ones he drafted are the players which give him something more valuable than anything else in his eyes which is upwards of \$30million in cap space. That would give him the flexibility to go into the free market with basically a blank check to pick up the guys he really wants to have on the ice. Or we could be in for a few years of sog for all we know while they build from the farm up.

TLDR: They went super cheap, super young, refused to take garbage contracts, and have a wheelbarrow of money to spend on free agents. Oh and now some teams have legitimate unexpected cap problems they will need to relieve one way or another

u/KrakenFan24 is helpful and welcoming in their response, describing the possible ramifications of the draft and their thoughts on why the general manager, Ron Francis, made the decisions he did. There is also the presence of hedging (i.e., “Seems initially...”, “...he might truly...”), which indicates an effort to manage accountability and avoid making definitive claims. As the draft is one part of the team’s preparation for season play, it stands to reason u/KrakenFan24 was providing a measured response, offering a reasonable description of the event and highlighting how the draft is just one part of an overall plan. The point total on this reply is higher than most for replies during this time, suggesting wider community support for this description. Coupled with other observations from this period, a key part of “we” is being a reasonable and measured fan.

The question of competency, and acceptable demonstrations of competency, begins to create a sense of segmentation during this time frame, with users highlighting their deservedness within the community around these questions of what you know and if it is reflected in the collective identity and community values. Even amongst those who

are knowledgeable about the sport, there is community pressure to be more rational, patient, and reasonable. The draft is a somewhat divisive topic during this time with a range of opinions. One prevailing opinion within the community is that the draft is just one part of an overall plan and does not warrant outrage or concern. In this sense, being a knowledgeable fan is associated with not being reactionary. This forms the basis for much of the conflict across Time Frame 3. In the excerpt below, some community users respond to a “new-ish” hockey fan who is asking for an assessment of the expansion draft from more knowledgeable hockey fans. In response, community members negotiate “we” around who gets to call themselves competent.

u/KrakenFan_OP8 (OP; 5 pts, 78% upvote ratio, 17 comments)

Tell me how to feel about the expansion draft

New-ish hockey fan here trying to get stoked about our new squad. But I don't know enough about NHL players to judge how well we did in the draft. What overall grade would you give the expansion draft?

u/KrakenFan25 (9 pts)

I'm less than enthused - it appears all the teams learned their lesson from Vegas and Francis couldn't fleece any teams. It appears their building more for a couple of years from now than trying to come flying out of the gate like Vegas did.

u/KrakenFan26 (1 pt)

I don't mind them building slow, even Vegas had really low odds of all those moves actually paying out like they did. But it *really* puts me off how terribly we did accumulating assets.

The actual draft was fine. Like the defense, goalies are fine, couple forwards I'm really excited about but nowhere near enough scoring. Like that they're trying to put together a team that's just no fun to play against.

u/KrakenFan25 (1 pt)

Seattle wins or loses 1-0 and 2-1 will be a common theme in their opening year I reckon

u/KrakenFan27 (11 pts)

Until I see the final roster and how they perform on the ice I won't judge. I'm sure seattle sports fans are familiar to when analyst and other fans made fun of

the Seahawks notorious F grade draft when we got Russel Wilson and Bobby Wagner and they won the NFL championship. So we shall see how it works out

u/KrakenFan28 (7 pts)

B- overall. Our Defense is absolutely great, great job there. Goalies are pretty good. Forwards are not fantastic. That itself would make it a B. But the fact we lacked even ONE trade with any teams for players, and instead chose who we chose, is pretty bad. Francis is not looking good in his start

u/KrakenFan29 (0 pts)

Trades are announced tomorrow BTW. Rumor is there aren't a lot but there's not zero

u/KrakenFan28 (1 pt)

Those are trades that happened subsequently with the players we drafted. What was reported was that we made no pre-draft moves

u/KrakenFan30 (10 pts)

The consensus is that it was a bad draft, but I think it's a long game thing rather than the immediate success game thing.

Only time will tell if the Kraken ownership knows what they're doing or not.

u/KrakenFan31 (1 pt)

No, the consensus among doom and gloomers was that it was a bad draft. The consensus among level-headed people that actually know hockey is that this is far from our final team and we got some great players while maintaining a boat load of cap space for free agency, good draft.

u/KrakenFan26 (1 pt)

Draft was fine. The doom and gloom is the total lack of assets we got in the process, which is a legit problem.

u/KrakenFan16 (0 pts)

The consensus from people that know hockey or armchair GMs?

In the excerpt, being knowledgeable is valued and rewarded. Those who can speak to the quality of the roster and demonstrate their competency around the sport reflect a valued quality and aspect of “we” during this time. However, there is also conflict around how members are expected to use their competence in this respect. For example, the top comments to this post are generally balanced, highlighting both the

positive and negatives associated with the draft. These users (i.e., u/KrakenFan25, u/KrakenFan27, u/KrakenFan28, u/KrakenFan30) highlight their competencies with u/KrakenFan25 drawing comparisons to how the Vegas Golden Knights conducted their draft and u/KrakenFan28 providing an assessment of the roster. u/KrakenFan27 highlights a valued Seattle identity, making connections with Seattle's NFL team and how they have historic drafts that were not exciting at the time, but paid off in the long run. Each of which demonstrate a valued competence in and around Seattle Kraken hockey and measured fan behavior.

u/KrakenFan30, reports that the “consensus” is that it was a bad draft. In response, users u/KrakenFan31 and u/KrakenFan16 link being a knowledgeable fan with level-headedness and perspective. u/KrakenFan31 calls the fans who think the draft was bad “doom and gloomers” whereas “level-headed people that actually know hockey” have a more refined understanding of the draft and its value. u/KrakenFan16 reiterates this distinction by drawing a line between those that “know hockey” and those that are “armchair GMs” implying that anyone who thinks the draft was bad is a sort of fake fan and one that just watches the game and thinks they know enough to have a valued opinion.

While these particular comments are not highly scored, they do reflect a growing conflict that emerges at this time around this question of what is “we”, specifically what the requirements are to be a prototypical user within this community. Although the team itself has yet to take the ice, hockey-specific discussion takes a central role in the community, with users negotiating their place within the collective “we” by highlighting their competencies in valued areas, such as hockey, Seattle, and fan knowledge. In doing

so, community members are creating a collective identity bounded around what it means to be a Kraken fan.

While being knowledgeable is a key part of “we” in this sense, there is an emphasis on being an educated, reasonable, and rational fan, not reactionary. For example, one fan received mixed responses for sharing their intent to get a tattoo of one of the franchise’s early logos. Community members respond, poking fun at the user for being too reactionary with a logo that is not considered the final version. The pushback this user receives seems to reflect a larger desire to be taken seriously as a hockey fan base. As a new team and a new fan base, the Seattle Kraken are a blank slate lacking established traditions or a reputation as a fan base, compared to other more established teams. As reflected in this dataset, expansion teams also garner attention from fans from various backgrounds who may be new to the sport or shifting their allegiance from their old team to the new one. This can create a sense that a fan base is novice or unknowing. As demonstrated through the first two time frames, and highlighted in Time Frame 3, this can create a pressure to legitimize the community. Based on the current analysis, this is motivated by knowledgeable fans who create opportunities to educate new fans, are quick to position themselves as resources for fans in various respects (i.e., through their various competencies), and at times encounter conflict from other fans.

Time Frame 3 is a period where the CoP is actively engaging in social learning. As users bring new information to the community, community members learn, becoming more competent in the process. During this period, with the team finally drafted, knowledgeable users (i.e., *knowers*) are active in trying to educate community members through informational posts and through their participation in comments and replies on

other posts. While community members are increasingly valuing, and drawing distinctions around, who “we” is based on valued competencies and knowledge, the collective “we” remains somewhat loosely defined and actively negotiated. For instance, in one post, the community discusses terms that would refer to community members. By this point, “Kraakeads” has already been rejected, but other terms are proposed and voted on (e.g., “release the kraken”, “the squids”, “cephalopod squad”, “let’s get Kraken”). In this sense, the CoP is still seeking elements of a shared repertoire and defining characteristics that characterize a community of this sort. However, once the team officially takes the ice, the norms and prototypes that define “we” are quickly negotiated and enacted.

4.4.5 Time Frame 4 & Time Frame 5 (1st Two Seasons)

Time Frame 4 covers the first regular season for the Seattle Kraken up until the start of their second season, spanning October 12, 2021, until October 12, 2022. During this time, the Kraken competed in their first meaningful, regular season games. In their inaugural season, Seattle finished 8th out of 8 teams in the Pacific Division, finishing with 60 points due to a final record of 27 wins and 49 losses, with six additional overtime/shootout losses, which are worth one point each (Standings, 2022).

Time Frame 5 spans the Kraken’s second regular season, from October 12, 2022, until data collection in July 2023. During this time, the Kraken finished 4th out of 8 teams in the Pacific Division, finishing with 100 points due to a final record of 46 wins, 28 losses, and 8 overtime/shootout losses (worth one point each). Seattle made the playoffs as a Wild Card team and defeated the defending Stanley Cup champion Colorado Avalanche in their first-ever playoff series, becoming the first expansion team to do so

(Boulding, 2023). The Kraken would lose in the second round to the Dallas Stars in seven games.

Across Time Frame 4 and Time Frame 5, the community discussion shifts to the on-ice hockey product as the Kraken officially play their inaugural season and then make a playoff run in Year 2. Time Frame 4 covers the entire first season and the following offseason with community members discussing topics such as coaching moves, scheduling procedures in the NHL, specific questions about line changes in hockey, and making assessments about the state of the team. Another focal area of interest during the first season concerns normative hockey fan behaviors, particularly around sport fan consumption, including how to watch the team and game attendance.

Time Frame 5 reflects similar discussion topics, with community members asking about, or discussing the sport of hockey, how best to consume the Kraken product, or sharing their excitement as a fan of the team. Although there are differences across these periods in what is specifically being discussed, the way community members define, construct, and negotiate “we” is largely consistent. For that reason, both time frames will be discussed together.

Regardless of the discussion topic, community members remain welcoming and interested in growing the Kraken fan base, as evidenced by an ongoing concern that new fans need better connection points with the franchise. This is an extension of what is seen in Time Frames 2 and 3, where *knowers* of the sport are concerned with properly supporting new fans (i.e., *non-knowers*) through new fan guides and resources for learning hockey. This is reflected in Time Frame 4 as well, where a user prompts discussion about the team’s decision to release a mini-documentary series behind a

paywall. While users understood the business strategy of doing so, users expressed concern that it was doing a disservice in forwarding their mission to continually grow the Kraken fan base. This continues throughout Time Frame 5, yet by the second year of competition, the community is more organized and efficient in sharing resources, outbound links, or describing necessary details. Users often provide “rundown” lists to hit the important socialization points, often highlighting key players and cautioning new fans to be patient with the young team. During Seattle’s second season, the team introduced a sea troll mascot, Buoy, who is often referenced in these lists during Time Frame 5. An example of a rundown list is provided below.

u/KrakenFan_OP9 (OP; 47 pts, 90% upvote ratio, 42 comments)

New to Supporting Kraken so need a rundown

I’m from the UK and only recently started watching Hockey and loved watching the Krakens. Really wanna start following them more!

u/KrakenFan32 (51 pts)

Welcome! We're doing much better this year than anticipated and that's pretty exciting. Most fans have pretty thick skin about losses due to a rough inaugural year, but we're all just happy to be here and have some hockey representation in the Northwest!

Beniers is the real deal, he, among other prospects have me pretty excited about the team's future.

Tanev is my personal vote for the heart and soul of the team, you won't see much reflection of this in the points column, but the dude is pretty much always making important moves when he's on the ice, when you see a satisfying hit it's probably 13.

Lots of great personalities on the team as well, Gourde is pretty universally loved as far as I can tell, he's great at stirring the pot without being malicious.

There's some division amongst fans when it comes to our goaltending, Grubauer was present for* a Stanley cup with the caps back in 18 and had a fantastic 20-21 season so he has a high skill ceiling, it's the consistency of reaching it that can be concerning. We picked Jones up this year in free agency and he (imo) did a great job carrying the team through a hot streak early and locking things down while Grubauer was out with an injury. The consensus with Jones among the league seems to be that he can indeed be streaky.

Our mascot is indeed an Eldritch horror, but perhaps not in the way you're thinking.

Imo we don't really have any true rivals just yet, we've had a great time this season dominating our division and keeping pace with other leaders, so this is a fun time to be watching as our relationships with other teams is still in it's infancy.

I'm optimistic we'll be making a playoff appearance this season, though I think we have a few more screws to tighten to be real cup contenders. However the future looks bright, and again, I'm just happy to have a team to support from my home territory!

Valued competencies remain a key element of the collective identity once Seattle officially takes the ice. While new fans are still generally welcomed, during this period, the Seattle Kraken subreddit community has established various norms and expectations around community membership. One visible way in which this occurs is through detail and assessments where users position themselves as knowledgeable and valued members of the community. Assessments, in response to questions or observations, serve an important role in adding information where a user may agree or disagree with an initial assessment (i.e., reply). For example, in the excerpt below, a new hockey fan asks the community about “playoff hockey” and how/if the intensity of the postseason impacts play. Community members reply, with multiple users providing secondary assessments adding additional detail.

u/KrakenFan_OP10 (OP; 48 pts, 93% upvote ratio, 44 comments)

Playoff hockey is different?

Hey, I'm still a very new hockey fan and I keep hearing that "playoff hockey is a much different style that this team isn't used to."

Can anyone explain this? Go Kraken!

u/KrakenFan33 (81 pts)

In addition to the other comments, overtime in the playoffs is 5v5. It's essentially a sudden death 4th period or longer. No commercial breaks except around the ten minute mark to clear the snow. Nothing better than Stanley Cup playoff hockey.

u/KrakenFan34 (17 pts)

To add to this.. in 2020, the Lightning (with Gourde) had a game that went to 5OT vs. the Bluejackets in the first round. They played an additional game, and then some.

u/KrakenFan35 (52 pts)

It's tough to explain... One of those "you'll know it when you see it" things. More intensity, the game just feels crisper and tighter. Hockey is a sport of adaptation to the other team's strategy, so series play is really interesting.

u/KrakenFan36 (9 pts)

"crisper and tighter" in theory. It's more heavy and fast and when things click it can look like that. But it can also just be ugly, both teams looking sloppy because of all the mental and physical pressure. Crowds are typically amazing.

It's a different beast that feels like playing more on an edge of success or defeat with the heavy mist of 'desperation'

u/KrakenFan37 (83 pts)

It's cranked up to 11. You'll see it and go "oh I understand".

u/KrakenFan38 (7 pts)

Additionally, teams get the chance to prepare more for the specific team they're facing as well. It can be much more of a chess match for the coaches.

u/KrakenFan39 (44 pts)

Far more physical and refs tend to let more calls go.

u/KrakenFan40 (36 pts)

This is correct. This also benefits the Kraken as our strength is 5v5 play.

Also no more 3v3 in OT or shootouts, so 5v5 play continues in sudden death.

Throughout the replies to this post, there are numerous assessments, specifically secondary assessments, where a new user adds on or expands on the previous users' initial point. For example, u/KrakenFan35 describes playoff hockey as "crisper and tighter", also implying that it is hard to describe. Although this user receives community support, with 52 points, u/KrakenFan36 provides a secondary assessment, defining "crisper and tighter" and adding onto u/KrakenFan35's point. The assessment serves a

purpose for u/KrakenFan36, demonstrating their knowledge in this space. While the above is just a snapshot of the 44 comments on this post, many of the posts above talk about the same key points; playoff hockey is more dramatic, intense, and has some rule changes. The other replies largely reiterate these points.

This behavior is not uncommon across this dataset, particularly in these later time frames. Users are quick to offer additional assessments, even if the original assessment is directed specifically at a different user or post. Assessments are generally amicable, with the secondary user merely offering additional context and/or expanding on a previous commenters' point. While these add-on assessments have a direct effect on promoting greater discussion and understanding within the community, it underscores the perceived premium placed on being a *knower* in this space. Individuals who know about hockey, the Kraken, hockey norms, or other valued competencies within the CoP, manage their identity and position within the community by highlighting their knowledge. In adding or expounding on others' assessments, a user is being informative while also communicating to other users that they are *knowers* to fellow community members.

4.4.5.1 Cemented "We"

Once the Seattle Kraken officially take the ice, the collective "we" becomes more defined. During these time frames, the community is more active, and users utilize more external references and information in which to inform community norms, prototypes, and values. For instance, in Time Frames 2 and 3, community members are actively negotiating "we" in discussions about fan norms (e.g., throwing squid on the ice, supporting multiple teams, best media outlets to follow, getting Kraken tattoos, and preferred community terms). By the end of the regular season in Time Frame 4,

community members have brief guides effectively breaking down what it means to be “we” as it relates to many of these norms and values. For example, the following excerpt represents one such guide written by a newer fan who supports the Kraken from Australia.

u/KrakenFan_OP11 (OP; 37 pts, 92% upvote ratio, 35 comments)

New NHL fan deciding to follow the Kraken.

So i just recently started watching hockey. I live in georgia so there is no state team to root for. and i had a friend who is a hockey fan tell me to watch the kraken because i'm new and so are they. anything i should know about this season? i watched the inaugural game but haven't watched much hockey since then until this past week.

u/KrakenFan41 (27 pts)

Welcome friend! I too am a new fan to hockey, and here's what I find helpful.

The Kraken is a new team still trying to find it's feet, so allow a little slack for our gameplay.

If our goalie makes an awesome save, but it sounds like the crowd is booing, no. That'd be Grubauer and that's his "cheer"- they're calling "Gruuuuuu"

"The Hockey Guy" on YouTube is INCREDIBLY informative, and does his best to educate without being dismissive of new hockey fans.

I listened to a few games on the radio first, mostly because I couldnt figure out how to watch games for free in Aus. Fitz's game calling helped me learn terms of gameplay without being distracted by the visuals.

Finally, for now, just enjoy the games. We've already been eliminated from the playoffs, so there's no pressure on us to win.

Again, welcome!

Edit to add:

We (the subreddit) honour the Gameday Beast with a Gameday Beast Feast. Snackrifices are made.

Terminology that is Kraken specific:

Hakstol Special: pulling the goalie while down in points, and the opponents score

Davy Jones: the goodest boy. This is known, this is fact. You will defend this.

Geekie teapot: little stretch that Morgan Geekie (#67) does before each faceoff

Did I miss anything?

u/KrakenFan42 (16 pts)

Some nicknames like Tanev is Turbo, Mr. Oleksiak is The Big Rig, Grubauer is The German Gentleman (supposedly someone on this sub created German Gentleman and Forslund started using it within the past two months. Cool huh?), I've also heard Forslund call Larsson "The Big Cat" 🐱 I'm not sure if that's official from any of his previous teams but it makes me laugh anyway.

Also if we win, "That's kraken hockey baby!"

But if we lose, "That's kraken hockey baby!"

u/KrakenFan43 (5 pts)

BEAST FEAST

u/KrakenFan41 (6 pts)

BEAST FEAST! BEAST FEAST!

u/KrakenFan44 (9 pts)

Cheap Seats Sports has great introductory videos on hockey and the NHL if you're new to the game in general. He's also one of the few content creators on YouTube solely focused on the kraken so I'm sure a marathon of some of his videos will get you up to speed.

Otherwise, you haven't missed much. We traded away much of our roster for draft picks this year meaning that we are just beginning to develop and find our identity. Lots of people excited about Brandon Tanev coming back to the team next year after a season ending injury and Matty Beniers, our first true draft pick from Michigan, just joining the team this week. Lots to be excited for next year.

In the meantime, sit back and enjoy. If we win it's always worth celebrating and if we lose it increases our chances of the #1 pick in the draft, so just soak it all in while you can this year!

u/KrakenFan45 (9 pts)

Our arch nemesis is what ever team we're playing at the time.

u/KrakenFan46 (6 pts)

And the Donskoi curse

u/KrakenFan47 (7 pts)

It's a new team so there are a lot of things to still work out. Not to mention with all the free agents and players the kraken will lose/Change during this offseason, the Kraken on the ice next year will look a bit different. They have a super solid core though, I feel that they are much stronger for the future as a franchise than Vegas who may miss the playoffs for the first time this year now that all of their superstars had their contracts expire/and or sold to cover the salary cap. All in all compared to past expansion franchises this year is exactly how 90% have gone, I'm looking forward to a bright future.

u/KrakenFan42 (7 pts)

Welcome to the family, things have gotten a bit quiet lately but we had a slew of injuries and the expansion draft didn't quite work out as intended so our performance this season was lower than expected. But! That doesn't mean we won't see improvement over the next few seasons.

We got a metric ton of draft picks from other teams this trade deadline so we should have a really good chance of developing a number of players from this summer's draft. We have arguably the nicest home and away jerseys in the entire league so we will never lose when it comes to fashion at the very least lol. Our goal song is an homage to Nirvana, a Seattle icon. Also our goal horn is taken from a decommissioned Seattle passenger ferry, for me hearing both is super nostalgic.

It's nice for us to finally have an nhl team, especially one that leans so hard into making Seattle/WA it's home. We've been shafted and had our nba team taken from us and our mlb and nfl teams are always a labor of love to be fans of so even if you read people getting frustrated in kraken game threads I'm pretty sure the people that stick around are all still grateful and excited to have our own team. Even though we kind of dropped the ball and messed up this season, I still completely love the kraken

In the excerpt above, u/KrakenFan41 uses affect displays (i.e., exclamation points, emotive language/capitalization) conveying emotion and excitement over the addition of the new fan and self-discloses their own status as a new fan, positioning themselves closely with the original poster as a reliable and relatable resource. They are detailed, providing a guide for the new fan to get a sense of “we” for the community. In their response, u/KrakenFan41 highlights the importance of patience with the new team and then provides various examples of Kraken specific terminology and normative behavior, including the “cheer” for their goal (i.e., “Gruuuuu”) and their later edit discussing the “Gameday Beast Feast” (i.e., a community ritual where a user creates Seattle Kraken-inspired lettuce art to feed to their pet rabbits) and other terms such as the Hakstol Special, Davey Jones and Geekie teapot. The “Beast Feast” reference even generates additional replies in support. Meanwhile, u/KrakenFan46 references the “Donskoi curse”, a seemingly obscure reference, yet deserving of upvotes, suggesting community agreement. Each of which are terms or phrases with meaning in this space,

indicating that over the course of the first season, the community terms were proposed, used, and eventually adopted to a recognizable degree, contributing to the collective sense of “we” and *what* constitutes a Seattle Kraken subreddit community member.

The above excerpt also emphasizes educating the new fan about the sport is a valued on-boarding step. u/KrakenFan41 couches their recommendations in their own experiences, lending credibility to their recommendations as they suggest they just went through the socialization process themselves. u/KrakenFan41 recommends watching “The Hockey Guy” in part because his videos are not “dismissive” of *non-knowers*, bringing further attention to how and where knowledge and competency plays a defining role in what it means to be “we”. This also hints at a potential challenge for a community concerned with welcoming and educating new fans, as new fans may feel dismissed by other *knowers* in the community, if they do not effectively convey valued competencies and an understanding of “we” in terms of knowledge.

This is further highlighted by u/KrakenFan42’s reply, expanding on u/KrakenFan41’s points, further discussing community terms. u/KrakenFan42 also replies directly to the original poster as well. In their comment, they use affect displays and strong emotional language, such as with the phrase “Welcome to the family”. The use of “family” acts as a category entitlement, as the word is loaded with meaning, conveying acceptance, care, and love, describing their connection with the Kraken. This deep connection is one bounded in one of the valued competencies within this CoP, Seattle. u/KrakenFan42 provides detailed descriptions of the various Seattle imagery and references engrained within the franchise (i.e., goal song, goal horn, history of professional teams in Seattle), highlighting how “we” is inherently tied to Seattle, despite

the community being comprised of nonlocal fans, including the original poster who is adopting the Kraken from their home state of Georgia.

Between the replies from u/KrakenFan42 and u/KrakenFan41, as well as other community responses, users highlight the valued competencies and in-group prototype at this point. Community members are expected to *know* about valued competencies, such as the Seattle roots and how to be a *proper* knowledgeable and educated hockey fan. Hockey fans are expected to understand the game thanks to their ongoing research and the hard work required to be a fan (e.g., using “The Hockey Guy” videos to learn the game). Community members are expected to know community-specific terms, rituals, and norms that reflect a still growing competency around being a member of this Seattle Kraken subreddit specifically. Notably, the term “Kraheads” is not used or referenced in the posts analyzed during these two time frames as this was a term that was discussed and subsequently rejected as an acceptable reference to community members.

Whereas u/KrakenFan41 highlights the difficulty of picking up the game and the discomfort that can be associated with being a new fan, other users use minimization language, such as “you haven’t missed much” to make joining the fan base sound easier and more accessible. This lowers the bar for the original poster, indicating that they are not far behind in the necessary hockey knowledge to participate and follow-along. In this sense, community members actively try to make the on-boarding process less intimidating, yet newcomers may feel they are not fully accepted by the collective.

4.4.5.2 Normative Hockey Fan Behavior and Proper Fandom

During earlier time frames, community members are actively negotiating what it means to be “we”. “We” largely revolves around valued competencies but is still loosely

defined. What constitutes necessary hockey knowledge? What is the precursory information one needs to know about the history of hockey in Seattle? Early on, community members are finding connection points with other users. Many are choosing to support the team from outside the Seattle region and others are bringing along their other fandoms, using those norms to make recommendations for the young Kraken subreddit community. However, once the Kraken take the ice, questions of “we” and the valued competencies and behaviors associated with group membership become more defined and cemented.

4.4.5.3 Bounded Community: “It’s on us”

One representative example of this is with posts discussing hockey etiquette, specifically the etiquette around attending games. With the Kraken officially taking the ice, members of the community have become experts around attending and watching games, meaning new fans or individuals seeking to attend a game themselves, can turn to the community for clarification on parking, transportation, and other attendance issues. In this sense, community members have folded in another layer of valued competency, being the active consumption of the Seattle Kraken hockey product (e.g., where to tailgate, how to watch, where to go, what jersey to get).

This also creates a challenge for the community, as newer fans may not be knowledgeable about how to attend a hockey game. Hockey is fast-flowing and can be difficult to follow. Thus, it is common courtesy, and generally enforced by arena staff, that fans do not stand during play or get up to leave their seats. The same goes for fans returning to their seats, who are told to wait until a stoppage in play. Early in Time Frame 4, after one of the Kraken’s first home games, a user brings this issue to the attention of

the community, phrasing the discussion as a public service announcement. The post was highly trafficked with a score of 275 pts, an upvote ratio of 95%, and 102 comments, one of the most popular posts in the dataset. While the discussion that results from the post is insightful, the tone of the post is light with numerous users using the topic as a backdrop for anecdotes and personal stories from when they were newer fans of the sport. An excerpt is provided below.

u/KrakenFan40 (OP; 275 pts, 95% upvote ratio, 102 comments)

PSA: Hockey Game Etiquette

We have alot of new fans that went to see their first game last night or will be seeing there first game in the coming season. A couple of things to be aware of when attending Hockey games.

1. Do not leave your seat or go back to your seat during play. Wait for a stoppage in play.
2. If you do get stuck going back to your seat and play is fully underway squat down or take a seat on the stairs and wait for the next stoppage of play.

Climate Pledge ushers are new as well, so they were not stopping people yet, but most rinks ushers have a stop sign and prevent you from entering a section during play.

Hockey is not like Baseball or Football, you will not see vendors walking up and down the aisle selling things. The reason for this is it blocks the view of game and hockey is quick so in a split second something big can happen.

I hope everyone gets to enjoys a Hockey game this season and I am looking forward to our first win at Climate Pledge.

Go Kraken!!!

Edit: I was in Section 3 and they did not have stop your vessel signs, so glad to hear they had them at other sections. They will sort it out in the next few games. Even if the sign is not there, it is still good to wait for a stoppage in play.

u/KrakenFan48 (117 pts)

Some sections had ushers with stop signs. They had "halt your vessel" on them lol.

u/KrakenFan49 (37 pts)

"Halt your vessel" I don't know why but that's such a cute idea.

u/KrakenFan50 (6 pts)

i'm an usher at the arena and we are severely understaffed! we don't have enough people to watch all the entrances/exits and every section yet, but we're working on it! it's tough with the worker shortage :(trust

me, we all just want y'all to have the best possible time at the game—uninterrupted!

u/KrakenFan40 (8 pts)

Great to hear!!!

u/KrakenFan51 (80 pts)

Funny anecdote from when the Lightning joined the league. A lot of their ushers during their first game in 1992 were new to the sport, so they received the basic instructions:

- Verify seat locations
- Don't let people back to their seats during play
- If people throw things on the ice, kick them out
- If there is an altercation in the stands, contact security
- etc, etc.

Well sure enough, during their first game Chris Kontos scored a hat trick (he ended up with four, actually) and when fans started chucking hats on the ice, ushers unfamiliar with the tradition were frantically trying to keep track of every offender and trying to kick them all out one by one.

Eventually they were told by people in upper management that this practice was ok and the people were allowed to return to their seats.

u/KrakenFan52 (23 pts)

Lmao. Great story. I used my hat to save our table at Westlake when my name was called that food was ready and my dad was concerned about someone taking it. I told him I would throw it on the ice if there is a hat-trick tonight so I wasn't too worried about it and his look was utter shock at me. I had to explain to him that hockey is a different breed.

u/KrakenFan53 (5 pts)

I think this tradition with the hats is awesome... but... I'm wearing that hat because I like it, why would someone throw it away? Do they get donated or something?

u/KrakenFan51 (14 pts)

It's different with each team. Some donate, some give to the player, one arena I went to (can't remember which) has a ton on display from different famous hat tricks. I know the Lightning last time I caught a game in Tampa, offer a discount on new hats purchased as well if there is a hat trick

u/KrakenFan54 (-2 pts)

I love that people throw their hats, but I'm not throwing mine. I'm very picky and I take great care of my hats. I'm not about to give it away.

u/KrakenFan55 (31 pts)

Shout out to Kraken fans in my section. My partner wore a Vancouver Canucks Jersey to the game last night and cheered loudly every time they scored. Everyone was super chill. One guy after the game tapped us on the shoulder and said "HEY!... Great game."

Remember opposing fans are people and we're all just having fun. I've had people threaten to kick my ass on my way out of the Leafs rink.

u/KrakenFan56 (10 pts)

Goddmanit leafs fans this is why nobody likes us

u/KrakenFan57 (13 pts)

Oh man. In 1980 I moved to Vancouver from Seattle because my mom married a Canadian. I knew zero about hockey but quickly fell in love; my team was the Minnesota north stars. They came to town to play the canucks at the old PNE and my friend and I went to watch them. Halfway through the first period I thought "I want to go get some popcorn" and stood up to make my way out.

Jesus it was like I was stabbing babies along her the way, by the way the other fans reacted. I got out into the concourse and there was absolutely no one there. Complete ghost town, except for the dozens of people stationed at the concession stands. When I went back to the arena, an usher held me back for like three minutes; which I didn't understand at the time. Finally a whistle blew and I was told to make it quick back to my seat.

When I got there my friend leaned over to me and said in my ear "you fucking idiot"

I was absolutely clueless how shit worked

u/KrakenFan40 (5 pts)

I have only been to a handful of games in Canada, but it is definitely more serious up north with this etiquette.

u/KrakenFan58 (10 pts)

Another thing to note is the orange light between the penalty boxes. When it's on it's a media timeout and you have more time to move about.

TV timeouts are the first whistles under 14, 10, and 6 minutes of each period (except during a power play, after a goal, or icing)

u/KrakenFan40 (3 pts)

Good tip, did not know that one. Another clue is they are shoveling the ice.

In the above excerpt, the topic of discussion is hockey etiquette, or normative hockey fan behavior, a topic that had not been discussed prior to the start of Kraken games. Although this represents a valued competency in the community, the discussion

that results takes on a lighter tone. Some fans make additional assessments either providing additional information or adding context to the specific game in question (e.g., u/KrakenFan58 and u/KrakenFan48). Others reply with anecdotes, such as u/KrakenFan55 thanking fans for being welcoming, u/KrakenFan51 sharing a story about the ushers at the Lightning game and u/KrakenFan57, who reflected on their own experience of not knowing the proper etiquette. The use of personal stories and anecdotes serves the purpose of illustrating a point, such as one's appreciation that other fans were welcoming, as compared to a separate time when fans were not. The anecdotes here may also take on a playful tone, in part, because the topic is not deemed as particularly serious. After all, the ushers were outnumbered, and the team is still new.

In Time Frame 5, a different post about the same hockey etiquette issues is shared. However, the tone shifts to being more serious and genuine in concern. As demonstrated in the excerpt below, the reason for the change in tone appears to reflect broader hockey norms, specifically how Seattle is viewed as a hockey town, compared to other hockey towns.

u/KrakenFan_OP12 (OP; 51 pts, 81% upvote ratio, 57 comments)

How do we get people to wait until the puck is not in play to leave their seats??

All last season, people blocking our view as they're leaving their seats during play – a lot

Home opener: view blocked 40+ times – by outbound folks

Ushers are okay, but not always there and not always firm. However, the real problem is lack of awareness by our new fan base that you don't leave your seat while the puck is in play unless it's urgent (kid has to pee, etc.).

Just so frustrating and not worth it anymore (too expensive and too exasperating). Anyone from an established hockey town (or even TBirds or Silvertips fans) would be mortified,

Of course, ownership doesn't know how difficult it is for us out there because they're in their suites.

Anyone have any ideas about how we could effectively get ownership to help us fix this?

u/KrakenFan16 (36 pts)

It will come with time. A new city with generally no idea on hockey etiquette. But, for example, I've taken at least 10 new hockey fans to Kraken games since the start of last season. And I've taught them all. And I've seen them respect it once they were taught.

Give it a chance to sort itself out. I've definitely seen it improve this season since last year's season opener.

At least the ushers generally don't let people come BACK to their seats until play stops. That's half the problem under better control.

Admit it: Somebody had to teach you, too, at one point. To that end, please be cordial with people that don't know and teach them politely. I've seen people be karens about this at Silvertips games when people are at their first hockey game in their life. Great first experience for those people, I'm sure.

u/KrakenFan59 (20 pts)

I hear your pain. I'm right by the aisle. This year a group of us are teaching and just won't let people by until a stoppage now, started in the preseason. Wish it didn't have to be us, but the ushers if they're around don't help. Plus I moved to the first row this season to prevent the folks in front who like to stand randomly during the game

u/KrakenFan60 (-1 pts)

“When you gotta go you gotta go” - Dr Ian Malcom.

Seriously though, for a lot of these people it was probably their first ever in person game. Give them a break. I think it's better at sporting events to leave mid action. It kills ne when people get up surfing live music, theater, or other performing arts events.

I think it needs to be said that culture isn't on ownership. And you don't want it to be. You see what happens when a planning committee tries to create a sports culture (raise the colors, Buoy, stuffed fish) it just doesn't work. If you want a team to have a specific fan culture that's on you/us to do it.

u/KrakenFan61 (-3 pts)

If you think it's better to leave your seat in the middle of play, please, I beg of you, find another sport.

And regarding Buoy: ask the folks who can't keep Buoy stuffies in stock in the team stores and had tentacles flying all over the place on Saturday if it “isn't working.” Looks like it's working just fine.

In the excerpt above, two key points stand out. First, some community members view the behavior of *non-knowers* to be a legitimate problem, one they are actively trying to solve and remedy themselves. The reason it is a problem is because of how it affects

the viewing experience, but also because it contrasts with what “proper hockey fans” would accept. The original poster discusses how knowledgeable hockey fans would be “mortified” by the behavior, drawing another line to the distinction between *knowers* and *non-knowers* and how the latter can be perceived. Second, pronoun shifting occurs in this post, reflecting community members defining and cementing what community membership looks like. u/KrakenFan16 and u/KrakenFan59 mention that they are actively teaching new fans. The reply from u/KrakenFan60 similarly discusses this issue around “us” versus “them” with “them” referring to the *non-knowers* who do not reflect the community knowledge as a hockey fan base. As u/KrakenFan60 puts it, “If you want a team to have a specific fan culture that’s on you/us to do it.” Particularly in this post, but also present in others, the community is discussed as “we” and there is presumption that “we” could never make these types of mistakes. The implication is that the “we” of the Seattle Kraken subreddit community is one that knows; knows about hockey, knows about the Kraken, knows about Seattle, knows how to be a fan, and now *should* know how to properly watch a game.

4.4.5.4 Challenges to “We”

With the community cementing a sense of “we”, defined as one of varied and multiple valued competencies, users are now expected to know and adhere to the norms and prototypes of the community. In this sense, posts that do not, can be interpreted as challenges to the collective “we”. This is more common during the later time frames, notably the end of Time Frame 4 and through Time Frame 5. For example, one fan asks community members how to watch Kraken games as they are unable to find a way on their own.

u/KrakenFan_OP13 (OP; 2 pts, 58% upvote ratio, 33 comments)

Why can't I find kraken games on YouTube TV or local channels?

Being from Atlanta I've never had a Hockey team so I've never really watch regular season Hockey. Since I moved to seattle 2 years I've adopted the Kraken and wanted to get into the sport. However I legit can't find the games on YouTube TV. 90% of the games are unavailable. Is this normal for the NHL? How do hockey fans watch regular season games? Sorry for the dumb question just new to the league

Edit: thanks for the help. Ultimately I realized ROOT TV is garbage and hates fans!

Community members appear to take issue with the post, as evidenced by the community upvote total and ratio (i.e., 2 pts, 58% upvote ratio, 33 comments). Replies are generally short, direct responses with users sharing their alternative viewing options (i.e., Hulu, ESPN+, etc.) and lamenting that local Seattle sports network ROOT Sports carries the games. One user directs the poster to the "TV/Streaming Guide" that is posted at the top of the subreddit, further suggesting that u/KrakenFan_OP13's post is not adhering to the expectations of this community. They did not refer to the provided guide and their question touches on valued competencies around being knowledgeable as a fan (i.e., knowing the streaming options that might offer the games) and being knowledgeable about the Seattle region (i.e., knowing ROOT Sports carries the games and that members in this community do not like ROOT Sports).

Similarly, another post during Time Frame 5 questions the quality of the Seattle Kraken home game broadcasters, sharing that they find the broadcasters to be sub-par. The post receives a score of 0 with an upvote ratio of 31% and 26 comments, which are generally defensive of the home broadcasters. Another post towards the end of Seattle's second season is posted by a new fan, introducing themselves to the community. That post received 0 points as well, with an upvote ratio of 41% and zero comments. Between both posts, the valued competencies of the community and the collective "we" are being

challenged, creating conflict. In the case of the former, it is a fan who doesn't know or appreciate the experienced broadcast team that represents the team. In the latter, the new fan shares a picture of him and his father wearing San Diego/Los Angeles Chargers jerseys. Despite the post itself discussing how they were excited to be Kraken fans, the image runs contrary to what it means to be from or represent Seattle, where the NFL team is the Seattle Seahawks.

One additional example is a new fan who introduces themselves to the community, like many others have previously. However, this user makes the mistake of challenging "we" as it relates to being a Seattle sports fan, suggesting that as an Oklahoma City Thunder fan, they also have a connection with Seattle sports. This post, shared below, received 4 pts, an upvote ratio of 59% and 16 comments.

u/KrakenFan_OP14 (OP; 4 pts, 59% upvote ratio, 16 comments)

New Fan

Hey everyone, new fan here. Just getting into hockey. Love the Kraken's spirit and vibe. I'm already a Thunder fan, so I feel a real connection to teams from Seattle. What do I need to know to get really involved with supporting this team?

u/KrakenFan62 (12 pts)

This is helpful [outbound link to Seattle Times Hockey 101]

u/KrakenFan63 (31 pts)

First rule of Seattle Sports: No one talks about Thunder

u/KrakenFan64 (22 pts)

Get out.

u/KrakenFan65 (1 pt)

umm... who's the Thunder and why do we hate them?

u/KrakenFan64 (6 pts)

The old Seattle Sonics were purchased and moved to Oklahoma City to become the Thunder. There was much anger at the process because there was no real reason for it other than the guy who bought them wanting to move them to

Oklahoma City (edit: glossing over a lot here). It's a touchy subject for sports fans in this town.

u/KrakenFan65 (3 pts)

got it. boo Thunder!

u/KrakenFan66 (6 pts)

there's a lot more to it, too. bunch of fuckery. guy who bought the team vowed to keep them in Seattle, and made a bunch of "effort" to keep them here and get a new stadium ("effort" being making absolutely asinine request and stadium offers he knew no one would go for)

and then one of his partners stated to an okc newspaper that the plan was never to keep the Sonics here and they bought the team to move them.

guy who bought the team vehemently denied it, and the NBA even fined his partner who told that to the newspaper.

then there was a whole other saga involving them leaving before the contract for key arena was up

And even more fuckery

Anyways that's probably more than you wanted to know

in summary, fuck clay Bennett, fuck Howard Schultz, fuck OKC

to top it all off, the sonics could have had Westbrook, Durant, AND harden

great now im angry all over again

u/KrakenFan65 (1 pt)

wow.. i know the sonics were beloved in the community but i've never been a fan of basketball so i didn't know the history. thank you for the info! i suppose it's something i should know being a fan of two seattle teams

u/KrakenFan67 (10 pts)

Nobody in the Puget Sound is a Thunder fan. Most say F em, including me! Glad to have ya as a Kraken fan though.

u/KrakenFan42 (5 pts)

Like.. Oklahoma City thunder? Welcome aboard but that is such a sore spot for so many in the pnw 😞 I almost wished we would get the Sonics back before a hockey team

u/KrakenFan68 (5 pts)

Bruh

u/KrakenFan69 (2 pts)

Bro, you don't have any connection to Seattle or the SuperSonics because you root for the Thunder. Clay Bennett stole our team from our city and relocated them to a truck stop town.

u/KrakenFan70 (4 pts)

I'll take an astros fan or 49ers fan rooting for the kraken any day over a thunder fan.

While community members are not unanimously hostile with the new fan, the reference to the Oklahoma City Thunder is one that is not appreciated by the deeply Seattle-based community. As a result, some users, including u/KrakenFan64, u/KrakenFan69, and u/KrakenFan70 effectively reject that the new fan has a legitimate claim to being a Seattle fan. Even users who welcome the new fan actively educate them, quickly conveying the necessary details that are required to be a member of “we”.

Together, these posts reiterate how “we” has been constructed to this point, particularly during Time Frame 4 and Time Frame 5, where the on-ice product has motivated more defined normative behaviors, valued competencies, and subsequently a clearer collective identity for who “we” are. CoPs are never truly static, suggesting the Kraken subreddit will continue to change and evolve over time, as members participate in the community, bringing new experiences and knowledge to the community, and contributing to the social learning of the community (Wegner, 1998). Identity is an outcrop of this process, with the prototype of community membership theoretically evolving as well. The current work indicates that a community’s collective identity and

sense of “we” is one characterized by valued competencies and active negotiation through social interaction.

Brand communities are defined by consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility that community members enact to represent and defend the brand. Particularly in the context of sports fandom, the sense of “we” that forms out of these markers can have important and lasting implications. For established community members, these markers can be unifying and serve as a prototype for how community members can achieve acceptance and belonging within a community. However, prototypes around community and fandom can also be exclusionary for categories of people or fans.

Based on the current findings, consciousness of kind is constructed over time through the negotiation and promotion of valued competencies. Drawing from CoP and DP, we can see this accomplished in online communities through language use. Notably, detail and assessments are used to highlight valued knowledge. Users similarly position themselves amongst fellow community members in ways meant to accentuate their knowledge, such as through secondary assessments. The meaning of “we” shifts and evolves as a non-geographically bound space like the Kraken subreddit community, begins as a collection of early adopters from various backgrounds. Many were already from or connected to Seattle, but many others were interested in the team for other reasons, often bringing along previous and current fandoms. Through online interactions, users sought commonalities amongst others, while also discursively drawing attention to their value within the community as *knowers* of hockey, Seattle, Seattle hockey, etc. As the community discussed issues around the branding, the eventual roster, and potential

rituals and traditions, the community discussed, rejected, and promoted key aspects of what they valued in community membership. The result was a prevailing consciousness of kind that was only cemented once the team began playing. At that point, the initial prototype for fandom was established, serving as a blueprint for what is considered a valued community member.

Chapter 2: Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate a newly formed online fan community for the Seattle Kraken (NHL), specifically examining how a sport fan community negotiates and generates a sense of “we” and collective identity through community discourse. To do so, I employed discursive psychology to examine the interplay between language use and identity, attending to how the community negotiated what it means to be “we” over time.

The guiding research question for this study aimed to investigate how do online fan communities, and their community members, develop a sense of “we” (i.e., consciousness of kind) through online discourse in the case of a newly established professional team and online fan community. My findings indicate that a new community negotiates “we” over time based on valued competencies, including competencies around hockey knowledge, Seattle, and, eventually, the Seattle Kraken.

4.5 Contributions

4.5.1 Theoretical Implications

This work makes several theoretical contributions in relation to online fan communities. I build on existing brand community literature, and online fan community

literature, providing insight into how a newly formed community comes to establish consciousness of kind and a sense of “we”. Additionally, I extend discursive psychology and CoP in sport consumer literature.

4.5.1.1 Examining the Development of “We”.

These findings contribute to brand community literature, notably as it relates to consciousness of kind. Brand community markers, including consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility, collectively contribute to group cohesion and provide meaning to a group about what is considered normative behavior or expectations around community involvement (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Consciousness of kind is considered perhaps the most important, as it reflects a community’s sense of “we” and demarcates salient in-group and out-groups (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

The current study aimed to identify how consciousness of kind (i.e., “we”) is developed in the case of a new community due to its impact on community dynamics, specifically normative behavior, and related prototypes around group membership. The findings indicate that consciousness of kind is a result of an ongoing process of identity negotiation amongst community members. This adds to our understanding of consciousness of kind, specifically how it is developed, and the elements that inform the development of this brand community marker over time.

4.5.1.2 The Centrality of Knowledge in Shaping Community Prototypes.

The current findings shed light on the pivotal role of knowledge in the construction of the community's collective identity and offers valuable insight into how this process occurs longitudinally.

The study identifies a progression of valued competencies that, over time, define the community's understanding of what it means to be a Kraken fan. These competencies, initially broad calls to engage with and understand hockey, gradually evolve into more specific and central expectations, effectively shaping the consciousness of kind within the community.

This phenomenon aligns seamlessly with the theoretical underpinnings of CoPs, rooted in social learning theory and knowledge management (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000). The CoP framework accentuates collaborative learning through group interaction, exemplified by the collective construction of meaning and knowledge within the Seattle Kraken subreddit. In this digital space, fan interactions, discussions, and evaluations serve as mechanisms for negotiating what is deemed valued knowledge, contributing to the development of the community's consciousness of kind and collective identity.

As the community engages in this ongoing negotiation process, a set of valued competencies emerges, encompassing skills, knowledge bases, and behaviors considered crucial within the Kraken fan community. Essentially, these competencies encapsulate the prototype of the community. The fans, over time, articulate expectations around what information is considered essential for fellow members to possess.

The emphasis on being informed and knowledgeable resonates with broader notions in sports fan literature, where knowledge is often linked to legitimacy and authenticity as a fan (Holt, 1995; Kirkwood et al., 2019; Lock & Funk, 2016). In the context of the Kraken community, being informed as a hockey fan, a Kraken enthusiast, and a Seattle sports fan emerge as valued competencies as the community grows. This

aligns with existing literature, illustrating how fans legitimize their identity by learning and adhering to community norms, rituals, and prototypes. The process of conforming to these conventions not only reduces subjective uncertainty but also allows fans to self-classify as knowledgeable and authentic within the community (Kirkwood et al., 2019).

This interpretation extends the existing understanding of how knowledge is valued within fan communities, offering insights into the developmental aspects of this knowledge and its role in shaping a broader collective identity. The study thus contributes to our understanding of identity negotiation within online fan communities, showcasing the multifaceted nature of knowledge in shaping collective identity and consciousness of kind (i.e., a sense of “we”).

4.5.1.3 Knowers and Non-Knowers.

Another key takeaway from this work concerns the determination of legitimacy within an online fan community. Being considered knowledgeable is intricately linked to legitimacy and authenticity as fans (Holt, 1995; Lock & Funk, 2016). However, these findings suggest that what makes one knowledgeable and legitimate is contingent upon valued competencies within the community. The current work sheds light on the distinctions around who is considered legitimate or prototypical (i.e., *knowers*) and who is not (i.e., *non-knowers*).

Prototypes serve as informative guides, shaping behavior and providing group members with a blueprint for conforming to group norms, attaining acceptance within the community, and reducing subjective uncertainty within a social context (e.g., Hogg, 2001; Kim & Manoli, 2022; Nason, 2023; Turner et al., 1987; Zhang et al., 2018). However, the literature also acknowledges the dark side of prototypicality in sports

fandom, leading to exclusion and ostracization for fans who do not conform to the established prototype (e.g., Behrens & Uhrich, 2020; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016).

Based on the current results, distinctions around what is considered expected or prototypical knowledge depends on a variety of valued competencies within the community. For instance, as the Kraken progressed into their first regular season and second season, valued competencies around hockey, Seattle, the Seattle Kraken, and fandom (e.g., knowing proper hockey fan etiquette when attending games, understanding community-specific terms/traditions) became firmly established as areas of negotiated prototypical knowledge for a Kraken subreddit community member. During this time, newer fans inadvertently challenge these valued competencies, drawing the ire of community members.

In the broader context of prototypicality in online fandom, this highlights how a fan prototype is a collection of negotiated and agreed-upon valued competencies among community members. Whereas one fan may view a new fan's lack of Seattle history as non-prototypical, the new fan may still be considered legitimate if they demonstrate expertise in hockey etiquette from attending many games or reflect different valued competencies.

This theoretical exploration reveals the intricate relationship between knowledge, legitimacy, and prototypicality within online fan communities. While existing literature recognizes the significance of being knowledgeable for fan authenticity, this study emphasizes the contextual nature of valued competencies that contribute to one's standing as a legitimate fan. The findings underscore that prototypicality is not a static concept;

rather, it evolves over time through the negotiation of valued competencies within the community.

4.5.1.4 Examining Identity Through Discourse.

The current study extends both the CoP framework and discursive psychology into sport consumer literature, specifically in relation to online fandom. The CoP framework is an interdisciplinary social learning theory, which posits that individuals contribute to a community's collective knowledge through active participation and knowledge sharing (Wenger, 1998, 2010). Through this process, a community comes to negotiate meaning within the community, including collective identity.

Paired with discursive psychology as a methodological approach, CoP may be a useful way to consider online fan behavior, particularly around questions of identity and related psychological concepts. In pairing CoP and discursive psychology to examine online fan behavior, it was possible to consider questions of language use and identity over time. Using these approaches to examine identity through language use longitudinally represents a valuable contribution to the literature.

Online communication is largely done anonymously with little information assigned to users. Although social media has been a popular area of study for sport consumer scholars, given the accessibility of large-scale, real data (Filo et al., 2015; Watanabe et al., 2021), by attending to the way language is used by online users to construct and negotiate identity, scholars can dive deeper into understanding how online fans operate in comparison to more traditional conceptualizations of offline fandom.

4.5.2 Practical Implications

There are several practical implications for this work, concerning the role of sports managers in supporting fans in online fan communities.

4.5.2.1 Fostering Inclusion.

These results suggest that valued competencies are central to how a community defines community membership and prototypical users. In that sense, there is a practical opportunity for sports managers to identify the valued competencies of their fan base and provide detailed and accessible resources for new fans, such as how-to guides, videos, or even offline experiences. For example, the Seattle Kraken organization may have benefited from a more active educational focus for their fans, creating easily sharable resources that address the questions and issues newer fans struggle to understand. While resources were created by news media and by subreddit community members, there was an opportunity for the organization to be more proactive in assisting new fans.

This is supported in earlier research by Behrens and Uhrich (2020) who found that online fan communities were more receptive and welcoming towards new, outsider fans that were more prototypical. Fenton, Keegan, and Parry (2021) similarly found that nonlocal fans were received more positively if they demonstrated existing knowledge of the team and region. The current work further supports these findings and extends how managers may define what is considered prerequisite or prototypical knowledge. In the Seattle Kraken subreddit, there are various valued competencies that are rewarded and welcomed, including Kraken-specific (i.e., prototypical Kraken fan) knowledge and a rich understanding of the Seattle region. However, the current work also suggests that well-informed hockey fans are valued, even if they don't exclusively support the Kraken.

The current findings indicate that non-prototypical users may be able to utilize different discursive devices and tap into different valued competencies as a way of positioning themselves as a member of the community. For sports managers, this also represents an opportunity to support new fans by creating informational resources.

4.5.2.2 Appealing to “We”.

Based on the current findings, there is an opportunity for sport managers to better identify what matters to a community. By examining valued competencies and knowledge bases for a fan base, sports managers can more accurately attend to what matters to fans and identify promising brand associations that could be used in marketing initiatives.

For instance, if the fan base appears to strongly value the history of hockey in Seattle, the Seattle Kraken organization could identify that as part of a theme night or another part of a broader marketing plan.

4.5.2.3 Getting Involved.

There is also an opportunity for sport managers to be more active and involved in communities such as this Seattle Kraken subreddit. In addition to negotiating meaning, community members were also vocal about the organization. Oftentimes this discussion revolved around ticketing, attending games, or resources for new fans. In this sense, this represents a valuable opportunity for sport managers to be involved with meaningful fan communities to be a resource for fans.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

It is important to recognize limitations in the current work. One limitation is that this study offers a snapshot of how this subreddit community operates. *New fan posts*,

and the resulting discussion, is a small part of the overall community, where meaning is being constantly negotiated and navigated. The dataset was selected purposefully, as these posts do allow for a direct look at what the community deems as “what you need to know” about being member of the Kraken subreddit community. Still, new fans represent one of many potential entry points in examining wider community behavior. Future research could take other approaches to examining this phenomenon, such as conducting interviews with community members or using more expansive data collection techniques to get a wider glimpse at how fans experience the effects of prototypicality or the development over time.

Another limitation is the generalizability of these results beyond the Seattle Kraken subreddit. There were a variety of unique circumstances that are unlikely to translate clearly to other settings. For example, the Kraken franchise was originally announced just over a year before the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the pandemic, and the aftermath of getting back to in-person sporting events colored the community discussion.

While the high-level takeaways of how “we” was negotiated by the Kraken community are more generalizable, it is worth noting that different fan bases are inherently unique, suggesting “we” may be developed in slightly different ways depending on factors such as the geographic location, the team/organization, the sport, and the reach of the team/fanbase.

Future research could take a closer look at a community like the Kraken’s and examine key, influential users in these spaces. In the current work, certain users were present throughout the dataset, actively negotiating “we” across different posts. Future

research could examine these individuals, the degree of their influence, and if they have a tangible effect on how “we” is shaped and developed.

4.7 Conclusion

The current study examines how a newly established online fan community (i.e., r/SeattleKraken) for a newly announced professional sports team (i.e., Seattle Kraken) develops a sense of “we” (i.e., collective identity) over time. The results demonstrate that community members established “we” through the negotiation of various competencies that characterize being a fan of the Seattle Kraken and a member of the Kraken subreddit community. With this study, I wanted to investigate how fan communities come to determine who “we” are and subsequently the fan prototypes that define and inform community membership.

This study contributes valuable insights into the brand community literature, notably how consciousness of kind is developed over time. This study also contributes to sport consumer behavior literature, utilizing a combination of the CoP framework and the discursive psychological methodology to examine the interplay of language use and identity in online fandom. As a final step with the project, I wanted to take a step back and consider online fan behavior more holistically. Between Study 1 and Study 2, I observed many instances of online fans who actively supported multiple teams through Reddit subreddit communities. As a result, I wanted to examine this maximizing behavior, specifically in the context of Reddit. Study 3 aims to do just that, exploring online sports fandom, sport fan maximizing, and online fan behavior more holistically.

CHAPTER 5

ONLINE FANDOM BEYOND A PRIMARY TEAM IDENTITY

5.1 Introduction

Contemporary fandom is increasingly non-geographically bound, as new media has removed many of the barriers that once limited sports fans to supporting the team in their local, regional market (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). This is particularly apparent online, where social media networks, and online fan communities have made it easier than ever for individuals to connect with fellow fans, follow and support teams, and curate their own experience of sports fandom through the online medium (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Reifurth et al., 2019). New media has also created new opportunities for fans to engage with communities beyond their primary rooting interest.

Team identification is frequently the foci of sport consumer behavior scholars, as team identification is linked to various consumer behaviors (e.g., James & Trail, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2013; Smith & Stewart, 2007; Wakefield, 1995) and psychological health and well-being benefits (Wann, 2006). Team identification is inherently intertwined with external identities, such as regional identities (e.g., Heere & James, 2007), organizational identities (e.g., Delia, 2015; Katz et al., 2017) and other related social identities (e.g., Delia, 2020). Although team identification may represent a prominent social identity in the case of sports fans, it is but one of potentially many identities that comprise a fan's sense of self and self-concept. Despite our understanding that team identification relates and overlaps with various identities and interests, comparatively little is known about how fans negotiate multiple team identities (e.g., Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021) or

other sport-related identities (Kunkel et al., 2013). This is particularly apparent online, where fans may enact identities through online actions and behavior (Belk, 2013).

Online fan communities have become an increasingly popular area of research in examining sports consumer behavior, particularly examining the utility of online communities for fans (e.g., Chang et al., 2019; Gong et al., 2021; Stavros et al., 2014). However, much of this research has focused on fans' primary rooting interests and has thus far overlooked the online sports fan holistically. Online fans are not only active in their team's fan community but engage with other communities as they curate and shape their online fan experience. In this sense, they create complex identity structures that reflect offline interests or identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Huang et al. 2021).

In addition to exploring the nature of fan identity and online fan community participation, there is a need to examine how fan communication behavior varies across different communities. Communication behavior can be influenced by identity (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Additionally, the anonymous nature of online communication allows for consequence-free interactions, that can result in hostile community environments for fans (e.g., Behrens & Uhrich, 2020; Fenton, Gillooly, & Vasilica, 2021; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021; Kearns et al., 2022). Thus, there is a growing need to better understand online communication, particularly in the context of fan communities, which may serve as valuable touchpoints for nonlocal fans or potential new fans.

Contributing to a growing trend of sport management literature on new media (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022; Filo et al., 2015), I utilized data mining and textual analysis to explore fan behavior from one Reddit fan community. The purpose of this study is to explore online sports fandom and the online fan experience by examining the types of

communities fans participate in, beyond their primary rooting interest, and how communication behavior across these types of communities varies.

5.2 Literature Review

Study 3 similarly draws from the social identity approach, considering how online fans use the accessibility of online fan communities to construct identity structures beyond their primary rooting interest. Consistent with SIT, I draw from Lock and Funk's (2016) multiple in-group identity framework (MIIF) to explore how individuals use different communities for different purposes, balancing different needs across the different communities they participate in online. Existing literature in the sport consumer space refers to the phenomenon of sport fan maximizing or *ambi-fans*, as a way of conceptualizing fans who choose to support multiple teams. Informed by MIIF, I employ qualitative methods to explore how fans use other communities beyond their primary rooting interest as a means to better understand the nature of fandom in increasingly accessible online spaces, painting a more holistic picture of fandom.

5.2.1 Sports Fans and Multiple Social Identities

Sports fandom is commonly conceptualized as a social identity (i.e., team identity), referring broadly to an individual's sense of psychological connection with a team and the awareness of their status as a fan (Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004) posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics and experiences, such as gender, race, and nationality, as well as through other group memberships centered around hobbies and other interests. Such group associations play a key role in individuals' self-concept, which is one's overall perception

of themselves, either in terms of self-esteem and self-worth, or as defined by the various attributes or traits derived from personal experiences and group affiliations (Cast & Burke, 2002; Mittal, 2015). Consumption behavior, such as sports fandom, can provide symbolic meaning to one's self-concept (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Reed, 2002). Additionally, these social categories provide a sense of belonging and self-esteem as individuals define themselves amongst and compared to others (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Team identification operates similarly, as individuals derive a sense of identity and meaning from their affiliation with a sports team (Lock & Heere, 2017). While team identification may be a prominent social identity for sports fans, it is just one component of an individual's self-concept as individuals may have multiple and overlapping social identities that influence their behavior in different contexts (Lock & Funk, 2016; Mansfield, 2020; Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Team identification is inherently tied to external identities. For example, university students who support their college sports teams do so, balancing their related identities as university students and their identity as local residents of the larger community (Delia, 2015; Katz et al., 2017). Similarly, sports fans may more strongly identify with their team due to regional identities that are reflected in the team itself, such as a blue-collar team exemplifying the blue-collar identity of the local region (Heere & James, 2007; Heere et al., 2011). Other social identities, such as gender identity and identities around gender equity, have been demonstrated to also influence consumer support for sports teams (e.g., Delia, 2020). Social identities may also be activated depending on different settings. For example, role identities may become salient, given a particular context, prompting the individual to act in prototypical ways that are consistent

with the salient identity (Stets, 2018; Stets & Burke, 2000). In this sense, identities are often intertwined and negotiated. Team identity is merely one of many identities that comprise an individual's self-concept and influence behavior related to fandom (e.g., Heere & James, 2007; Lock & Heere, 2017; Mansfield, 2020).

Fans may use various social identities, even in the sports context, for different purposes. Lock and Funk (2016) consider this in terms of the MIIF in which fans theoretically identify with different groups of different sizes to satisfy different social and psychological needs. In their conceptualization of the MIIF, a team identity acts as a superordinate identity by promoting self-esteem, creating a sense of coherence, and reducing subjective uncertainty in relation to one's self-concept (Lock & Funk, 2016). In identifying with a team, Lock and Funk (2016) argue fans reinforce and support self-image through this broader identity. Subgroups (i.e., tailgating groups, online fan communities, etc.) within the superordinate are used to balance optimal distinctiveness between needs for belongingness and distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991, 1993) while more exclusive relational groups, such as close peer groups, are used to achieve interpersonal connectedness (Lock & Funk, 2016).

Fans are simultaneously members of multiple social groups, including other superordinate identities or other prominent social identities (Lock & Funk, 2016; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). For example, while an individual may differentiate themselves from fellow fans by participating in a tailgating group (Lock & Funk, 2016), that same fan may support other teams from different sports, or even rival teams within the same league to achieve similar social or psychological goals (Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). Although sports consumers are frequently studied in relation to their primary team

interest, studies considering the interplay of multiple team identities in the sports context are less common (e.g., Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). This is particularly pertinent in the case of online sports fandom, where multiple teams, communities, and interests are easily accessible, allowing fans to construct and curate a complex identity structure and self-concept through online fan behavior. As such, we need to broaden our understanding of how and why fans use social identities to construct their sense of self-concept, providing a more holistic understanding of sports fandom, particularly in online spaces.

5.2.2 Fans, Maximizing and the Portfolio of Fandom

There is a pressing lack of research considering how fans may adopt and layer multiple team identities as a way of satisfying different needs. Norris et al. (2015) refer to the process of adopting multiple teams as *sport fan maximizing*. They argue that fans, particularly supporters of uncompetitive teams, may choose to also support a separate, more competitive team to maximize their odds of supporting a winner and balance needs for belongingness and self-esteem, respectively (Norris et al., 2015). In supporting multiple teams in this sense, fans construct a unique sense of self and self-concept from complementary social identities that extends beyond their primary rooting interest. Sun et al. (2021) similarly consider fans who balance multiple team identities, yet they use the term *ambi-fans*, referring to fans who support multiple teams, even from the same league. Sun et al. (2021) highlight how *ambi-fans* use multiple team identities as a way of hedging, allowing them to shift allegiances due to competitive success, or lack thereof. While scholars have investigated why fans may disidentify with teams and may shift allegiances, particularly in the case of sport team relocation (Foster & Hyatt, 2007; Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Martin & Goldman, 2015), investigations into fan maximizing behavior

are less common. However, Sun et al. (2021) conclude that *ambi-fans* are unexpectedly persistent and may represent a dedicated class of fans, despite appearing less committed than the traditional highly identified fan, characterized by one focal team of interest. Together, this conceptualization of flexible fans who hedge their rooting interests with various team identities reflect an industry trend where fandom is becoming increasingly fluid, and fans may quickly shift interests or support from one team to another (*Sport Innovation Lab*).

In a sense, fans may create a sort of *portfolio of fandom*; a collection of rooting interests or team identities they engage with as part of their overarching sport consumption (Baker et al., 2016; Kunkel et al., 2013). As the MIIF and sport fan maximizing literature suggests, such a collection of team identities serve social and psychological purposes for fans, informing fan behavior (Lock & Funk, 2016; Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). New media stands at the center of how contemporary fans develop such a portfolio, expanding fan opportunities. Online streaming and online fan communities provide near-limitless access to resources where fans can engage with teams and fellow fans that extend beyond their primary rooting interest or their immediate geographic proximity (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Reifurth et al., 2019). While much of the existing sport consumer literature focuses on fans' primary, salient team identity, the traditional boundaries of where and how fans can enact fandom or engage with other communities no longer exist online. Thus, the question becomes, how do sports fans use online fan communities beyond their primary team identity?

5.2.3 Online Fan Behavior

Online fan communities, such as social media networks (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Reddit) and fan message boards, satisfy various needs for the contemporary sports fan. Fans utilize online fan communities to satisfy needs for connection and belongingness (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021; Newman, 2020), serve as sources of entertainment and information (Gibbs et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Stavros et al., 2014), and allow fans to react in real-time to live sporting events (Chang, 2019; Fan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). While this paints a picture of how or why individuals may choose to engage with online fan communities, this is a limited scope of true online fan behavior. The traditional geographic barriers that once limited how fans followed or supported other teams have been mitigated as a factor in the case of online sports consumption. If a fan wants to support a secondary team or engage with another rival community, they can, by seeking out the relevant online fan communities.

Particularly in the case of contemporary online fan communities, such as Reddit, individuals are likely to interact with communities beyond just one sports team or even beyond sport-specific interests. For example, Reddit is composed of numerous subreddits, which function as online communities or fan forums, about nearly any topic you can think of, including sports teams. As such, online fans can curate the information they consume, and their online identity, based on the subreddits (i.e., online communities) they choose to engage with. Although members of an online fan community may hold their primary team identity in high regard, it is unlikely that is the only community they interact with online (Kunkel et al., 2013). For example, while we understand that online sports fans, such as Cincinnati Bengals fans, are likely to engage

with the Bengals subreddit community, it is highly unlikely that is the only sport-related community they identify with or participate in, given the accessibility of complementary interests and alternative options (Baker et al., 2016; Kunkel et al., 2013). As such, my first guiding research question is:

RQ1: What types of online communities do fans engage with beyond their primary rooting interest?

This question has important implications for how we conceptualize online fandom. Traditionally, fans are viewed in terms of their primary rooting interest. However, with the prevalence and access of various online communities in the case of new media, it is worth considering if one's primary team identity is sufficient in properly defining online sports fans. Should we think of Bengals fans as merely Bengals fans? Or does being an online Bengals fan necessitate other identities that overlap and relate to the salient identity? Bengals fans may maximize fandom by frequenting other team-related communities (e.g., Buffalo Bills) or communities that similarly support geographically near teams (e.g., Cincinnati Reds, FC Cincinnati). Or they may participate in communities reflecting other sport-related identities (e.g., NFL, college football, fantasy football). This reflects a key oversight in how we conceptualize online fandom as online sports fans are more than just a fan of their primary team. The presumption is that sports fandom is no longer regionally bound due to new media, yet it remains unclear exactly what that means for where and how fans use new media to engage with other teams and identities. Thus, by exploring this question, we can consider online fans more holistically, garnering a better understanding of what types of identities/communities characterize the

online fan experience and develop a greater understanding of the role of team identification within the larger context of an online fan's self-concept.

Not only do we need to better understand the types of additional communities these fans utilize, but we also need to better understand how this involvement influences online communication, notably how identity, and the interplay of multiple identities, influences communication behavior online. In addition to exploring the types of communities that characterize online sports fan activity, the next step is to examine how fans engage with these communities. To consider this, we have to understand the implications of how/if identities overlap and then how that corresponds with fan behavior in the sense of communication and language use.

5.2.4 Communication Across Online Fan Communities

Individuals can construct unique experiences online with various interests and multiple social identities. It is the nature of contemporary online fan communities to allow individuals to curate their online experiences and the communities they wish to engage with. In this sense, online sports fans can create complex identity structures accounting for interests and identities that extend well beyond their salient team identity. Online users curate not only the information they are interested in, but also curate their own sense of self through their various online actions and behaviors, such as the communities they post and comment in, as well as the nature of that communication (e.g., Belk, 2013; Tamburrini et al., 2015; Welbers & de Nooy, 2014). As such, it is not only important to consider the types of communities' online fans interact with, but it is also important to explore how fans utilize these communities.

Online communication is often text- or image-based and largely occurs anonymously, with individuals modifying or altering parts of how they present themselves for the online medium (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Despite the potential for users to construct an entirely new sense of self online, individuals generally ground their online self to their offline identity and then edit facets of self when they go online, depending on the audience or platform (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Huang et al. 2021). As Belk (2013) discusses, new media asks the question, “who are you?” and begs users to engage in self-extension and continually answer that question. In this sense, online sports fans reasonably reflect and represent their offline identities through online engagement.

Identity can be a powerful influence on communication behavior. Individual communication behavior varies depending on factors such as community norms, the personal meaning of a community or social identity (Giles & Ogay, 2007), and an individual’s identity structure (i.e., combination of various identities; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). For instance, if a sports fan is interacting with a community of similarly identified fans, the fan will theoretically modify or adjust their communication in ways that are consistent with the social group in an effort to seek approval or acceptance from group members (e.g., Tamburrini et al., 2015; Welbers & de Nooy, 2014). In contrast, in-group and out-group distinctions may drive communication behavior that accentuates differences amongst communicators (Giles & Ogay, 2007), which may take the form of more confrontational or hostile communication (e.g., Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021). Hostility online is a concern in relation to online fan communities (e.g., Rösner & Kramer, 2016), as the largely anonymous nature of online communication gives

individuals the freedom and confidence to ridicule others (Kearns et al., 2022; Kilvington, 2020). As online fan communities play a prominent role in the present and future of sport fan community, it is necessary to explore communication behavior in online contexts, particularly the interplay of identity and communication behavior (Kearns et al., 2022).

For online sports fans, different communities may serve different purposes. A fan may not only engage with their primary team's community, but also may interact with larger league-level superordinate identities (e.g., NFL), or other related communities, to achieve a sense of coherence, or more focused team-specific communities as a means to negotiate belongingness and distinctiveness (Lock & Funk, 2016). The question remains, how does fan engagement vary across these groups? This represents a pressing gap in our understanding of online fan behavior and addressing this question can provide novel insights into how fans utilize different communities as part of their fan experience. While existing literature has identified that fans do not follow their favorite team exclusively (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2013), what this means for online communication is uncertain. As such, my second guiding research question is:

RQ2: What purpose do online communities serve beyond a primary rooting interest, and in what ways do fans engage with these communities?

In exploring the differences in how online sports fans communicate across different communities, we can consider how different types of communities and identities attract differences in fan behavior. This has implications for how sport managers identify and market to online users as each online community beyond their primary team presents an additional datapoint for targeted marketing efforts (e.g., partnering with other

products, fostering rivalries, recognizing teams' community users similarly identify with). For example, do online Bengals fans communicate similarly across other team-specific communities, or do these communities serve entirely different communicative purposes in relation to sport-related identities? When the salient community identity is no longer team-specific, but represents a superordinate identity, such as the NFL or the fantasy football community, do Bengals fans change their communicative purpose and type of engagement? And how is community engagement informed by geographic or regional ties to a team or community? In exploring these behaviors, I seek to better understand, not only the complex identity structures of online sports fans, but also how or if different communities influence different behavior in the online setting. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore online sports fandom and the online fan experience by examining the types of communities fans participate in, beyond their primary rooting interest, and how the fans engage and enact identity across these types of communities.

To address both of my guiding research questions, I employ web scraping techniques and qualitative content analysis.

5.3 Methodology

5.3.1 Data Collection and Context

Data were collected using the Python programming language with the PRAW package to access the Reddit API. I collected user data on users who posted in one team-specific subreddit (i.e., r/Bengals).

Reddit is a social media platform comprised of a litany of subreddits, which effectively serve as fan communities, or online fan forums. It is an online community-driven platform where users can share content, engage in discussions, and participate in

various communities by means of subreddits. Subreddits cover a wide range of topics, catering to diverse interests and niches, including sports teams, where individuals can engage with like-minded others through subreddit involvement. Reddit users can “join” any number of over 130 thousand subreddit communities (Reddit User Base, 2023). When a user joins a community, the community posts are added to a running “Home” feed, populated by posts from the various subreddits an individual follows. For example, an NFL fan can join the league subreddit (i.e., r/NFL), as well as other subreddit communities, such as the Bengals subreddit (i.e., r/Bengals), or the Cincinnati community subreddit (i.e., r/Cincinnati). In this case, this individual’s “Home” feed would then populate with community posts from the NFL, Bengals, and Cincinnati subreddits. In this sense, Reddit not only connects users with thousands of communities (i.e., subreddits), but also allows users to curate their communities (i.e., identities) of interest.

For academics, Reddit proves to be a valuable source of information due to its capacity for real-time discussions and diverse opinions. In contrast to other social media platforms like Twitter, Reddit facilitates longer posts without character limitations. Furthermore, researchers benefit from Reddit's Application Programming Interface (API), enabling the retrieval of historical data through data mining techniques. With an estimated 55.79 million daily active users, predominantly aged between 18 and 29, Reddit is a significant platform (Reddit User Base, 2023). Notably, 63.8% of users are men (Reddit User Base, 2023).

The Bengals subreddit was purposefully selected, given my familiarity with the team, the context of Bengals fandom, and the related regional communities, interests, and identities. Bengals fans may engage with various sport-related communities.

Understanding the historical context of how Bengals fans may engage with these different communities allows for a more nuanced understanding of how community members are constructing complex identity structures through community involvement. For example, in my data analysis, the Buffalo Bills, Kansas City Chiefs, Baltimore Ravens, and Pittsburgh Steelers are among the most visited communities beyond the Bengals community. While all four teams may be thought of as rivals, with the Ravens and Steelers being divisional rivals and the Chiefs and Bills being more recent conference rivals, I also know that historically the Bengals and Bills fan communities have been amicable and friendly with one another due to shared history (e.g., the Bengals beating the Ravens in 2017 to get the Bills into the playoffs; Damar Hamlin's collapse in Cincinnati in 2022, etc.). Having this deep knowledge of historical context allows me to attend to a more nuanced understanding of the community and the ways Bengals fans interact with other non-Bengals communities.

For my data collection, I used PRAW to access the Reddit API and scraped the 2,000 most recent subreddit posts from the Bengals subreddit (i.e., r/Bengals) to create a list of recent users to publish on the Bengals subreddit. The result was a list of 530 users who had previously posted on the Bengals subreddit. I then used PRAW to collect additional posts submitted by those users across the network of Reddit subreddit communities. For example, if user "u/blainehuber" was listed as one of the most recent users to post to the Bengals community, I would then collect their broader posting behavior, such as posts submitted to the NFL subreddit, the Cincinnati subreddit, etc. The resulting dataset was 61,487 Reddit posts that had been published across 5,188 subreddit communities.

5.3.2 Data Analysis

The research questions examined how fans use online fan communities beyond their primary rooting interest, as well as how fans interact with these communities in relation to balancing social and psychological needs. To address my first research question, investigating how online users engage with communities beyond their primary rooting interest, I evaluated the posts based on the subreddits Bengals users frequent. I first removed Auto-moderators (i.e., Reddit bots) and then conducted an exploratory analysis of the dataset. Posts from subreddits that have been infrequently visited by users were removed and the top subreddits, in terms of unique users, were identified, reflecting the most common overlap amongst Bengals fans and related communities. I specifically focused on the top-20 subreddit communities for sport-related subreddits. Creating this distinction is deemed necessary to better conceptualize the sport fan experience in terms of fan-related behavior and is consistent with the focal topic of interest in this study being how online sports fans engage with other sport-related identities beyond their primary team.

To identify the most popular sport-related subreddits, I used Excel PivotTables to rank all the subreddits based on the unique count of authors who posted in that subreddit. For example, since all users were pulled from the Bengals subreddit, the Bengals subreddit had 530 unique author posts. The second highest was the NFL subreddit with 154 unique author posts, r/Reds with 89 unique author posts, and so on. The resulting dataset was 9,444 posts by 285 users across the top-20 sport-related subreddits.

The top-20 sport-related subreddits visited by users from the Bengals subreddit were r/NFL (154 users), r/Reds (89 users), r/fantasyfootball (63 users), r/buffalobills (52

users), r/KansasCityChiefs (47 users), r/CFB (college football; 44 users), r/collegebasketball (38 users), r/steelers (37 users), r/Madden (35 users), r/ravens (35 users), r/baseball (33 users), r/Browns (33 users), r/detroitlions (33 users), r/TennesseeTitans (33 users), r/Colts (32 users), r/NBA (32 users), r/LosAngelesRams (30 users), r/49ers (30 users), r/Jaguars (30 users), and r/Patriots (30 users).

To address my second research question, which sought to explore how individuals interact and engage different sport-related subreddit communities, I used content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique for making sense of textual and communication data, particularly in cases where existing literature on a phenomenon is limited (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As such, content analysis was warranted for exploring how online fan community members engaged and communicated with communities beyond their primary rooting interest.

While content analysis is a versatile approach that can be applied to quantitative and qualitative studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kleinheksel et al., 2020), I used qualitative content analysis, taking an inductive approach to investigate how online fan community users interacted with other communities beyond their primary rooting interest. To do so, I first used my ranking of sport-related subreddits (based on unique users) and pulled the posts for each of the top 20 subreddits. Second, starting with the first subreddit (e.g., r/NFL), I read the posts and immersed myself in the content to obtain a sense of the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Tesch, 1990). As my third step, I then read each post, open coding posts in terms of the communicative purpose and how communities were used beyond the Bengals subreddit (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Miles &

Huberman, 1994). I attended to potential maximizing behaviors during open coding but was open to inductive, emergent codes as well. The purpose of this step was to examine how users engaged with other communities, exploring how Bengals community members use different online communities for different purposes, specifically related to one's self-concept and identity structure around fandom.

Once I had reviewed the posts for one subreddit, I moved on to the next subreddit, immersed myself in the related posts, and engaged in further open coding. I repeated this process until I had reviewed all 20 of the most popular sport-related subreddit communities, based on my ranking. Once I had open coded each of the 20 subreddits, I built out meaningful clusters of codes into broader categories that characterize how Bengals community users interacted (e.g., posted) with subreddits beyond the Bengals community and captured the ideas underpinning the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

In total, qualitative content analysis was employed to explore how Bengals fans use sport-related subreddits beyond their primary rooting interest (i.e., r/Bengals).

5.4 Analysis and Findings

Through the application of qualitative coding techniques, I identified distinct patterns of fan behavior, highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals interact with online fan communities beyond their primary rooting interest. The findings shed light on the complex interplay between fan identity expression and the utilization of digital platforms for community engagement.

The analysis identified several prominent categories that encapsulate how fans use online communities to balance different social and psychological needs related to one's self-concept and identity structure. These categories include Generalized Fandom,

Regional Fandom, Trolling Behavior, and a collection of Maximizing Behaviors. Please note that users have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

5.4.1 Generalized Fandom

Bengals subreddit users use other communities beyond their primary rooting interest to support broader and more generalized sports fandom. This is reflected in the varied participation in league-level and sport-level subreddit communities beyond the Bengals subreddit. This participation is characterized by users who report or share sports news and users who cultivate community by posting discussion prompts, highlights, or other content (see Table 5.1 for examples).

Many users interact with other communities to share and disseminate information, often playing a role as a reliable source of news and updates. The information being shared is rarely original content that the user sourced themselves but generally a social media post from another outlet or a news report from a reputable news source. Depending on the subreddit, these posts may be presented in a structured format, with the source being shared in brackets and the information then to follow. This way of formatting is widely adopted as a standard way of sharing news, at least in the league-level subreddits. For example, the r/NFL subreddit lists this as a required format for news posts with other rules around how to present the information (e.g., it cannot be a screenshot, there must be an identifiable source).

Particularly in the broader focused communities (i.e., r/NFL, r/fantasyfootball, r/CFB, r/collegebasketball, r/baseball, r/NBA) the purpose of this engagement is to enact a broader identification as a fan of sport. For example, users share breaking NFL news in the NFL on the r/NFL page, whether the news is specific to the Bengals or not. This

occurs similarly across other league-level subreddits, as well as the r/fantasyfootball community, where news is particularly common. Reporting occurs in each of the 20 subreddits with the lone exception being r/Madden.

Table 5.1
Examples of Generalized Fandom (Reporting)

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/nfl	NFLPoster1	[Ian Rapoport] #49ers senior defensive assistant James Bettcher is expected to fill the vacant LBs job with the #Bengals, sources tell me and @TomPelissero. A strong addition in Cincy.		234	26
r/fantasyfootball	FFPoster1	James Conner is back in the game. Briefly went into medical tent		170	26

This behavior is less common on team-specific subreddits, with the exception of the r/Reds community, where many of the Bengals users are also fans of the Reds and active members of the community. Across the other team-specific subreddits (e.g., r/49ers, r/buffalobills), news is rarely reported by Bengals users.

Generalized fandom is reflected in the ancillary sport consumption communities, r/fantasyfootball and r/Madden. In the r/fantasyfootball subreddit, fans ask questions and discuss the fantasy football implications of the latest NFL news. While not as popular amongst Bengals users, the r/Madden subreddit community similarly reflects an ancillary consumption activity in and around sport where users are engaging with the NFL video game and engaging with fellow players of the game. These communities reflect broader consumption driven activity, informed, but not inherently driven by their primary rooting

interest. Similar to how Bengals users may reflect identity as a fan of the NBA, these users reflect broader identification with the NFL product through these consumption activities.

Another behavior associated with generalized sports fandom is the act of cultivating community engagement (see Table 5.2 for examples). These are users who engage with communities beyond the Bengals subreddit, asking questions and attempting to generate discussion. The nature of these questions often has little to do with Bengals specifically, usually more directed towards better understanding another team or generating discussion about a league or sport more broadly. In this sense, the identity enacted is not Bengals referenced, but suggests a more generalized interest in sport (Kunkel et al., 2013). Bengals users engage in this type of behavior widely across the top-20 sport-related subreddits. For example, users may ask specific questions of a team-specific subreddit. Oftentimes Bengals users disclose their fandom in these NFL team communities.

Across the league-level communities, disclosures about being a Bengals fan are less common. However, users still frequently engage in this behavior, asking questions of the broader community. In this sense, Bengals users are utilizing other subreddit communities for the purpose of their own entertainment and for information, reflecting a more generalized interest in sport and a stereotypical usage for social media (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Stavros et al., 2014).

Table 5.2*Examples of Generalized Fandom (Cultivating Community)*



Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/LosAngelesRams	RamsPoster1	Question from a Bengals fan	Well, as the title suggests, I have a question... How do you guys feel about bringing in Frank Gore to fit your power run scheme? I know he is pretty damn old, but if he can even give you 40% of snaps, plus the added leadership, I think you can acquire him on a cheap one year deal. Thoughts?	5	13
r/ravens	RavensPoster1	Why is it that you guys seem to be injured all the time? Bad luck or bad training staff?		0	13
r/NFL	NFLPoster2	Would you pay Jamies Winston 25 million a year?	He will surely seek 30, but would you pay him 25 if you were a GM? The guy is such an enigma. Still only 26 which is very young by QB standards.	3	90

5.4.2 Regional Fandom

A second emergent pattern from the content analysis is the prevalence of enacted regional fandom. Bengals users often interact with other subreddit communities in ways that reflect regional teams, such as the University of Cincinnati Bearcats, the University of Kentucky Wildcats, and the Cincinnati Reds (MLB). In particular, the r/Reds are a popular subreddit community amongst Bengals users as a source of news, discussion, and entertainment for the Cincinnati-based MLB franchise, the only MLB team-specific subreddit to appear in the top-20 sports-related communities. Given the geographic proximity of the Reds and Bengals, there is mention of the Bengals across these posts, notably in instances where Bengals players are throwing the ceremonial first pitch for a

Reds game or when the teams are sharing in each other's successes on social media (see Table 5.3 for examples).

Table 5.3
Examples of Regionalized Fandom (Reds Subreddit Posts)

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/Reds	RedsPoster1	Johnathan India at the Bengals game	I was at the bengals game last night and I was so happy to see India at the game. I know he's from Florida so it's so nice to see him enjoying his time in Cincinnati when there's nothing baseball related to be doing.	107	6
r/Reds	RedsPoster2	Another Bengals 1st pitch coming tonight		206	18
r/Reds	RedsPoster3	The Buffalo Bills' Instagram is currently campaigning to get Buffalo native Jesse Winker voted into the All Star Game via former NFL Pro-Bowl Bills' Center Eric Wood. Wood, a Cincinnati native, hails from Elder High School!		165	5

While the r/Reds subreddit, like the Bengals, is focused on a Cincinnati team, regional fandom also permeates how Bengals users interact and communicate across other subreddit communities (see Table 5.4 for examples). For instance, in the r/CFB

subreddit, Bengals users are active, sharing information and discussion points, specifically about teams like the Ohio State Buckeyes, University of Cincinnati, and the University of Kentucky. In the r/collegebasketball subreddit, many Bengals users also post about the Xavier University Musketeers and the University of Indiana. Each of which are universities in regional proximity to the city of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Table 5.4

Examples of Regionalized Fandom (Broader Communities)

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/CFB	CFBPoster1	Lee Corso on Gameday said, 1-loss Notre Dame should get in over undefeated Cincinnati		1	1
r/fantasyfootball	FFPoster2	Is G Bernard's stock falling??	So as of today, Jeremy Hill will be taking first team snaps in the next preseason game for the Bengals. Does this hurt his draft stock? I have him on my board currently as my 4th round pick (26th overall), which I felt was good value; however it's looking more and more like he'll be in a RBBC with Hill and Law Firm. Thoughts? Should I take M Ball, A Morris, or R Bush instead? Help me out, guys! Thanks!	5	39
r/Madden	MaddenPoster1	Bengals Playbook?	Hey guys I am a Bengals fan looking for other Bengals fans opinions, or at least people who watch their games and are familiar with this years offense. I am trying to figure out if there is a playbook in the game that would successfully emulate the offense we have been running this season. Not necessarily the trick plays though those would be a plus. I would like to avoid playbooks that hide wr1 in the slot because we don't really do that. Any ideas would be greatly appreciated. Downloadable playbooks are more than welcome. Thanks Bros.	1	2

The content being shared in these cases is similar to other posting behavior. Users share breaking news or ask questions. In many ways, these posts are Bengals users conveying and sharing their team identity with other fans. However, outside the r/Reds community, the subreddits where regional fandom is being communicated are generally league-level, broader focused communities (see Table 5.4 for examples). These posts suggest users are taking an informational role, informing other groups of fans who may not follow Cincinnati sports about the topical news or providing their valued perspective on a team they watch closely compared to a fan from the state of Florida who has little interest keeping up with the University of Cincinnati football program. In this sense, Bengals users engage with broader focused subreddits for the purpose of demonstrating an expertise and knowledge base with other sports fans.

Regional fandom similarly influences communication behavior in the r/fantasyfootball and r/Madden subreddits. As fantasy football is specific to the NFL, Bengals users tend to similarly share what they have seen from watching the Bengals that may sway or contribute to the community discussion around player discussion and analysis (see FFPster2 in Table 5.4). For the r/Madden community, users are also likely to discuss the Bengals, either identifying a technical issue with the game they discovered while playing with the Bengals or discussing the accuracy of how the game portrays the Bengals as a team (see MaddenPoster1 in Table 5.4).

Regional fandom may also permeate communication on team-specific subreddits as well, even those for the NFL. For instance, one fan (i.e., TitansPoster1) posts on the Tennessee Titans subreddit to ask how the community feels about their newly drafted quarterback, a University of Kentucky product, Will Levis (see Table 5.5). In the post,

the user discloses their Bengals fandom, but also that they are a Kentucky fan who watched Levis in college. For this fan, the purpose for their engagement with the Titans community is less prompted by their Bengals fandom, despite the disclaimer, but rather is motivated by a separate, regional identity of fandom.

Table 5.5

Example of Regionalized Fandom (Team-specific Communities)

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/Tennesseetitans	TitansPoster1	Thoughts on Levis	Bengals fan coming in piece. I live in Cincinnati, and besides being a UC fan, not only because I go there, but also hometown school, I'm also a UK fan. I really liked Levis coming out of the draft and thought he fell for no real reason. Especially with the recent reports that his doctor told him he shouldn't play last year and that Kentucky had to change their offense on the fly to adjust to his limited capabilities. But I personally think he has the highest potential out of all the QB's in this draft. (I am incredibly low on Richardson. I think he'll be like a Zach Wilson 2.0) But in the circles that I frequent being a Bengals fan, all I see is Will Levis hate. Not a single person talking about how he could be good, but everyone saying he wasn't even worth a 2nd. I really don't get it. So I want to know your opinions on him.	14	41

A separate post that further reflects the overlap across regional fandoms is a post from the r/Reds subreddit community, as shown in Table 5.3. This was a post submitted by a Bengals user (i.e., RedsPoster3) who is sharing that the Buffalo Bills are campaigning on behalf of a Reds player and Buffalo native, Jesse Winker, with the help of Bills' player Eric Wood, a Cincinnati native. Cincinnati and Buffalo have a sort of kinship, from the past couple years, between the Bengals helping the Bills break a playoff drought in 2018 (London, 2018) and then both teams uniting in response to Bills player,

Damar Hamlin, collapsing during a matchup on January 2, 2023 (Van Natta Jr., 2023). The awareness of this overlap in sport identities makes this post relevant in many ways. Cincinnati and Buffalo have no reason to overlap in baseball, but the sports history between the two cities, specifically between the Bills and Bengals, undoubtedly contributes to why this user posts this specific content. In this way, Bengals users, such as RedsPoster3, are enacting various sport team identities through their behavior. Not only are they sharing a story with Reds fans, but they are also tapping into an existing understanding of how a fellow regional fandom (i.e., Cincinnati Bengals) contributes to this story.

The presence of regional fandoms in the posting behavior of Bengals users reflects a complex identity structure that can be supported through online fan behavior. A Cincinnati Bengals fan may be likely to live in Cincinnati, or the surrounding region, with additional fandoms in baseball (e.g., Cincinnati Reds), basketball (e.g., University of Kentucky), and college football (e.g., Ohio State University). Thus, *how* Bengals users interact with online communities beyond their primary interest is informed, in part, by other regional teams. In the case of the r/Reds community, users may overlap in their participation across both communities, engaging with the r/Reds subreddit as they would the r/Bengals subreddit with each representing a valued team identity with each being informative or influential for the other, as is the case with the r/Reds example above.

5.4.3 Trolling

For some Bengals users the purpose of community engagement with other sport-related subreddits is to poke fun at another fan base or team. This behavior is trolling and is usually associated with specific games, teams, or rivalries. They are generally light-

hearted trolling, playful banter, or meme wars, poking fun by using an image or video. However, some posts are less amicable as well.

Of the top-20 sport-related subreddit communities, trolling behavior primary occurs in team-specific subreddit communities, notably the r/KansasCityChiefs, r/steelers, and r/ravens. Each of these teams are rivals, with the Steelers and Ravens reflecting heated divisional rivalries. The Chiefs are a newer rivalry, based on the past three seasons where the Chiefs and Bengals have been highly competitive at the top of the league.

Online, this competition resulted in trolling behavior where Bengals users would make content with the intention of poking fun at the respective team's community. For example, the Chiefs are the most frequented community for this behavior in the dataset with multiple users posting in the Chiefs subreddit (see Table 5.6 for examples). These posts are generally playful with the intent to draw attention and derive a reaction from the Chiefs community. In the case of the above examples, these interactions often involve humorous or sarcastic exchanges, reflecting a form of friendly competition or lighthearted rivalry.

Table 5.6*Examples of Trolling Behavior (Kansas City Chiefs Subreddit)*

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/KansasCityChiefs	ChiefsPoster1	It's on		278	34
r/KansasCityChiefs	ChiefsPoster2	Shitposting Wars: Attack of Mahomes		109	9
r/KansasCityChiefs	ChiefsPoster3	Let the meme wars begin!		407	21

The r/KansasCityChiefs subreddit is not the only community to receive trolling behavior. A similar type of trolling post was identified in the r/LosAngelesRams subreddit, with a user poking fun at how fans of the Rams and Bengals were arguing with one another before they played in Super Bowl 56 (see Table 5.7).

The tone in other subreddits for rival teams is generally less playful. It should be noted that Reddit has various forms of moderation, between auto-moderation that remove posts if they are off-topic or hateful, and designated users who manually evaluate posts that meet or do not meet community guidelines. While some moderated posts are still visible, others may have the content of the post removed or posts may be entirely deleted, depending on the content of the post. In the current dataset, some posts suggest trolling behavior, but have since been edited or moderated in that the content is no longer visible. This may be particularly prevalent in subreddits for rival teams, where fans may be theoretically less amicable and playful between fan bases.

Table 5.7
Examples of Trolling Behavior (Non-Chiefs)

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/LosAngelesRams	RamsPoster2	WhY cAn'T wE aLl JuSt GeT aLoNg???		22	3
r/ravens	RavensPoster2	Joe mixons coin flip celebration was funny.		0	10

However, that does not prevent Bengals users from using the accessibility of online fan communities to engage in trolling behavior. For example, one Bengals user (i.e., RavensPoster2) posted about a celebration by a Bengals player that alluded to a controversial decision to decide playoff seeding between the Bengals and Ravens on a coin flip (see Table 5.7). In this sense, the users' identity as a Bengals fan is being enacted in a rival fan community's space. Generally, online trolling behavior is associated with efforts to antagonize, gain attention, and generate responses (Demsar et al., 2021; Sanfilippo et al., 2018). Bengals users' trolling behavior tends to follow suit.

Trolling behavior is not exclusive to team-specific subreddits. However, trolling behavior is more common, comprising more of the interaction between Bengals fans and team-specific subreddits than that of broader, league-level communities where most of the interaction is news, content, and discussion-based posts.

5.4.4 Supporting Teams Beyond the Bengals

A prominent category that emerged through my analysis was the act of supporting teams beyond the Bengals. This refers to Bengals users who utilize other subreddit communities beyond the r/Bengals subreddit to manage alternative and/or complementary team identities through processes including sport fan maximizing (Norris et al., 2015), uniting with other fan bases to root against a common enemy, and, in rare cases, to disidentify as a Bengals fan and shift their allegiance to a new team. In this sense, this category of online fan behavior reflects how fans utilize multiple online fan communities to construct and curate a fan portfolio comprised of various rooting interests.

5.4.4.1 Maximizing Behavior

Maximizing behavior is represented by users who utilize other subreddit communities for the purpose of expressing and extending their support onto other teams. This is consistent with existing work on sport fan maximizers (Norris et al., 2015) and *ambi-fans* (Sun et al., 2021) in that these are instances where Bengals fans are using other subreddit communities to balance needs for belongingness (as members of multiple groups) and self-esteem. This behavior is explicit on NFL team-specific subreddits, notably the r/buffalobills, r/jaguars, and r/detroitlions subreddits (see Table 5.8 for examples).


For instance, BillsPoster1 identifies themselves as a Bengals fan who has adopted the Bills as a “surrogate” team, implying that the Bills occupy a secondary or complementary role in this user’s portfolio of fandom (see Table 5.8). While this post is one that specifically comments on that week’s game against one of the Bengals primary

rivals, this user represents a Bengals fan who uses Reddit to support their secondary, “surrogate” team.

The Bengals and Bills have an amicable history between the two franchises and, by extension, between the two fan bases. Posts by BillsPoster2 and BillsPoster3 reflect these ties between the franchises and how the Buffalo Bills may be treated as complementary team identities or rooting interests (see Table 5.8). Additionally, another post from BillsPoster1 similarly seeks to maximize their fandom by asking the r/buffalobills community if they will be accepted as a “dual citizen” as both a fan of the Bills and the Bengals.

This post reiterates how the accessibility of contemporary online fan communities, specifically Reddit, can aid sport fan maximizers and *ambi-fans* who may wish to support multiple teams. As discussed by Norris et al., (2015) and Sun et al., (2021), sport fan maximizing allows fans to achieve feelings of belongingness and self-esteem through multiple team identities. As these examples demonstrate, Bengals users consider the Bills to be a complementary identity, as a competitive team from a geographic location not unlike Cincinnati. Additionally, the Bills are not a direct rival to the Bengals, but rather share positive historical overlap, despite competing in different divisions. This shared history is referenced in a second post from BillsPoster1 and BillsPoster3 in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8*Examples of Maximizing Behavior (Buffalo Bills)*

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/buffalobills	BillsPoster1	As a Bengals fan, I wish my surrogate team all the luck in the world against the Black and Gold. Destroy them!		475	27
r/buffalobills	BillsPoster1	Buffalobros, I come from the land of r/Bengals.	May I be accepted as a fan of your team as a dual-citizenship fan? Our bonds are strong, and I want to be able to rep both teams on sundays from now on.	137	27
r/buffalobills	BillsPoster2	Bengals fan dropping in	Just wanted to tell you guys, I fucking love you guys and your entire fanbase. That is all #Billsmafia	244	24
r/buffalobills	BillsPoster3	To our Buffalo Brethren	<p>As a Bengals fan, I hope this sub can agree that the love is mutual between our franchises.</p> <p>The Bills have become my second favorite AFC franchise, and I hope you all the best in winning the AFC East and competing for a championship. The outpouring of love you all have given Andy Dalton in the past has touched us as fans, and we love you all for it. In honor of his release, I implore you to join me in donating \$14 to his foundation if you can afford it. The link will be below, thanks for all the support for him and our org. We will continue to do the same for you guys! Go Bills and Bengals!</p> <p>https://www.andydalton.org/mobile/index.aspx</p> <p>Edit: no gold was needed here, but thank you 🙏 only the Bills Mafia and Who Dey nation know what love like this between franchises is ❤️</p>	138	25

As the example highlights, the bonds between the Bills and Bengals are “strong” with many similarities as small-market franchises that have experienced many of the same successes and struggles (Dehner Jr. & Graham, 2023). The Bills and Bengals represent similar types of teams for a fan looking to add a new team to their portfolio.

The Detroit Lions and Jacksonville Jaguars represent a similar phenomenon with both teams in the past two seasons showing promise and a similar trajectory to that of the Bills and Bengals (Pouncy & Howe, 2023). As such, Bengals users use these communities to similarly maximize and demonstrate their support for the two teams. As demonstrated in the examples from JaguarsPoster1 and LionsPoster1 in Table 5.9, these Bengals users gravitate to the Lions and Jaguars, in part, because they reflect similarities to their primary rooting interest (i.e., the Bengals), in terms of roster construction, team outlook and even nickname and logo.

Bengals fans express support for NFL teams like the Bills, Lions, and Jaguars, in large part due to the similarities between the franchises. In the case of the Bills, these similarities are reflected in “strong bonds”. The Lions and Jaguars serve more as a mirror to similar trajectories, and both also share logos that are big cats.

Maximizing behavior is also reflected beyond the NFL team-specific subreddits. For example, the Cincinnati Reds represent a complementary non-NFL team identity that is popular amongst Bengals users. The Reds also reflect regional parallels. Regional fandom, as enacted in the broadly focused, league-level subreddits, reflect additional team identities that comprise a fan’s self-concept and fan portfolio, such as a complementary rooting interest in the Ohio State Buckeyes in college football, or the Kentucky Wildcats in college basketball.

Table 5.9*Examples of Maximizing Behavior (Lions and Jaguars)*

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/jaguars	JaguarsPoster1	Fellow Catbro fan coming to wish ya'll good luck	Hey guys I'm a Bengals fan and just wanted to let ya'll know I'm pulling for you to beat the Titans and make some noise in the playoffs this year. You guys remind me a lot of the Bengals last year. Coming off a bad year, young QB turning it on after a tough start and good players around him rising to the occasion. I'm also a big fan of Doug Pederson I feel like he never got as much credit as he deserved in Philly and he's proving it this year. I definitely don't want to see you guys in the playoffs vs my Bengals, but I will be rooting for you in every other game.	54	15
r/detroitlions	LionsPoster1	cat bros.... bengals fan here..	am i crazy for thinking detroit could pull off this upset against denver? maybe i'm being dramatic but that locker room with mcdc after that win had to be something spectacular, i really feel like they're gonna carry that energy and momentum into this game and denver's not gonna see it coming. or am i just high on hopium?	38	16

Maximizing behavior allows fans to balance various social and psychological needs (Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). In supporting multiple teams, a fan can improve their odds that one of their teams will be competitive and self-esteem enhancing, while another team may prompt a stronger sense of community as a result of a fan's identification. While maximizing behavior is associated with supporting multiple teams in the same league or sport, this category suggests online fans construct and enact complex identity structures around sport fandom through involvement with their primary rooting interest (e.g., r/Bengals), secondary rooting interests from the same league (e.g.,

r/buffalobills, r/detroitlions, r/jaguars), and complementary rooting interests from various sports (e.g., r/Reds and the Kentucky Wildcats via r/CFB or r/collegebasketball).

5.4.4.2 Uniting Against a Common Enemy

Another category that emerged from my analysis is a behavior referred to as “uniting against a common enemy”. This refers to instances where Bengals users extend their support for another team, often a rival, to root against a more disliked team (see Table 5.10 for examples). These are maximizing behaviors, in that Bengals users are engaging with another team-specific subreddit and indicating their support for the team in question. However, this maximizing behavior is more temporary, with users seeking camaraderie with cheering against a common enemy, but quickly returning to a relatively contentious relationship between in-group (e.g., Bengals fans) and out-group (e.g., Ravens fans). This occurs primarily across the subreddit communities for the Bengals’ divisional rivals (i.e., r/steelers, r/ravens, r/browns).

In the example from BrownsPoster1 in Table 5.10, a Bengals user posts in the r/browns subreddit community. They self-identify as a Bengals fan and then highlight how Bengals and Browns fans have a shared hatred of the Pittsburgh Steelers. This user concludes their post by acknowledging that the Bengals and Browns play the following week in a rivalry known as “The Battle for Ohio”.

This post exemplifies a fan who is actively throwing their support behind another team, in this case a rival. They do so for the sake of rooting against a more hated rival (i.e., the Pittsburgh Steelers). Similar posts are also shared on the r/ravens subreddit with the intention to unite over a shared disdain for the rival Steelers.

Table 5.10

Examples of Uniting Against a Common Enemy

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/browns	BrownsPoster1	Bengals fan here and just wanted to say...	Kick the Steelers ass on Sunday! We will be cheering you on! I know y'all got this. Fuck the Steelers! And can't wait to face y'all next week in the Ohio Bowl.	231	55
r/ravens	RavensPoster3	From a Bengals fan	I come in Peace. You beautiful bastards. Thank you for silencing the most ignorant fan base in the league on their home field. Next week you get a crack at the 2nd most ignorant fans. I'm pulling for ya! F.T.S.	55	10
r/ravens	NFLPoster1	BENGALS FAN HERE JUST TO SAY LETS GOOOOOO FUCK THE STEELERS		12	3
r/49ers	49ersPoster1	Bengals fan who's still not over the SB coming peace... thank you for embarrassing that trash team in prime time 🙏		396	18

Across these posts, Bengals users are identifying other communities that have or will play their primary salient rival (i.e., the Steelers) and are actively expressing support for a different divisional opponent in the process. This behavior represents Glory Out of Reflected Failure (GORF) in that Bengals users are experiencing, or seeking, satisfaction when a rival experiences indirect failure, such as a loss (Havard, 2014). In this case, rival subreddits serve a purpose for Bengals users to extend temporary support for a less salient or despised rival who is competing against a more hated opponent (i.e., “common enemy”).



The “common enemy” also tends to shift, depending on circumstance. For instance, a similar phenomenon was directed at the Browns when Cleveland signed quarterback Deshaun Watson to a 5-year, \$230 million fully guaranteed contract, while Watson faced accusations of sexual assault and misconduct (Kasabian, 2022). In response, Bengals users posted in the r/steelers and r/ravens subreddits, urging an “alliance” against the Browns (see Table 5.11 for examples).

This behavior occurs predominantly on the subreddits for divisional rivals, but not exclusively. For example, one user posts to the r/49ers subreddit to demonstrate support and appreciation for the 49ers beating the Los Angeles Rams, a team the Bengals previously lost to in the Super Bowl the year prior (see Table 5.10).

For these Bengals users, engaging with non-Bengals subreddits supports fan maximizing behavior. This is particularly clear through online fan behavior, given the flexibility afforded to fans on a social media platform like Reddit, where subreddit communities for nearly any topic are easily accessible. For sports fans, this allows for maximizing and extending rooting interests beyond their primary team identity.

Table 5.11

Examples of Uniting Against a Common Enemy (Watson "Alliance")

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/steelers	SteelersPoster1	Bengals fan here, I come in peace. Temporary alliance?		1338	162
r/ravens	RavensPoster4	Finally, we agree on one thing		357	35

5.4.4.3 Disidentification

Disidentification is a category of Bengals users who use subreddits beyond the r/Bengals community for the purpose of choosing a new team to support, after deciding to no longer identify with the Bengals. Only two users in the dataset engage in this behavior, with both reacting to news that former Cincinnati Bengals head coach Marvin Lewis was signing a contract extension with the team in 2018. One user posted in the r/buffalobills subreddit, announcing their new allegiance to the Bills, while the other user did the same with the r/LosAngelesRams subreddit community. Both are provided in Table 5.12.

Both users here demonstrate disidentification or de-escalation of their fandom with each evidently hitting their breaking point with the team and ownership. In this sense, these users utilized communities beyond their primary rooting interest to identify alternative teams and initiate their new team identity with their newly selected fan base. This behavior is consistent with literature on the de-escalation of fandom, where fans may experience a misalignment of fan values between themselves and characteristics of the team, motivating disidentification (Hyatt & Foster, 2015).

Table 5.12
Examples of Disidentification Behavior

Subreddit	Reddit User	Post Title	Post Content/Media	Score	Comments
r/buffalobills	BillsPoster2	Bengals fan here	After 15 years of die-hard fandom, I have once again been screwed over by the incompetence of Mike Brown in bringing our coach, Marvin Lewis back. Therefore, I have decided to change my fandom to the Bills. Y'all seem like cool people and I can still support Cincy players like Andy Dalton. Fuck the Steelers.	59	7
r/LosAngelesRams	RamsPoster3	Bengal Fan Transfer	News that Mike Brown has signed Marvin Lewis to a 2 year extension has me jumping ship after 30 years. My grandfather plated for the LA Rams in the 50s so you guys are the logical choice! I'm pretty familiar with the offensive players but I need the skinny on your guys D/ownership, coaching, fan stuff. Also... which jersey do I buy?! Cheers!	68	27

While these posts are rare in the dataset, they speak to the accessibility of online fan communities. With the Reddit social media platform, numerous teams and fan communities are available to an individual seeking an alternative rooting interest and

initiating with their newly selected fan base. It should also be noted here that the Reddit activity for both of these users indicates that both are currently active users on the r/Bengals subreddit, suggesting that these were also temporary shifts in rooting interest.

5.5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to consider online sport fandom beyond a fan's primary rooting interest. Specifically, I sought to examine how online fans construct and enact complex identity structures through participation with various sport-related online communities. To do so, I utilized web scraping techniques to collect a list of Reddit users in the Bengals subreddit. I then used that list to scrape additional posts from these users across hundreds of subreddit communities. I identified the most popular sport-related subreddit and then qualitatively examined how Bengals users utilized these communities as part of their larger identity structure.

Research Question 1 aimed to examine the types of sport-related subreddit communities that Bengals users post in beyond the r/Bengals community. My findings indicate that online fans enact various sport-related identities across three general community types: league-/sport-level communities that have a broader focus (i.e., r/NFL, r/collegebasketball, r/baseball), team-specific communities (i.e., r/detroitlions, r/Reds, r/KansasCityChiefs), and ancillary sport consumption communities (i.e., r/fantasyfootball, r/Madden). Across these communities, Bengals users enacted complementary identities around sports fandom, including expressions of generalized sports fandom (e.g., a fan of the NFL participating in the r/NFL subreddit), regional allegiances that extend into broader community involvement (e.g., a Cincinnati Bearcats fan discussing the Bearcats on the r/CFB subreddit), and a spectrum of maximizing

behaviors. These results suggest that online fan behavior is varied, characterized by different types of communities.

Research Question 2 sought to investigate how Bengals users engaged with these communities, seeking to better understand the purpose of this varied community involvement. My findings suggest that online fans use other online communities beyond a primary team to enact generalized fandom, regional fandom, to agitate other fan bases (i.e., trolling behavior), and to support teams beyond their primary rooting interest, including other NFL teams, regional teams, and rivals. In rare instances, fans also used the accessibility of online fan communities to switch allegiances to an entirely new primary team. These findings indicate that online fans have varied uses for the multiple online communities they frequent. Additionally, this study points to the accessibility of contemporary online fan communities, particularly in the Reddit ecosystem.

5.5.1 Theoretical Implications

The current work makes several theoretical contributions, specifically as it relates to the nature of online fandom and the utility and flexibility these settings allow as they relate to supporting complex sport-related identity structures and individuals' self-concept.

5.5.1.1 Overlapping Superordinate Identities.

One primary takeaway from the current work concerns the prominence of subreddit communities at both the league and sport levels, defining the engagement patterns of Bengals fans.

Drawing on Lock and Funk's (2016) MIIF framework, it is unsurprising to observe fans utilizing distinct communities for different purposes. As per Lock and Funk (2016), fans associate with an overarching identity, such as a team, along with smaller, more exclusive subgroups and relational clusters to address diverse social and psychological needs.

In the current study, the Bengals subreddit represents a subgroup within a broader superordinate identity of being a Bengals fan. While a user might derive a sense of coherence or self-esteem from their status as a Bengals fan, the r/Bengals subreddit fulfills distinct needs. As a subgroup identity, subreddit users likely experience a sense of belonging from group membership, while also asserting a sense of distinctiveness compared to other Bengals fans who are not part of the Reddit community. From this perspective, the broader community engagement beyond the r/Bengals subreddit appears to stem from fans actively seeking optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991, 1993) and constructing a multifaceted identity structure as a result (i.e., a fandom portfolio).

These findings suggest Bengals fans shape their self-concept around various identities; a Bengals fan defines themselves through memberships in the r/Bengals subreddit, the r/NFL subreddit, the r/Reds subreddit, the r/jaguars subreddit, etc., and these subgroups serve the purpose of differentiation from other Bengals fans, reinforcing one's self-image in the process (Lock & Funk, 2016).

An alternate interpretation suggests that the r/Bengals subreddit is not merely a subgroup nested within a "Bengals fan" superordinate identity, but rather falls under broader superordinate identities related to sports fandom. Contrary to the common perception of sports fans being primarily devoted to their favorite team, Kunkel et al.

(2013) and Baker et al. (2016) argue that fans may also identify more broadly with a sport or league. For instance, Kunkel et al. (2013) highlighted how some fans may be more strongly motivated in fandom by an identification with a league, rather than any given team. Baker et al. (2016) also lend support as well, arguing that, despite the unique aspects of sports fandom, fans are likely to engage with the sports product more holistically. Fans may be more active in watching games without their favorite team or may consume a variety of media content to remain informed on a league overall (Baker et al., 2016).

The maximizing literature supports the notion that identifying with multiple teams does not undermine a fan's identification with a particular team, but rather reinforces a more generalized identification with the sport or league (Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). As new media makes it increasingly easy to access different communities and act upon different identities, contemporary fandom is becoming more fluid, potentially emphasizing identification with a league over a specific team (*Sport Innovation Lab*).

In this context, online communities can be conceptualized, in relation to the MIIF, as a network of overlapping identities with subgroups that may fall under multiple superordinate identities. For example, the r/Bengals subreddit may be considered a subgroup of a Bengals superordinate identity, or it may be a subgroup within a broader superordinate identity of NFL fandom. The prevalence of regional sports fandom in the current study would even suggest that being identified with a region may serve a superordinate role with team identities, such as the Bengals, the Reds, and the Kentucky Wildcats, occupying subgroup identities.

The present study indicates that online fandom, facilitated by the accessibility of various communities, encourages a unique and complex layering of identities. Depending on how these identities are organized, the purpose of community involvement may vary significantly, allowing fans to actively construct intricate identity structures and fulfill their needs in unique ways.

5.5.1.2 Maximizing Fan Behavior and Congruent Fandom

An important insight emerging from the present study pertains to the concept of sport fan maximizing. Traditionally, sport fan maximizers have been defined as individuals who support multiple teams within the same league, driven by a desire to maximize or hedge their chances of aligning with a winning team (Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). However, the findings of this study challenge this characterization, suggesting that the conventional understanding of sport fan maximizing falls short in comprehensively capturing the diverse reasons and ways in which online fans express support for additional, complementary teams.

While previous conceptualizations emphasize the balancing act between successful and unsuccessful teams within a league, the current study reveals a more intricate pattern of maximizing behavior. Rather than solely seeking success, fans appear to leverage the accessibility and flexibility afforded by new media to identify complementary identities and express support for teams beyond their primary rooting interest.

Decisions regarding sport fan maximizing seem to be less dictated by on-field success or the strategic hedging of competitive outcomes (e.g., Norris et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021). Instead, perceptions of congruency and similarities across teams emerge as key

influencers. For instance, decisions to support NFL teams were influenced by factors such as shared history, likability, similarities in roster construction, team outlook, and even team logos. Regional team identities, with their obvious geographic connections, contribute to a sense of coherence across rooting interests. Even supporting rival teams can be seen as a form of coherence, with fans finding comfort and relatability with those who share a common disdain for a mutual rival (e.g., Ravens and Bengals fans both opposing the Steelers).

In this dynamic landscape, online fan communities offer tremendous flexibility. Fans can add, adjust, and curate team identities that hold personal meaning, engaging with relevant communities in the process and potentially following and supporting a greater number of teams as a result. The findings of this study shed light on the nuanced factors influencing fans' decisions to curate a complex portfolio of fandom. Understanding the motivations behind maximizing behavior provides insight into the intricate relationships fans form with sports teams and underscores the role that online communities play in shaping these connections.

An additional facet illuminated by these findings is the pivotal role played by new media platforms in supporting maximizing behavior, extending beyond individual teams to encompass regional team identities in various sports. While existing literature often associates external group identities, such as regional identity, with team identity (Heere & James, 2007), our study suggests that regional fandom is actively manifested through fan activity on diverse online communities, such as r/baseball, r/CFB, and r/collegebasketball. Bengals enthusiasts actively participate in discussions and share information related to regional teams in these communities, a behavior not fully

accommodated in existing conceptualizations of sport fan maximizing. This underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of online sports fandom, where the interplay of team allegiances, shared elements, and regional identities contributes to a rich and multifaceted fan experience.

Moreover, our results bring to light a noteworthy aspect of maximizing behavior within the context of rivalries. Online, fans not only navigate their own community but actively engage with rival communities for the purpose of expressing support. In our study, Bengals users leverage this access to extend gestures of truce, all in the spirit of uniting against a more universally despised common rival.

While trolling behavior, as exhibited by some Bengals users, aligns with expectations in an online rivalry space, the purpose of actively voicing support for a rival team within the rival fan community may seem less apparent. This behavior echoes GORFing behavior (Havard, 2014), where Bengals users find satisfaction in a rival's indirect failure. Intriguingly, this temporary maximizing behavior appears to be similarly motivated by commonalities and similarities. Rivalry often stems from shared attributes, such as parity, geography, and cultural similarities (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). For Bengals users, many of these shared attributes characterize their rivalries with the Browns, Ravens, and Steelers. Thus, one interpretation of maximizing behavior with rivals is that rival communities may share enough in common that supporting the Ravens for the sake of rooting against the Browns is a matter of expressing support for a team and community that is familiar. This could suggest interesting overlap in how and when rival fans actually share support for one another.

In sum, the current work supports and extends existing conceptualizations of sport fan maximizing behavior, suggesting that new media is making it easier than ever for fans to support teams beyond their primary rooting interest, and that decisions on which teams to support are based on similarities and commonalities across a fan's portfolio of sport-related identities.

5.5.2 Practical Implications

There are several practical implications for this work, most notably in relation to considering fans more holistically, particularly in an increasingly connected online space.

5.5.2.1 Marketing to Maximizers.

There are opportunities for sports managers to market more specifically to sport fan maximizers. Based on the current findings, maximizers are drawn to complementary teams that share commonalities or congruency with their primary team identity. This represents an opportunity for sports managers to leverage areas of overlap.

Recognizing these overlaps presents valuable marketing opportunities for teams to expand the reach and depth of their fan communities. For instance, identifying commonalities between teams, such as the overlap between the Bengals and Bills, offers a strategic avenue for team marketing departments. They can create unique opportunities and content that foster camaraderie between these fan bases, thereby enhancing engagement and broadening the scope of the overall fan community.

Given that professional sports franchises often operate in saturated local markets, as noted by Coombs (2021), this strategic approach becomes crucial for teams looking to expand their footprint. By identifying and capitalizing on similarities and shared interests

between teams, sports organizations can effectively reach new fans. This approach is not only beneficial for well-established teams seeking to broaden their appeal but also for organizations in the process of establishing themselves in a local market.

5.5.2.2 Marketing to Fans Holistically.

There are opportunities for sports managers to adopt a more holistic perspective when considering online sports fans. Merely focusing on users' primary rooting interests provides an incomplete understanding of their identities. Especially within platforms like Reddit, where users can cultivate multifaceted identity structures across different subreddits, sports managers stand to gain significant insights by acknowledging the types of communities their consumers frequent.

This study introduces nuanced considerations for sports managers as they contemplate their target market and customer profiles. It suggests that online fans actively participate in diverse communities, each representing a facet of their multifaceted identities. By recognizing and understanding these identities, managers can strategically form partnerships and collaborations that resonate more deeply with their target audience. This approach enhances the potential to reach and engage fans across various dimensions of their online presence.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

It is important to recognize limitations in the current study. One limitation concerns the generalizability of these results to other online communities and contexts. The posts identified in this analysis were drawn from one subreddit for one team in the NFL. Different teams and different communities may enact different identities through online community involvement. Particularly given how regional fandom permeated

online behavior, it could be the case that different teams from different regions place importance on other communities. The figures to be most apparent in relation to maximizing behavior, where fans of other teams would not be expected to make the same decisions as Bengals fans. Future research should continue to examine online fandom holistically and explore how sport fan maximizing translates to other fan contexts with other sports and leagues.

Another limitation concerns the operationalization of Bengals users. While Bengals fans are expected to post on the r/Bengals subreddit, the subreddit is not limited just to Bengals fans. Just as Bengals fans contributed to other communities, such as r/buffalobills and r/detroitlions, non-Bengals fans were collected as part of this study. While many Bengals fans self-disclosed their fandom on NFL team subreddits, that behavior is uncommon in a league-level community, such as r/NFL. Thus, it can be difficult to identify Bengals fans versus other Reddit users. While clearly identified non-Bengals users were removed from the analysis, future research should continue to consider additional approaches to operationalizing specific fan groups, particularly on Reddit, where the barrier to entry on any given subreddit is particularly low.

5.7 Conclusion

The current study delves into the intricate ways online fans leverage diverse online communities beyond their primary rooting interests. The aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of online fandom and examine how fans exploit the flexibility and accessibility offered by new media to shape their unique fan portfolios and enact diverse identities around their fandom. The findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of Bengals users' engagement across an array of communities, ranging from

league-/sport-level platforms to team-specific forums and ancillary sport consumption spaces.

These insights contribute to social media research in the realm of sport consumer behavior. By providing a nuanced exploration of online fans' holistic engagement, the study sheds light on the various identities enacted within these digital spaces. Notably, it adds nuance to how we conceptualize the overlooked sport fan maximizer, contributing a valuable perspective to our understanding of how fans navigate and participate in online sports communities.

As we move forward, acknowledging the diverse identities and behaviors within online sports fandom becomes paramount for researchers, sports managers, and marketers alike. This study not only enriches our comprehension of fan dynamics in the digital age but also prompts further exploration into the complex interplay between online communities, fan identities, and sport consumption behaviors.

CHAPTER 6

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, the current project aimed to provide a comprehensive examination of online fan communities, addressing critical gaps in understanding related to how communities welcome new fans, how communities come to define who “we” are, and how online fans engage with sport communities beyond their primary rooting interest.

In Study 1, the focus was on the intricate process of how new fans are welcomed into online fan communities. This involved a meticulous exploration of the factors and qualities of self-presentation from new or prospective fans that contribute to welcoming behavior within established online fan communities, thereby extending our understanding of fan socialization in the online setting. Results indicate that self-presentation matters and does influence a community’s welcoming behavior.

Study 2 investigated a recently formed online fan community for a newly announced professional sports team. The objective was to unravel how this sports fan community negotiates “we”, through community discourse. Central to this process was the importance of knowledge and how “we” evolved over time as valued competencies and knowledge bases informed and shaped the collective identity in the process. This exploration contributes to the literature on brand community and sport consumer behavior.

Finally, Study 3 expanded the scope to examine online sports fandom holistically. This involved exploring the diverse types of communities in which fans participate online beyond their primary rooting interest. The study delved into the intricate communication behaviors that traverse various online communities, including those focused on other

teams and broader sport-related themes. Results demonstrate that fans not only engage with various communities, but also maximize fandom through multi-faceted community engagement. In doing so, Study 3 contributes to the ongoing discourse in sport consumer literature, concerning how online fans utilize new media in constructing their unique sense of fandom and fan experience.

Across these three studies, several overall main takeaways emerged.

6.1 Prototypicality in Fandom

A central and recurrent theme across all three studies conducted in this project revolves around the concept of prototypicality in fandom. Prototypes within a group serve as potent symbols, embodying both intragroup similarities and intergroup differences (Hogg & Rinella, 2018). These prototypes function as guiding principles for group members, offering a blueprint that shapes their behavior and fosters adherence to shared norms. In doing so, prototypes play a crucial role in fulfilling individuals' fundamental desires for group acceptance and cohesiveness (Reimer et al., 2020). The existing body of sport consumer literature corroborates this, emphasizing that prototypical behavior is a pivotal predictor of community acceptance (Behrens & Uhrich, 2020; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016).

Within the context of this project, each of the three studies explored the intricate dynamics of prototypicality. In Study 1, the focus was on new fan posts that exhibited the desired prototypical behavior, specifically the demonstration of in-group knowledge, which was correlated with positive welcoming behavior. Study 2 explicitly delved into the development of a collective identity, emphasizing the construction of a shared "we" and the prototypes ascribed to this community's identity. Finally, in Study 3, the

significance of prototypicality surfaced as fans actively chose complementary teams based on shared commonalities with their primary team, underlining the role of familiarity and comfort with teams that likely share prototypical norms.

In summation, these collective findings underscore the pivotal role of prototypicality in not only delineating in-group and out-group distinctions but also in shaping the operational dynamics of online fan communities and influencing the nature of community acceptance. The exploration of prototypicality across these studies enriches our understanding of the intricate social processes that underlie fan interactions and group dynamics within the dynamic landscape of online sports fandom.

6.2 Online Fan Communities as Non-Geographically Bound

Another key takeaway that spans across the three studies is the nature of physical location in the case of online fan communities. Online fan communities are, by definition, non-geographically bound making them valuable resources and outlets for fans to follow and support a team nonlocally (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Pu & James, 2017). As such, online fan communities represent community spaces that are not necessarily associated or tied to any specific geographic location. Yet, across this project's three studies, geographic location is unmistakably a factor in online fan communities.

One of the self-presentation codes in Study 1 was for new fans who disclosed that they were nonlocal while they initiated fan socialization with a new team/community. No significant differences were found between those who disclosed this information and those who did not, suggesting being nonlocal was not of significance to established communities. Prior research points to online fan communities as being important for nonlocal fans in making connections with fellow fans and maintaining connections with

one's hometown, in the case of displaced nonlocal fans (e.g., Collins et al., 2016; Pu & James, 2017; Reifurth et al., 2019). As such, being nonlocal may not be considered a particularly unique characteristic amongst a community of online fans, as further suggested in Study 1.

Study 2 delved deeper into the relationship between online fan communities and physical geography by showcasing how a non-geographically bound community negotiated its collective identity. Here, the community developed valued competencies, with one such competence centering around Seattle. While geographic location itself did not matter for participation, there was an implicit expectation that community members would possess familiarity with crucial information associated with the Seattle region. This finding builds on existing research that suggests that, despite the non-geographically bound nature of online fan communities, fans are expected to have sufficient, prototypical knowledge and understanding of the geographic location of the team (e.g., Behrens & Urich, 2020; Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021). The current work further highlights the somewhat paradoxical relationship between non-geographically bound fandom that implicitly (or explicitly) requires geographic knowledge.

Study 3 further accentuated the nuanced interplay between online fan communities and physical geography, emphasizing the persistent presence of regional identity in the form of regional team identification. Even as fans interact and engage with various communities, regional identity persists in the form of regional team identification.

In conclusion, the findings from this project underscore the intricate ways in which physical geography weaves into the fabric of online fan communities, challenging

the notion that these spaces are entirely detached from geographic considerations. This interplay between online fan communities and physical geography not only adds depth to our understanding of online fans but also highlights the enduring significance of regional identity within the expansive landscape of online sports fandom.

6.3 Examining Online Fandom Through the Lens of Communication

One additional takeaway from this work is the utility of communication theories in examining online fan behavior. While I am certainly not the first to highlight the potential to consider social media and online fan research through a communication lens (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022), the current project suggests such theoretical frameworks may be particularly valuable in this context.

Across the three studies comprising this dissertation, it becomes evident that communication behavior stands as a crucial determinant in shaping and understanding online fan communities. Study 1 leveraged Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to explore how new fans navigate communicative adjustments, both in terms of content and sentiment, and how these adjustments are received within established online fan communities. In Study 2, the examination delved deep into the negotiation of meaning within a text-based and anonymous community setting, employing discursive psychology in conjunction with communities of practice (CoP). Finally, Study 3 scrutinized the communicative purpose of community involvement, offering valuable insights into the various motivations and dynamics underlying online fan interactions.

The integration of these diverse theoretical perspectives across the studies highlights their collective efficacy in unpacking the multifaceted nature of social media and online fan behavior. It is particularly noteworthy that these theoretical frameworks

provide a lens through which the intricate relationship between identity and communication can be elucidated. As established in the sports fan literature, identity is a central and defining element in the conceptualization of sports fans (Lock & Heere, 2017), and this identity is inherently reflected through their communication patterns and language use within online fan communities.

In conclusion, the application of communication theories has proven to be an invaluable analytical tool for unraveling the complex web of interactions, negotiations, and identity expressions within online fan communities.

6.4 Importance of Knowledge and Fandom

A salient theme woven throughout this project underscores the pivotal role of knowledge in the construction and legitimization of fan identity. While it is acknowledged that knowledge is not an absolute prerequisite for fandom, its significance lies in the manner in which fans actively seek and internalize information, thereby legitimizing their identity within the broader fan community (Holt, 1995; Lock & Funk, 2016). The value placed on acquiring knowledge extends beyond a mere adherence to norms, rituals, and prototypes; rather, it becomes a dynamic process through which fans position themselves as experts and authentic contributors to their respective communities (Kirkwood et al., 2019).

The findings across the studies affirm the centrality of knowledge in the fan experience. In Study 1, the significance of in-group knowledge emerged as a noteworthy predictor of a new fan's acceptance within an established community. Notably, the emphasis on cognitive understanding surpassed the importance of merely "acting like a fan," shedding light on the primacy of knowledge in fan communities.

Study 2 delved deeper into the mechanisms through which legitimacy and authenticity are cultivated within a new community. The results underscored that being knowledgeable about valued competencies emerges as a foundational aspect in the collective definition of the community's identity. In this context, knowledgeable users assumed influential roles swiftly, highlighting the transformative power of knowledge in the early stages of community formation.

Study 3 extended this exploration into the realm of generalized sport fandom, where users actively engaged in disseminating breaking news on league-level subreddits. These findings resonate with existing literature (Kirkwood et al., 2019), reinforcing the idea that being knowledgeable serves as a linchpin in the multifaceted tapestry of fan identity.

In essence, the overarching takeaway from this exploration is the intrinsic connection between fan identity and knowledge. Whether it be the initiation of new fans, the establishment of community identity, or the active participation in league-level discussions, the currency of knowledge emerges as a central and defining element in the vibrant tapestry of online fan communities. This insight not only enriches our theoretical understanding of fan behavior but also holds practical implications for fan engagement strategies and the cultivation of vibrant and informed online fan communities.

CHAPTER 7

DISSERTATION CONCLUSION

The current dissertation project aimed to conduct a comprehensive exploration into the dynamics of online sports fandom, shedding light on the evolving nature of fan socialization, the establishment of collective identities, and the intricate web of identities woven within online fan communities. Each study contributes unique insights, expanding our understanding of sports consumer behavior in the digital age.

Study 1 tackled the foundational question of how new fans are welcomed into online fan communities, emphasizing the importance of the content of new fan posts in influencing welcoming behavior. This study highlights the role of online spaces as significant venues for fan socialization, a previously under-researched aspect, thus laying the groundwork for subsequent investigations.

Study 2 delved into the formation of collective identities within online fan communities, focusing on the development of fan prototypes through the lens of social identity theory and communities of practice. By adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective, this study unveiled the intricate negotiation of competencies and markers that define community membership, addressing a crucial gap in our understanding of how group prototypes are established.

Study 3 broadened the scope, recognizing the non-geographical boundaries of contemporary fandom facilitated by new media. It explored the multifaceted nature of online sports fandom, emphasizing the complexity of fan identities and communication behaviors across diverse online communities. This study paves the way for future

research into the nuanced interplay between online communities, fan identities, and sport consumption behaviors.

Collectively, these studies contribute to both sport consumer behavior and social media research, offering valuable insights into the evolving landscape of fandom. The findings not only advance our theoretical understanding of fan dynamics but also hold practical implications for sports managers and marketers navigating the complex world of online fan engagement. As we move forward, acknowledging the diverse identities within online sports fandom becomes paramount to understanding the future of fandom, as well as how contemporary fans make meaningful connections with teams. This dissertation provides a foundation for further exploration into the complex interplay between online communities, fan identities, and sport consumption behaviors.

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APPENDICES

Refer to the following list.

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Appendix A

Self-Presentation Codes Summary

Summary of Codes from New/Prospective Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Need To Know	Ask the community directly "what do I need to know?" to be a fan of the salient team	<p>"What are some things I need to learn about Broncos culture and Fandom as a new fan?"</p> <p>I know every Fandom has some culture, inside jokes references, try to teach them to me lol."</p> <p>"Hello, I followed the giants on a very, very casual scale. However, this season and on I want to dive deep into this team moving forward. What players on this team should I be excited for? Is Daniel Jones legit?"</p> <p>"But I don't want to consider myself a fully-fledged fan year" I need to undergo initiation. So I'm just curious: what should I, a new fan, learn or do to become a proper member of Bills Mafia?"</p> <p>"The rest of my family roots for the Bills since they are all from Western New York, so that's another reason. What should I know about the team, history, and traditions?"</p>	68%
Demonstrate In-Group Knowledge	Demonstrate cognitive team-specific knowledge (e.g., knowledge about the current team, historical players)	<p>"I know Pace was hated 4 days ago and now he is "almost" redeemed. That the ring was won on 1985. That Mack is a beast. But beyond that I know nothing. I want to learn more. Are we a defensive team historically? How good is Nagy? I read during the season all the drama with Trubisky, Foles and Russell."</p> <p>"I didn't want to jump on the bandwagon of a winning franchise and wanted to immerse myself in fan base that's familiar in never winning a championship and consistently falling short of expectations (No offense). The Lions seemed like an obvious fit given their history as a perpetual underdog and also because I'm effing hate the Packers."</p> <p>"I don't even know if it belongs or not, but with the lockdown in and being stuck inside, I finally got into NFL, it took me time to pick a team to latch onto but Flipping enjoyed cardinals play so much that I think I have finally jumped on the bandwagon. Kyle Murray is smart and fast it is brilliant watching him play. And The great Larry Fitzgerald! My goodness, the man has an aura, all the post match interviews, he just exudes respect. So I guess I'm joining the Cards from now till death do I part."</p>	42%

Summary of Codes from New/Prospective Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
Behaving Like a Fan	Position as in-group members through behavior including BIRGing (using "we") and team-specific cheers	<p>"With that, I don't know much about the team itself, personnel, players or general outlook from fans. If you guys could just share some thoughts I'd appreciate it. Go Fins!?"</p> <p>"I am glad to be part of the family, but I am new to NFL and I would love to participate in discussion here. Sadly we lost our first match to Seahawks but what can we say?"</p> <p>"Can someone fill me in on what I need to know? What are the memes. Who do we love? Which teams do we dislike? How's the coaching staff? We optimistic for next season?"</p>	28%
Maintaining Outsider Status	Position themselves as outsiders seeking acceptance from the salient community	<p>"First of all, feel free to say no. I know from being a football (Soccer to you) fan over here in England that no one likes bandwagoning. I don't mind staying back from the community at all... ...I appreciate your consideration, and I will respect any comments of acceptance or rejection."</p> <p>"Anyway I hope there is enough room for me because I really like your team. Ever since that NFC championship loss vs the saints you guys had a soft spot in my heart."</p> <p>"You all showed some good stuff last year so maybe now is a good time as ever to become a Lions fan. Should I? Am I welcome? What should I look forward to or not look forward to?"</p> <p>"I'm from Britain, and I'm a Buckeye fan. I'm looking for an NFL team to throw backing too. As a fan of Ezekiel Elliot, I'm drawn to the Cowboys"</p>	20%
Nonlocal Status	Present themselves as nonlocal (e.g., international)	<p>"Hello. I am not a football guy. I am a hockey guy. However, I want to get closer to my brother-in-law who is a die hard bears fan living in Arizona. I myself live in Ohio."</p> <p>"I live in Canada, the closest teams to me are the Bills and the Patriots, my childhood team lost Andrew Luck to another injury and I feel like I'm done with the Colts and football in general."</p> <p>"I've been wanting to change my allegiance from Washington since 2014 due to how poor the organization is run. After the name and rebrand I can't do it anymore.</p> <p>The rest of my family roots for the Bills since they are</p>	35%

Summary of Codes from New/Prospective Fans' Initial Post

Code	Meaning	Example	Percentage of Posts
		all from Western New York , so that's another reason. What should I know about the team, history, and traditions?"	
Explaining Motives	Providing a rationalization or reasoning for choosing to be a fan of the salient team (e.g., playstyle, family ties, disidentification, Hard Knocks, players)	"Furthermore, I want to plant roots and call a team home and with Herbert leading the charge (no pun intended) the Chargers are geographically close enough and exciting enough to call my team and have it make sense. Plus the obvious answer of best jerseys in the league. The young talent is insane on both sides of the ball with Herbert and ASJ."	66%
		***Backstory:** I wasn't sure which team to cheer for at first, and thought I'd let fate decide for me, but I <i>*definitely*</i> knew it wasn't going to be the Patriots. I'm not sure if it's because I like underdogs, or hate serial winners, but it was just <i>*something*</i> about the Patriots that ticked me off. Maybe it was the cockiness, or how luck always finds them when it mattered (<i>*cough*</i> Falcons <i>*cough*</i>) but I don't think it'd hurt for them to be humbled."	
Asking for Recommendations	New fans ask for specific modes of consumption, such as recommended podcasts, reading, and ways to watch the team's games	"So I'm here to ask for vids and things I need to know/see before I become a real dolphins fan and where I can get good source of information like in twitter. " "Anyway (sorry), can you all recommend good Cardinals Twitter feeds/websites to check out?" "I want to start cheering for a team in my adopted home and was wondering if you guys had advice for me? Who should I follow-on Twitter? What players should I be watching? What blogs should I read? Also, what's the latest on Herbert, how'd he look in camp?"	31%

Appendix B

Study 2 Cheat Sheet

What is "WE"?

The collective "we" that is generated through community discourse over time is one that originally **forms around commonalities**. Early on, these commonalities are shared physical locations, backgrounds, experiences, and most commonly, fandoms. The community as "we" is very much a conglomeration of different people from different backgrounds (quite a few from non-Seattle locations) who are united by an opportunity to get in on the ground level of a new organization.

Early on, "**we**" is a **conglomeration of unique individuals bounded by one or two commonalities**. Community members readily volunteer and discuss their Kraken fandom as part of their fan portfolio, with the Kraken being ranked compared to previous and existing fandoms.

As time goes on, the commonalities of the community begin to give way to **the rise importance of knowledge in this space**. A concerted effort is made to on-board and inform new fans. The "we" at this point begins to prioritize this knowledge, even to the point of seeming disproportionate to the number of new fans who actually engage with the community's resources/guides.

The collective identity of the community is welcoming and excited. As the brand is announced, the community adopts organization identity elements, such as **sustainability and inclusiveness**. The prevailing voices (at least reflected in these posts) **preach patience and a calculated and rational fan perspective**.

As games begin, "we" becomes more concerned with how to be a **proper hockey fanbase**, including discussions over **hockey etiquette and hockey norms that are more unwritten in nature**. Conflict appears more commonly in posts around new fans. Knowledge and the importance of being informed drives conflict. Additionally, conflict is driven by breaches of explicit and implicit norms of the community. When someone demonstrates a lack of understanding (e.g., OKC fan, fan experience post, comments on broadcasting team, Chargers fan who doesn't show Kraken) of the community norms, they are negatively received and called out (or ignored). Relatedly, the Hockey Talk for Women post remains one of the few to not receive comments. Together, this seems to suggest limits to the community's inclusiveness. **The "we" of the community (through the team's second season) is one characterized by hockey knowledge, Seattle roots/history, and a rational understanding of the hockey product**.

In this sense, the more established "we" is composed of implicit and explicit norms and expectations around community membership and identity. Members of the Kraken subreddit community are not expected to know everything, especially if they properly identify (i.e., hedge) as new fans, but they should not assume commonality and shared experience. Much of the conflict is a matter of information; either not knowing something or thinking they know something they are not properly informed on. **"We" is also an us AND them where less**

informed fans are somewhat presumed to be outside the community by this point ("we have to help *them* learn").

Time Frame 1: Announcement of team --> Branding

Only one *new fan post*. A fan who is nonlocal (from NO) and is looking for a team to get in on the ground floor with. Other fandoms don't feel right, so they are choosing a new, fresh team.

In Time Frame 1, the "new fan" is met with acceptance and emotion. Discussion about how some fandoms "don't feel right" but the appeal of getting in on the ground floor for the payoff associated with long-term/"earned" fandom. Also, a lot of social bonding with community members latching onto aspects of personal story as a way to relate and engage with the new member. Also "Easy75" is a user that clarifies information on multiple posts here but does not receive any replies; they are upvoted for providing clarification, but do not generate engagement, notably from the new fan.

Discursive Devices

- Pronoun Shifting
- Emotion Displays (i.e., "!")
- Self-disclosure

What is "we"?

Right now, being a Seattle hockey fan is waiting and revolves around the decision to support a new team and latch onto a blank slate. Detail is conveyed to the new member (i.e., too early to tell on draft, roster, etc.) and clarified by other users, but "we" is an inclusive space where members connect over other identities, as there is very little for members to connect over with the team itself. This materializes in identity work focused around pronoun shifting ("you" --> "we" --> "I") and online-mediated emotion displays ("!") that help close social distance.

The community is accepting and excited. Their connection point with the product revolves around the sport more broadly than anything specific to Seattle, the brand, or the eventual Kraken on-ice product. Here the collective identity is being shaped through commonalities in narratives, emotional displays, and pronoun shifting. Fans are taking ownership of their fandom, but the collective is being constructed through shared experiences, shared fandoms, similar motivations for supporting an expansion team, etc.

There is an interest in learning and preparing to consume hockey, but the community discussion, at this point, is more about identifying and reinforcing the commonalities of where and how people have arrived at this community.

Time Frame 2: Branding --> Expansion Draft

In Time Frame 2, the community expands with the announcement of the Kraken brand. As a result, there is a community interest in how the fanbase is being formed and the makeup of the community. New fan posts disproportionately revolve around questions of where fans are

supporting from and the other teams they support. This suggests that during Time Frame 2, the community is unpacking community construction.

Discursive Devices

- Narrative
- ECF
- Category (diehard, new)
- Ranking
- Emotion Displays
- Pronoun Shifting
- Humor
- Assessments = also makes a claim that we are experienced or have knowledge of the thing we are assessing

What is "we"?

Bounded by commonalities. Sustainable and inclusive. Aspiring knowledgeable hockey community.

"We" is a collection of fans from different locations and different backgrounds. Posts revolve around how fans selected the Kraken and where fans are supporting from. Discursively, there is a notable prevalence of narrative structure, category membership, ranking, emotion displays. All of which paint a picture of community "we" as a collection of "diehard" and loyal fans, even if they are supporting the team nonlocally or are adopting the team as one of various teams they support. Narrative structure provides a rationale to members for why they are entering the community. These narratives evoke category memberships around fandom, notably the distinction between being a new fan (warranting support and care; "why not jump on with a new team as a new fan") and a diehard fan ("I'm a Sabers fan, born and raised"). Emotion displays may merely serve to communicate excitement, but they also may help fans hammer home the value and importance they are placing on their newly identified fandom. Ranking often puts the Kraken at the top but may also be coupled with the other devices as a means to couch their "second team" within a wider profile of dedicated, loyal, and diehard fandom that the community is presumed to value.

In addition to the "fan migration" and ranking that is more active at this time, the collective is negotiating and discussing community norms, in the form of terminology (i.e., *Krakheads*, which is eventually rejected by the community as being insensitive to real hardship) and offline traditions (i.e., throwing squid on the ice). These discussions are informed by the communicated values and identity of Seattle and of the organization itself. At this time, the organization is known as environmentally conscious and inclusive (i.e., squid idea is shot down quickly). This identity also informs the community response to the terms *Krakheads*, which is deemed as insensitive to the large homeless population in the Seattle area and the very real hardship many individuals in their local community face. Other posts discuss the lack of existing traditions (46(3)), the likely rivals (165(3)), and even speculate that draft decisions may be made based on Seattle's left-leaning political ideology (48(3)).

Inclusivity is also reflected in how the community welcomes new fans. New fans are almost universally accepted (based on the current sample) and are invited to root multiple teams.

There is clear desire to inform, educate, and on-board new fans to the sport of hockey, almost regardless of the team(s) they choose to affiliate with.

Knowledge and the importance of knowledge begins to show in this time period. Existing fans are concerned with creating resources for new fans, generating "Hockey 101" posts and "Daily Deep Dives" to introduce concepts and players to new fans. This is reflected in pronoun shifting ("once you start watching the game *this way* you'll get hooked" - 16(2)) and in terms such as "newbies". There is a clear category distinction between knowledgeable fans and new fans. While there are a variety of posts that are designed for new fans, actual new fans are infrequent in responding with the post(s). Many of the comments are from knowledgeable fans who are complimenting the post/idea or adding additional information and clarification. When new fans do participate, they engage in hedging (i.e., "diehard since July", and "don't know enough, but here I go... (hedging)"). New fans comment on not needing to "catch-up" on fan knowledge as a main appeal of adopting a new franchise (3(2)).

An entire post is dedicated to answering new fan questions (17(2)), but is not engaged with (8 pts, 100%, 2 comments).

Perhaps noteworthy: One post titled "Hockey Talk for Women" shares a Facebook group page for women interested in hockey. This post receives an average to below-average response, compared to similar posts about podcast recommendations, and no comments from the community. The community does not respond strongly or harshly, but it is rare for posts in this sample to not receive any comments.

Time Frame 3: Expansion Draft --> 1st Regular Season (Opener)

In Time Frame 3, the community is reacting to the expansion draft, with new fans asking about the construction of the team and the community is providing evaluations. For new fans, they are limited on knowledge with the players and the general takeaways. From the community, the consensus is that the draft was "middling", prioritizing young players and free agency flexibility, and not properly collecting assets with trades, etc. Multiple users provide similar evaluations, using ECFs in their assessments. Also, there are a few users who are not Kraken fans who play instrumental roles in sharing information and perspective. Comparisons are made with Vegas (how they were successful, how the league learned, and how it can still be a blueprint; no one expected big things from them either). Comparisons and metaphors are also used with other sports (Seahawks, baseball) to help with clarity. The community is welcoming and accommodating, but the contents of these posts are more detailed and more oriented towards high-level hockey discussion.

Discursive Devices

- Detail (v. vagueness)
 - Linking outbound
- Assessments = also makes a claim that we are experienced or have knowledge of the thing we are assessing
- Hedging
- Pronouns ("they" with front office, "we" with fan collective)
 - Distance self from the decisions of the GM ("he must have been thinking..."; 53(4))

- Consensus
 - Used to describe draft results ("Consensus from people that know hockey or armchair GMs?"; 52(4))
- ECF (when discussing the roster construction)

What is "we"?

A discerning community employing a general "wait-and-see" approach to the roster. Projecting and valuing hockey knowledge. Two general camps are that they could have done more, like Vegas, and that they will be fine, depending on their next steps. A lot more detail (as they have more detail to provide), more assessments based on ECF, and a distinction (drawn using consensus/contrast) between knowledgeable and "armchair" GMs (52(4)), by a new fan, no less. The prevailing, and rewarded, perspective on the roster during this period is patience. Being "level-headed" is valued and keeping things in perspective matters (52(4)). Knowledgeable fans are those that can look beyond reactionary opinions, it seems.

Supporting and educating new fans continues to matter to the community, but there is a growing distinction between the two camps. Excited fans who know hockey are excited for players, the team's expected play style, etc. and excited *new* fans are excited about the branding, new organization, Seattle team, etc. More calls for dedicated *new fan* resources (KrakenFan16; 57(4)).

More general hockey norms are communicated here. Fans of other teams are commenting in the community as well (those who do not support the Kraken), discussing hockey knowledge or players from their team the Kraken picked during the expansion draft.

Time Frame 4: 1st Regular Season (Opener) --> 2nd Regular Season (Opener)

Hockey norms (etiquette), how to manage multiple fandoms, fosters hockey fandom (more so than Kraken fandom), "of the people" (80(5)).

New fans are welcomed with community terms (Welcome to the Depths, Squid Squad, etc.). Growing the fanbase remains a key focus here (81(5)), but there is some conflict reflected in pronouns. One user is tired of new fans "asking permission" (84(5) & 85(5)). In other posts, respondents will reply to a post with a collective "people" to address the "problem" users of the community who "don't understand"

A couple posts discussing new fans and their lack of knowledge about *offline* hockey norms/etiquette. The community has a lively conversation about how to inform new fans about how to attend hockey games (79(5): 275 pts, 95%, 102 comments). This discussion is driven by narrative and personal anecdotes about other non-appropriate game etiquette.

Rational/realistic fans are a new category that is brought up and compared to *frustrated fans*.

More conflict here than previously and most revolves around the question of knowledge.

- Assessments with add-ons are common, where users add additional clarification in comments back to posts or comments

- Not knowing hockey etiquette is contentious, not only with community discussion (79(5)), but also in the case of a fan making fan experience suggestions (87(5)), asking a "dumb question" about watching games (88(5)), or not being patient enough (93(5)).
- In one post (91(5)), a new fan mistakenly believes they can relate to the Seattle fanbase by citing their shared fandom with the Oklahoma City Thunder; the franchise that used to reside in Seattle but left on unamicable terms. This user received some welcoming comments, but the community was generally hostile for not knowing the history between the franchises. They failed their initiation of sorts.

Discursive Devices

- Emotion
- Consensus
- Ranking
- Metaphor
 - Sport as religion; 75(5)
- Stake inoculation
 - "Wouldn't normally speak bad about other teams..."; 75(5)
- Details
- Assessments = also makes a claim that we are experienced or have knowledge of the thing we are assessing

What is "we"?

"We" is a more holistic hockey fan, understanding the intricacies of the sport more broadly and some of the unwritten/unspoken rules of being a fan. This is accomplished through assessments and detail. "We" also means being a supporter of multiple teams and having a fluid fandom (with it's own sense of rules in the process).

This time frame seems to be more about promoting and enacting a more generalized hockey fandom/identity, supporting multiple teams and understanding the unwritten/unspoken rules of the community.

Time Frame 5: 2nd Regular Season (Opener) --> End of 2nd Regular Season (July 2023)

Time Frame 5 is an extension of Time Frame 4, as the collective "we" is increasingly defined by knowledge and being an informed fan on hockey and on the Kraken. There are more discussions about hockey game etiquette. It isn't hard to find community members who have attended games and can make detailed recommendations on how to attend a game. Pronouns are used to draw distinctions around those who follow/don't follow etiquette. One user (151(6)) describes the community as "a community of 1-year experts", hinting at some conflict. Being a rational fan remains valued (established vs. promising rivals (151(6))).

Subgroups are more prominent. Groups of members that share other fandoms (121(6)), other members who share nationality (122(6)), new fans (147(6)). Here, the use of *new fan* feels to be used as a hedge more so than a potential connection point (as it was in the earlier time frames).

Discursive Devices

- Affect/Emotion Displays

- "Love" for the "guide" for new fans
- Detail
- Assessments
 - Assessments = also makes a claim that we are experienced or have knowledge of the thing we are assessing
- Category (i.e., new fan)
 - Hedge: new fans hedge before participating
- Minimization: "just" read this post
- Consensus
 - Knowledgeable vs new people
 - "We" are responsible for setting culture (113(6))
- Humor & ECF
 - Discussions around firing the coach are often either ECF or humorous plays on the discussion

What is "we"?

"We" is becoming a clearer distinction between those who are knowledgeable and those whom are still "new". Informed community members are creating guides and communicating hockey etiquette/norms for new fans (and being rewarded through the upvote structure). This is particularly prominent in 113(6), where the community discusses how to solve the issue of fans getting up during the flow of play (a no-no in hockey etiquette).

- "It's on us to set the culture" --> feel responsible for training new fans (how do we get "people" to follow etiquette?)
- "Can't wait (until a stop in play), find a new sport"

Through devices, including consensus and pronoun shifting, they suggest that it is their responsibility to inform "others" being those who are not as knowledgeable and informed. This is a point of contention in the comments, but further suggests that by this point, the community "we" is differentiated based on being informed about the Kraken, hockey, and the less known aspects of the sport, despite the awareness from the community that Seattle is a "new" hockey town and the ushers are similarly new/understaffed.

Affect and emotion displays are used to respond to community engagement/involvement/effort (guide to new fans). Detail, ECFs, and various assessments characterize hockey discussion where the intricacies of the sport are discussed. For new fans, learning what they need to know is generally minimized suggesting it is perceived as "simple" to onboard. In 114(6), the top comments are generally concise or outbound links, supporting this assertion.

Notable posts:

- 142(6) - a new fan introduces himself (and his dad) as new Kraken fans and provide narrative to describe their fandom. They share a picture of them wearing jerseys for the LA Chargers (NFL) with no other indication of the Kraken in the picture. Not well received: 0 pts, 41%, 0 comments
- 144(6) - Hockey etiquette is discussed as new fans attended a playoff game and didn't know the norms. Community members excuse the behavior because it was such a good atmosphere
 - "I don't want to gatekeep"

- 148(6) - a fan questions the Kraken broadcast team. They seem genuine and honest in their questioning (a lot of hedging), but the community is very defensive of their broadcast: 0 pts, 31%, 26 comments
- 140(6) - new fan asks for information. A prominent user (KrakenFan16) says the community should create a guide. This has been this user's recommendation for at least a year at this point.

Other interesting overall observations:

- KrakenFan16
 - This user first appears in Time Frame 2, where they introduce themselves as a new fan. They take an early role in the community, posting about why new fans should watch/care about NHL events (prior to the Kraken playing).
 - This user remains active over the final 3 time frames, preaching patience with new fans and asking for organized guides/resources for new fans
 - Also a source of conflict, as this user comments on *new fan posts* about how people can and should choose to be a fan of a team without regard for the community response. They take issue with the "awkwardness" of asking to be a fan of the team
 - Also refers to self as a "regular" and uses pronouns to draw distinctions between the "regulars" and "them" (i.e., new fans).
 - Interesting quotes about fandom being "spiritual", rivalries, and how to help ignorant/new fans.