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Why do Fans Use Coping Mechanisms and What Can the NHL do to Keep Fans Interested?

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There has been no previous research on why fans choose the coping mechanisms they use. There has also been no research done about what the NHL can do to help keep these fans interested during a lockout. This research will be important because this will help professional sport leagues in the future if they enter a lockout. The goal of my research is to find out what coping mechanisms fans are using, why they are using them, and what the NHL can do to help them remain interested during and after a lockout.

For my research I distributed a survey using snowball sampling through social media. I hit my target audience with almost 50% high identified fans and 50% low identified.

Through my research I found the coping mechanisms remained the same, I also found a new one. I found that a large percentage of low identified fans cope with the loss of a season by watching a different sport. I also determined three ways the NHL can retain both high and low identified fans throughout the course of a lockout.

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There have been many lockouts in professional sports over the last decade (Drewes, 2005). The NHL has had four lockouts in the last twenty years (Fitzpatrick, n.d.). In the past research has shown during a lockout fans will find ways to cope with the loss of a season (Grieve, Shoenfelt, Wann & Zapalac, 2009; Winfree & Fort, 2008). After the lockout in 2004-2005 the NHL used marketing strategies to attract new fans to the sport (Gee, 2009; Batchelor & Formentin, 2008).

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Through my research I found the coping mechanisms remained the same, I also found a new one. I found that a large percentage of low identified fans cope with the loss of a season by watching a different sport. I also determined three ways the NHL can retain both high and low identified fans throughout the course of a lockout.
Introduction

Over the past few years there have been multiple lockouts in many sports. The National Football League (NFL) was in a standstill with the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) in 2011 because they could not come to an agreement on a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) (Travers, 2011). Also in 2011 the National Basketball Association (NBA) went through a five month lockout. This resulted in a partial loss of their season, playing only 66 games as opposed to the usual 82 per team. This was because the owners and players union could not come to an agreement on a labor deal (Beck, 2011). This year will be the fourth lockout for the National Hockey League (NHL) in 20 years. In 1992 and 2004-2005 the players went on strike because no agreement could be reached on a CBA (Buschemann & Deutscher, 2011). Finally 301 days later the owners and the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA) agreed on a new economic system (Farber, Bechtel & Cannella, 2005). In 1994-1995 there was a strike because the owners wanted to impose a luxury tax and players did not agree. The lockout in 1994-1995 led to salary arbitration being removed from the NHL (Levine, 2011). The lockout in 2004-2005 was longest lasting lockout ever recorded in sport history. They lost a record shattering 1,230 games over 310 days (Staudohar, 2005). Currently in 2012 players and owners cannot come to an agreement on a new CBA because of financial issues (Fitzpatrick, n.d.). Sports are very popular and highly viewed in the United States (Trail, Anderson & Fink, 2005).

Watching sports in the United States is very popular so this affects the sport market because there are fewer sporting events to watch and this may cause sport fans to become restless and to start watching other sports (Winfree & Fort, 2008; Trail, Anderson & Fink, 2005).
The goal of this study is to determine what coping mechanisms fans are using, why the fans are using these, and what fans want the NHL to do to keep them interested in the league. Going more in depth I am looking to find what the NHL should do to keep low identified fans interested in hockey and the NHL during a lockout. A low identified fan is a fan of a sport that does not have a significant connection with a team as opposed to a highly identified fan who has a significant emotional attachment to their favorite team (Grieve, Shoenfelt, Wann, & Zapalac, 2009). The research question to answer in this study is:

Why do fans use the coping mechanisms they use and how do they relate to the marketing initiatives taken by the NHL during and after a lockout?

This study is valuable to the academic community because this research has never been conducted before. The information will be helpful to NHL and other leagues that may enter a lockout by showing what they can do to assist the fans.

A sport organization is like any business, they are trying to get new customers and keep old customers moving up the escalator in the escalator concept (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). In this sports concept low users might be people who get to one or two games a year. A high user would be someone who is a season ticket holder. The elevator concept is taking non consumers and starting to get them involved or at least aware of the product. The next goal is moving light consumers up into medium users and then ideally moving them up to heavy users (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007).

This research will attempt to show what low identified fans need to stay interested and also what highly identified fans need to keep buying more and more NHL licensed products during a lockout. Throughout the course of this paper I will discuss the mechanisms used by fans
to cope with the lockout. I will also discuss what the NHL does from a marketing stand point during and after a lockout.

**Literature Review**

**Fan Coping Mechanisms**

Sport fans have a great ability to cope with adversity (Grieve, Shoenfelt, Wann, & Zapalac, 2009). There are two types of fans, highly identified and low identified fans. Highly identified fans tend to react worse to bad news or events that occur involving their team. They react with more negative reactions which may include depression, anger, and disappointment (Grieve, Shoenfelt, Wann, & Zapalac, 2009). High identified fans usually bask in reflected glory (BIRG) and cut off reflected failure (CORF). This means when their team wins they tend to include themselves as part of the team and when their team loses they tend to exclude themselves from the team (Spinda, 2011; Ware & Kowalski, 2012). For example, “we won today”, or “they played a bad game”. For example, on February 2012, fans of the home team al-Masry stormed the field and rioted. The game was between al-Masry and rival club al-Ahly. These two teams have been known for having bad blood between each other. In this event there was over 70 people killed and many more injured (Kwesi O’Mard, 2012). This tragedy shows how serious some highly identified fans take the sport and their team. Low identified fans have less of an emotional connection and are less likely to act in anger or rage (Grieve, Shoenfelt, Wann, & Zapalac, 2009).

During a crisis such as a lockout fans will find ways to cope with the loss. The alternatives that still involved hockey were to go watch minor league teams (AHL, CHL, and OHL) and/or junior league hockey teams (Winfree & Fort, 2008). Some of the highly identified
fans played in pick up hockey leagues more frequently than when the NHL was not in a lockout (Winfree & Fort, 2008). As research showed there are also some non-hockey related activates fans used to cope. Some fans would go watch the NHL’s competitor, the NBA. The NBA saw an above average increase in attendance during the time of the NHL lockout in 2004-2005 (Rascher, 2009). The thread I found online is important because it shows examples of what fans did during the NHL lockout in 2004-2005. For example, one fan stated during the lockout, “I learned how the world of international football worked and became a huge fan (McGuieresMonsters, 2011). This shows some fans watch other sports instead of waiting for the NHL to fix their problems, if this is a low identified fan the NHL might run the risk of losing the fan forever.

Research has directly found actions by the NHL have impacts on attendance if other hockey leagues in the same area (Winfree & Fort, 2008). For example, in Philadelphia, there was both an NHL and an AHL team and the AHL team attendance went up 7.9 percent during the lockout in 2004–2005. The AHL attendance went up 5.7 percent from the previous year because of the NHL lockout (Sports business daily, 2005). Most NHL fans went to the AHL, Ontario Hockey League, the NFL or the NBA. Here are a few responses I found on a thread online: “Followed the Amerks and the AHL closer. Went to a few games too. Watched more TV shows, played more Playstation”. Another fan states,” I stopped watching hockey for 3 years, until I happened to date a hockey fan who got me back into the sport (McGuieresMonsters, 2011). This is another example of what an NHL fan said they did during the NHL lockout. Even before the lockout in 2004-2005 the NHL was suffering from popularity issues and lacking in fan support (Batchelor & Formentin, 2008; Langford, 2012). In the thread I found there were a few responses saying they replaced the NHL with other sports and stopped watching hockey in
general (McGuire’s Monsters, 2011). This information supports the statement that fans will follow other sports and will find a way to cope with the loss of a season. This is because curiosity is a motive that influences fan behavior (Park, Mahony & Kim). The NHL needs to find ways to keep fans interested or they could lose fans. This is potential revenue for the league because there is a wide spread competition for the sports entertainment dollar (Teed, Delpy-Neirotti, Johnson & Seguin, 2009).

**Marketing and the NHL**

Relationship marketing is a way of getting a consumer interested in a company. This is also designed to create and maintain a relationship between the business and consumer (Mullin et al., 2007). “All sports marketing transactions, in fact, involve some type of relationship marketing. In some cases the efforts are explicit. In other cases, they are hidden or even unrecognized (Bee & Kahle, 2006, p. 102). A common mistake some professional organizations make is they believe a winning team is key to marketing their team (Bovinet, 1999). All sport organizations need to use relationship marketing to ensure fans stay interested and to keep them coming back. Also sport organizations are trying to keep fans for long term and incorporating a variety of database-management techniques to keep customer relationships (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Database marketing is the gathering of information on fans through resources such as surveys, research, and records (Mullin et al., 2007). This information includes demographics, psychographics, product usage rate, and geomarket information (Mullin et al., 2007). This information can then be used to develop relationships with fans. This can be done by sending information to the fans through e-mail, mail, and phone calls (Spoelstra, 1997). The goal of this is to keep in contact with fans and keep them moving up the “escalator”. This means increasing
their involvement with the company by trying to increase the amount of games they attend and the amount of merchandise they purchase (Mullin et al., 2007; Spoelstra, 1997).

Online marketing also involves building a relationship with the consumer through maintaining communication (Anderson, 2004). Online marketing has become a very large arena for sport organizations to build fan communities and relationships with their fan base (Loakimidis, 2010; Marilou, 2010). The research done by Brown (2003) shows there are some benefits for teams having a website such as establishing customer loyalty, reaching a global market, and creating brand positioning. Sport websites are now utilizing web marketing by posting audio and video files, podcasts, and also live broadcasts of games (Loakimidis, 2010). This helps fans stay more connected to their favorite team or league. The NHL and its marketing campaign are very important to a successful season post lockout. The campaign needs to attract fans they might have lost from the current lockout and also attract new fans to the sport. The NHL needs to attract more fans because they rely more heavily on ticket sales and don’t make as much on television rights as other sports organizations (Ozanian, 2012). This is because NHL games are rarely on national television, the only time you really see the NHL is during the playoffs.

Tim Tennant was the NHL’s chief creative officer (CCO) for the “Inside the Warrior” campaign (Gee, 2010). Tim Tennant knew the NHL was going to suffer from a backlash from missing an entire season so after the NHL lockout in 2004-2005, the NHL launched its “Inside the Warrior” campaign, part of their larger “My NHL” campaign. One of the biggest messages the NHL was trying to convey to the fans with the “My NHL” campaign is the NHL and partners were ready to give the fans a brand of hockey unlike any other (Batchelor & Formentin, 2008). The NHL had new goals and commitments they wanted to provide to the fans. They knew they
had to reignite the passion with the fans. This includes high and low identified fans. Two studies discuss the techniques used in these campaigns. The campaign was designed to attract a broader fan base than they had before the lockout (Gee, 2009; Batchelor & Formentin, 2008). This base includes both females and males, previously the NHL’s main concern was males. The NHL used the entertainment aspect to attract fans to explore the game through goal scoring, hard hitting, and fighting to attract fans (Gee, 2009). They also use star power to attract fans (Dewitt, 2008).

The NHL made a five minute film to attract fans back to the sport. This film could also be cut up into smaller 30 second segments for commercials and for individual teams to use. The film was played on television as commercials and the film was played in full in movie theaters as a preview before the movie. This was also available to view on the NHL website (Batchelor & Formentin, 2008). The way they were attracting women to the sport of hockey was through this video.

The video is about NHL players playing hockey but the voice they used as the narrator was a women’s voice. This sets her as the anchor of the advertisement (Gee, 2009). One of the main techniques to appeal to the masculine side is fighting in the “new NHL” (Gee, 2009).

Hockey’s status as a man’s game in Canada has been partly due to the fact that the game continues to be one of the few areas of life where hardness and overt physical intimidation are still allowed to count – places where men who love to hit can still enjoy doing so (Gee, 2009).

This is what the “inside the warrior” campaign is focused on. After the lockout the NHL was focusing to attract tough men to the hard hitting and fighting in hockey. The advantage hockey
has is the NHL is one of the only sports where fighting is allowed. When the NHL enters a lockout their marketing strategy needs to change.

During a lockout the staff of a team can be involved in community relations but no active players can be in contact with the team (Spector, 2012). An example of this happened over Thanksgiving. The New York Rangers staff served dinner to families affected by Hurricane Sandy (Spector, 2012). Teams are also using social media such as Facebook to keep fans interested in their team. Most teams are promoting their AHL affiliate. Teams are also mentioning things such as youth hockey and also entertainment such as concerts that are held in their arena (Perry, 2012). All these techniques are useful for the NHL to help gain fans and grow as a business.

The theory I will be using for this research paper will be the social identity theory. Social identity theory is based on a person’s relationship between them and their surroundings. This occurs when they become a member of a group and feel an emotional connection with the group (Heere & James, 2007; Lock, Taylor, Funk & Darcy, 2012). “Team identification is based on social identity theory” (Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002). This is important because this paper deals with team identification and personal identity. This theory is also deeply connected with self-esteem (Stets & Burke, 2000; Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Sports can increase a person’s self-esteem through association and affiliation with a sports team (Posten, 1998). Fans tend to be happier when their team is doing good and worse when they are doing poorly. I will also need to tie this in with team identity to show the relationship between the fans and their favorite team.
This theory will be useful in my paper because it will show how people become sport fans or members of a certain group. I believe in most cases this will be because of friends or family.

**Methodology**

The research I conducted was exploratory research because it is new unknown information. The data I gathered included people’s thoughts, this means data is be qualitative and quantitative. This is because some of the answers will be numerical such as how many games they attend. The rest of the data will be based on their feelings and thoughts. My research tradition is interpretivism. This is because my survey questions are based on feelings and emotions. The questions answered how fans become interested and why fans stay interested in the NHL. Some other questions will be asked so I can measure how strong their feelings are towards the league because of the lockout. The collection of data was also a mixed methods approach and this data will also be subjective because people’s feelings are involved in their responses.

I collected this data through surveys on qualtrics. The participants I used in my research are NHL fans. I used snowball sampling to find the participants. I posted a link on Facebook and twitter a couple times a day which people can click and take the survey. This means I won’t be able to choose who takes the survey. The reasoning for using this is because it would be too hard to find NHL fans because there are not as many as the NFL. I had the link open for two weeks and I got 29 responses. A couple problems I see with snowball sampling is the survey can get to people who might just put random answers and skew the study. The positive of using the snowball method are is survey will reach a lot of people. I used the survey to separate the
responses based on fans being high or low identified, the coping mechanisms they use, and off of their responses to my open ended questions. One other piece of information needed to know was how they get interested in the sport. Also I needed to find out how they become associated with a team, I will also tie this in with the Social Identity Theory. To find out if the fans are high or low Identified I needed to ask them a series of questions about their number of games attended, how long they have been a fan, and if they still have a favorite team. For the open ended questions part of the survey I asked what coping mechanisms they used and why they used these. I also need to ask their opinion on what they think the NHL can do to help them stay interested in the sport during the lockout.

The main focus of my research is on low identified fans and how the NHL can keep those fans throughout a lockout. This paper mainly deals with low identified fans so most of these fans are the fans that are just becoming associated with the sport or are not very emotionally attached to their team, in some cases they may not have a favorite team. This will help me show the way they become fans and I will then be able to connect that to the marketing techniques taken by the NHL to keep fans or to gain new ones.

The theory I used to interpret my survey responses will be the social identity theory. Social identity theory is based on a person’s relationship between them and their surroundings. This occurs when they become a member of a group and feel an emotional connection with the group (Heere & James, 2007; Lock, Taylor, Funk & Darcy, 2012). “Team identification is based on social identity theory” (Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002). This is important because this paper deals with team identification and personal identity. This theory is also deeply connected with self-esteem (Stets & Burke, 2000; Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Sports can increase a person’s self-esteem through association and affiliation with a sports team (Posten, 1998). Fans tend to be
happier when their team is doing good and worse when they are doing poorly. I will also need to tie this in with team identity to show the relationship between the fans and their favorite team. This theory will be useful in my paper because it will show how people become sport fans or members of a certain group. I believe in most cases this will be because of friends or family. This theory helped to analyze and interpret my results.

**Discussion**

My survey was active for twelve days and I received 29 responses and 21 of them were fully completed surveys. Out of those 21 completed surveys I found all of them became fans through friends or family. This can be explained through Social Identity theory. This is when people become a member of a group and feel an emotional connection with that group (Heere & James, 2007; Lock, Taylor, Funk & Darcy, 2012). Family and friends all share special bonds and are close with one another. When someone or multiple people in the group like something such as hockey they may influence others in the group to become a fan and watch games. I believe this is why my entire sample size responded they become interested through friends, family or both.

I also found 10 low identified fans and 11 highly identified fans took my survey. Even though the sample size is so small I still received good results because there was almost the same amount of both fans. This made it a lot easier to analyze and compare my results. The way high and low identified fans were separated was by analyzing the responses of these two questions “How frequently do you watch the NHL on Television” and “How many NHL games have you attended in the last 2 years. The responses that determined if they were highly identified was if
they watched NHL games twice a week or more and if they attended three or more NHL games in the last two years.

Also I found low identified fans tend to watch other sport leagues during the past two lockouts. High identified fans tend to be more involved weather it’s the NHL, AHL, or playing hockey themselves. They are truly invested in the sport. Through this part I also found a new coping mechanism, playing NHL video games. This mechanism has not been mentioned in any other previous research papers.

Through the survey I also found what high and low identified fans would like the NHL to do keep them interested during a lockout. High identified fans were very helpful in their responses. This is because they care about their favorite team or the NHL. Many high identified fans want the NHL to stay more involved with the NHL or AHL. On the other hand low identified fans showed they really didn’t care by blowing off the question by responding “end the lockout” or “not have a lockout”. This shows they are not very connected and devoted to the NHL or any NHL teams. High identified fans responded the way I anticipated them to but the low identified fans didn’t put much thought into some of their responses.

In the articles I read there was no data on what percentage of fans used what coping mechanisms. The articles just stated there were a few coping mechanisms such as playing hockey, watching AHL, watching amateur hockey, and watching another sport. Also these articles never went into detail on what coping mechanisms high and low identified fans use.

Even though my sample size was small I do believe it gave some good results. I found that an extremely high amount of low identified fans watched other sports during the 2004-2005 and the 2012-2013 NHL lockouts. In the 2005-2005 lockout, 7 out of 13 responses said they
watched a different sport during the lockout. In 2012-2013, 8 out of 13 responses claimed they watched a different sport. This relates back to what fans said on the discussion board about what people did during the 2004 – 2005 lockout. Many of the responses I received people stated they stopped watching hockey in general and some learned about other sports. While some high identified fans did watch other sports the numbers were much lower. High identified fans tend to use hockey or NHL related coping mechanisms as you can see on graph 1 below.

Throughout my research I found some interesting information about the fans and what the NHL can do to attempt to keep fans interested. I wanted to focus on what the NHL could do to keep low identified fans interested in the NHL during a lockout. When I looked at the data from the question about what fans wanted the NHL to do to keep them interested the low identified almost avoided the question. They responded with answers such as “idk” and “end” the lockout”. This could have been just because they are not as invested in the NHL as high identified fans. The responses from the high identified fans may also be good suggestions to keep low identified fans interested. This is because high identified fans made suggestions such as show more AHL coverage on television and play old NHL games. If the NHL frequently played exciting past games this would help to keep low identified fans interested because they might see
it on the TV guide and watch it. The two articles I read about how the NHL marketed themselves during and after the lockout they never mentioned replaying old games or covering AHL game.

Also when the NHL is in the off season they televise past games. This would keep both high and low fans more interested because they would have one more opportunity to watch the sport. By watching these games it would get the fans in the mood and excited for the start of the upcoming season.

The NHL would be able to advertise their video game to a greater extent. This is because one of the low identified fans stated they played the NHL video game to cope with the loss of the season. If the NHL advertises the video game more people may buy the game. This would keep them connected to the NHL and may keep them interested during a lockout and they may remain a fan. This is also another way the NHL would be able to keep fans involved in the sport and the league.

The NHL could also have commercials during other sports on the same channel. This would help attract possible past fans, current fans, or new fans to the NHL and watch their games. Even if this is during a lockout it may get people to think and remember how much they miss and enjoy the sport of hockey.

One of the responses I got to the question of what can the NHL do to keep fans involved was fans want the NHL to keep them involved and updated on what is going on. This can be applied to the offseason and also during a lockout. During the offseason the NHL could mention what players are doing and also what trades and signings are being made. During the lockout the NHL could keep the fans up to date on how meetings and negotiations are going.
Throughout my research I found a few pieces of new information. The first new piece of information I found was a new coping mechanism. I found that some fans cope by playing the NHL video game. This is important because with this information the NHL has one more way to attract people to the sport of hockey and to their league both during a lockout and in the off season.

I found low identified fans watch other sports more frequently than high identified fans. This is due to them not being invested in the sport and/or the league itself. High identified fans tend to cope with the loss of the season by staying involved in the sport of hockey or NHL related activities.

I also found what fans would want the NHL to do to keep them interested in the NHL. Their responses varied some of the responses are as follows: play old NHL games, keep me updated on what is going on, more AHL on TV, get involved with college hockey, and be more involved with the AHL.

**Conclusion**

My research added new information to the already existing knowledge about fan coping mechanisms. I found a new coping mechanism fans use. Another important piece of information I found was the percentage of low identified fans that watch other sports as opposed to using an NHL or hockey related coping mechanism during a lockout. I also found high identified fans cope with the loss of a season by using hockey or NHL related coping mechanisms. From this
information I determined the NHL can focus on three things when marketing during a lockout or the off season. The first thing is to keep the fans updated during the lockout. The second thing is to show old games past exciting games such as the Stanley Cup Finals. The last thing the NHL can do is have commercials during the other televised sports game.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Although I received a good amount of new information my research had a few limitations. The limitations were sample size, distribution of survey, survey format, and responses.

Although I received an equal distribution of responses, my sample size was a limitation. I only received 29 responses and only 21 completed responses. This is extremely small compared to the millions of NHL fans. My survey only reached a small portion of these fans. To correct this problem I would change the way I distributed the survey.

Another limitation was how I distributed the survey. I used snowball sampling on Facebook and twitter. The problem with this was people may have seen it on the news feed but may not have wanted to respond. In the future I would go to AHL games and hand out surveys or have them take it on my laptop. This way I can also get a much higher sample size. I would also be able to control who took my survey.

My survey could have been formatted differently. When changing the format of the survey I the response rate may be much higher I would format the survey so people don’t see the entire survey. When people see a long survey it can be discouraging and they may want to stop taking the survey.
In the future I would recommend people take their surveys to AHL games and other sporting events. This way you will be able to control how many responses you get. You will also be able to control the answers in a way. An example is the low identified fans responses in my survey. I would have helped if I could have had them answer some of the questions with more thought.
References


