

Exploring the Impact of the Winnipeg Jets Branding Strategies on Fan's Self Identity and

Loyalty

by

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## **Abstract**

In effort to drive fan loyalty, sports franchises are increasingly looking for ways to connect with the fans. The team-fan base relationship is anchored with the use of branding strategies to improve the fan experience both within and outside the arena. This study examines the impact of True North Sports and Entertainment Ltd.'s branding strategies, and furthermore how these strategies are perceived by the fans. To do so, this study uses a mixed methods approach. The qualitative research includes the results of three semi-structured interviews with staff from the Jets marketing department, while the quantitative portion includes the results of a survey with self-identified Jets fans. This study outlines the Jets branding strategies, the tactics used to execute them, and the influence these have on both attitudinal and behavioural fan loyalty.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Since the emergence of commercial sport, franchises have been businesses that have had to balance player salaries and franchise revenues. A team's economic value is partly dependent on its fan base, their numbers, and the money fans are willing to spend or the leisure time they are willing to invest regardless of whether the team is winning or losing. There is a significant value for professional sports' organizations in Canada to invest in branding efforts to foster and build fan identification with their team and focus on brand development. Sport management is extensively focussed on efforts by sports organizations to engage fans as a way of building community through the vehicle of "brand loyalty" so that the brand and its products ensure a committed fan base. The model that is often used is a product-driven model, not unlike television marketing. Fans purchase a ticket to the game (product) and if they like the game they come back and purchase not only tickets but might also buy merchandise and the brand is built in such ways. In some areas of marketing practice, an increasing interest in customer relationships has become apparent, turning customer retention into a top priority for many franchises (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer & Exler, 2008). The emergence of social media has created new opportunities for fan engagement and recognition of the importance of a stable fan base as an imperative driver of a team's competitive advantage (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008). Yet it is not easy to measure the impact of marketing and engagement strategies on the fan experience of professional sport.

The team-fan base relationship has been previously studied by scholars. Richelieu and Korai (2012), for example, examine the links between the Montreal Canadiens, French-Canadian fans, and the team's long history in the community. They argue that "the associations of the identity form indelible memories that remain present in the heart of young French Canadians.

The Montreal Canadiens appear to be an entity strongly tied to francophone Quebec that both feeds and is fed by the team” (p. 127). Professional hockey is not only a major industry in Canada but also a significant part of Canadian culture. Leveraging that embedded culture allows marketers to improve a franchise’s connection with its fan base. Richelieu and Korai demonstrate the significance of this in the case of Montreal. While the connection to the francophone community is significant in this case, the cultural importance of professional sports teams to their communities of fans is not unique to Montreal.

In Winnipeg, Manitoba, the *Winnipeg Free Press* declared the city “reborn” after the National Hockey League (NHL) Atlanta Thrashers were purchased by the Winnipeg-based True North Sports and Entertainment Ltd. (TNSE) in June 2011 and relocated to the Manitoba capital for the 2011-2012 season (Kirbyson, 2012). That first year was summed up in this way: “City reborn after the NHL: Downtown energized, citizens revitalized one year later” (Kirbyson, 2012). After a year in their new market, the Winnipeg Jets had been welcomed by the city and quickly assimilated themselves in the values and traditions of the community, thanks in no small part to the fan base. Prior to the franchise being relocated, TNSE in just minutes, reached the goal set by the NHL of 13,000 season tickets, tweeting shortly thereafter “Officially Sold Out! Reached our goal within 17 minutes of noon. THANK YOU!!!!” Gary Bettman, the commissioner of the NHL, mirrored a similar excitement “While I had no doubt the ‘Drive to 13,000’ would reach its destination, the remarkable speed at which it got there certifies the fans’ hunger for NHL hockey and their commitment to True North’s initiatives” (“Winnipeg's NHL”, 2011).

Winnipeg offers a case in which to consider the connection between the fan base, a professional sports team, and the latter’s efforts to market to these fans. This is in part because of



the Jets' complex history in Winnipeg and the Winnipeg Jets 1.0. Barry Shenkarow, the owner of the Winnipeg Jets 1.0, from 1979 to 1996 began to lean on corporate support in 1991 when he started demanding a privately funded arena. Though, "no private sector investors have expressed interest in purchasing the hockey club because of the existence of excessive losses and the potential for continued losses in the future" (Silver, 1996, p. 73). Furthermore, the Jets' expenditures were not being monitored, giving more reason for scepticism for potential investors. It was decided that the only way the Jets could survive, in what was considered a small market, was by building a new arena that offered luxury suites and more seating. Silver (1996) expands on the importance of a new arena to generate additional revenue, "the existing arena was old and relatively small, without adequate space for luxury boxes. A new arena in Winnipeg could use about thirty luxury boxes, Shenkarow believed, each costing about \$50,000 per year, plus about 1500 special seats" (p. 59).

With the lack of corporate support, attention began to shift towards the arena being publicly funded. Thin Ice, a voluntary pressure group "was primarily concerned with the use of scarce public funds to build a new arena at a time of major provincial and civic cutbacks to health care, education, and other social services. Ironically, while millions of dollars of public money were being proposed to be invested in a new arena, local recreation and community sporting facilities, including local hockey rinks, were being closed due to government cuts" (Scherer, 1999, p. 139). On August 15, 1995, despite many attempts at saving the Jets, it was announced that the hockey franchise was sold and moving to the U.S. sunbelt. This proved to be a devastating loss for the community, leading to a loss of civic identity and recalling other such losses as "becoming another Regina" (Scherer, 1999, p. 120)

Ultimately, the loss of Winnipeg's NHL franchise indicated much more than the loss of a professional sports team in the city. "It demonstrated a lack of corporate presence and global identity to the Winnipeg community, thus, being compared to Regina. To many Jets' fans, civic boosters and members of the media, the Jets symbolized Winnipeg's entrance in the global 'big-leagues' of 'world class' entertainment" (Scherer, 1999, p. 127). Many Jets fans felt a connection with the team, a reason why this loss was particularly difficult. In addition, during the campaigns to save the Jets, there was a significant amount of confusion regarding fiscal allocation. The team had received a number of generous donations which were never returned despite the loss of the team. This created animosity within the community. "Numerous rallies and socials were held to raise money for the Jets, and \$13.5 million was raised by Winnipeggers to support the team during 'Operation Grassroots'" (Scherer, 1999, p. 110). There was a misleading notion that despite evidence proving the economic viability of this proposed arena, that the community was unanimous in its support efforts to save the team.

Television exposure, such as "Hockey Night in Canada," showcased Winnipeg on a national stage that facilitated conversation and a sense of community. This sense of imagined community was cherished by Winnipeg residents and became an environment where fans could find common ground. Silver (1996) explains the impact that Winnipeg residents endured during the loss of the Jets: "to many, the Jets were a part of Winnipeg's overall cultural fabric that made life comfortable in the face of geographical isolation and extremes of temperature" (p. 26). The Winnipeg Jets 1.0 promoted common values which were lost with the team's departure, along with that was the loss of a global symbol and prosperity. With the NHL having a complex history in Winnipeg, it is no surprise that the current Winnipeg Jets 2.0 franchise is focusing on longevity and long-term prosperity. In addition to selling out Bell MTS Place and bringing in big

ticket sponsorships, what other branding strategies can a professional sports team create to maintain steady profit margins?

To explore the Winnipeg case, this thesis examines branding strategies that are intended to build brand loyalty and shape the fan experience. This suggests further issues such as, what are TNSE's branding strategies and how are these being communicated? How are fans responding to these branding strategies and how does their response build loyalty? And finally, does fan loyalty contribute to the organization's brand strength.

## **Objectives**

This thesis focuses on branding strategies and identity by analysing the sports fans in particular. Specifically, this study examines how an organization attempts to build a fan base and retain fan loyalty with branding strategies, and furthermore how these tactics are perceived by the fans through a mixed methods approach. The main objective of this study is to determine how branding strategies build brand loyalty and shape a self-identified fan. This franchise is in the position of having a history in the community, while also being a relative newcomer on the Winnipeg sports scene, arriving in 2011.

This study ultimately focuses on the issue of fan identity and loyalty, specifically how professional sports teams can leverage the emotional connection fans share with their franchise to build brand strength; how professional sports teams can develop their fans' interests in sports; and how sports teams can improve and maybe expand the fans' experience at the sporting venue and outside the arena, and increase fans' attachment to the team. A fan portrait emerges from asking what exactly engages a fan and compels the expenditure of time, energy, and money.

The Winnipeg Jets, despite playing in the NHL's smallest arena, are the 27<sup>th</sup> most valuable team in the NHL (out of 31 teams) at \$415 million (“The business of”, 2018). Though the Jets play in the NHL's smallest market, they have ticket prices topped only by Toronto and Montreal (Campbell, 2012). With a season ticket waiting list of approximately 8,000 people, “four years after their season ticket drive, things are going strong” (Whyno, 2015, p. 1). This suggests a significant level of loyalty among local fans. This study seeks to understand the branding strategies that contributed to this level of loyalty and how these tactics were received by fans. With operating income of \$11 million during the 2017-2018 NHL season (“The business of”, 2018), this suggests that if a brand is strong, “it benefits from a high degree of loyalty, and thus from stability of future sales” (Kapferer, 2007, p. 24).

## **Rationale**

There are several motivations informing this research on sports fans and branding. During the 2009-2010 season, NHL attendance was down 2.5 per cent (Hyatt, Sutton, Foster, & McConnell, 2013). Johnson (2010) highlighted the struggle: “there aren’t really a lot of bright spots in the NHL as far as attendance goes this season” (p. 1). In response, franchises attempted to remedy this by implementing player focused marketing strategies that built fan attachment. Urtz (2014) highlights the efforts of the Chicago Blackhawks: “it also helped that the Blackhawks had some talent, and the Blackhawks started marketing their players wisely” (p. 1). He further notes that the result of promoting talented players, “the emergence of two young stars added some popularity, and the on-ice success continued to the point in which the team became well-known around the NHL.”(Urtz, 2014, p. 1)

With the prioritization of branding strategies, there has been an increase in overall average attendance. Since the 2010-2011 NHL season, attendance has steadily increased (“NHL

average attendance”, 2016). Professional franchises that invest in the emotional connection they share with their fans leverage both their brand equity and their fan base. This study provides greater clarity on how professional sports teams can and should improve fans’ experience at the sporting venue and outside the arena, increasing fans’ attachment to the team, which is vital to a franchise’s sustainability.

Another compelling reason to analyze sports and identity and fans is that the nature of being a fan may be changing. We live in a social media world. Not only do franchises access fans in new ways, sports fans are changing how they express their commitment to a team and their resources in time and money. Fans have access to global sports – they are now viewing and following sports that were for the most part not accessible to them prior to the web 2.0. Assessing the social networking tools of sports organizations and how they can meet fans’ needs through connections on an emotional level will impact the fans’ overall connection to their team. Social networking tools may lead to enriching a fan’s experience and increase the fan’s level of involvement and also improve business results.

## **Contribution**

This thesis sheds light on the importance of fan loyalty and identity for professional sports teams and whether the focus on fans’ emotional connection builds a team’s brand image which in turn increases the revenues or at least provides stability to the sports organization. Some factors examined and explored in my research on fans’ emotional attachment include ownership and management in the NHL, fan support, and branding strategies. This thesis and related findings shed light on the ways in which fans’ emotional identification and experience can be a catalyst to growth and stability in a franchise. This thesis adds to and builds upon the current research on

fan identity and sport, which is summarized in chapter 2, by focusing on a professional sports franchise that is relatively new but also has a lengthy history in the community.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The subject and focus of this thesis is sports branding and identity as they relate to fans and their favourite franchise. Unlike a market development focus that treats fans as consumers and a significant influence on the franchise profile and profitability, this thesis explores the motives that drive people to become loyal fans and considers how best to foster fan loyalty in a franchise setting. The purpose of the literature review is to summarize the important literature that shapes my understanding of branding and fans who self-identity with their respective team. The review will bring greater clarity on how professional sports teams can leverage their branding strategies; and how sports teams can improve fans' experience at the sporting venue and outside the arena, and increase fans' attachment to the team, so vital to sustainability.

The review of literature begins with defining and understanding fandom. Following this section I review sport marketing practices and begin to identify the drivers of loyal fans, which then leads to branding and fan loyalty. Finally, this chapter concludes with social media and online marketing efforts. To achieve this, it was critical to select applicable reading material that facilitates the analysis of the relationship between the Winnipeg Jets and their fans, and how the team can build a sense of identity among fans, keeping in mind the best branding practices.

### **Understanding Fandom**

Fandom establishes a relationship between consumption and emotional investment, along with an emphasis on social and cultural interaction (Sandvoss, 2005). Sandvoss (2005) argues that "it's a complex relationship between fans as agents and the structural confines of popular culture in which they operate, a relationship which cannot be reduced to one being simply a consequence of the other" (p. 54). He identifies three different groups of fans. These are fans, cultists, and

enthusiasts. Fans intensely follow a particular cultural text or icon exclusively through mass media. Within the cultists group, media usage is more prevalent and specialized, while enthusiasts consume highly specialized texts produced by fellow enthusiasts.

Wakefield (2012) distinguishes between building a successful franchise and marketing a product or a service. This research has led to more focus on the fans. Typically, fans will have a dedicated loyalty and an emotional attachment to their sports teams, resulting in decisions based on emotion rather than logic: “while consumers of most goods and services see value as primarily an economic evaluation (Which detergent is the best buy?), the value fans derive from attending sporting events is likely to be more than a mere economic decision” (Wakefield, 2012, p. 3). Jafri (2014) summarizes the two ideas as “marketing to attract customers involves a mindset of getting people to buy your product or service. Marketing to attract fans involves a mindset of creating value, forging identity, and working toward a common goal” (p. 1).

According to identity theorists, “social identity refers to the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals or collectives” (Jacobson, 2003, p. 1). Wakefield (2012) describes how identification is likely to occur when an individual has a personal relation to a team. This embedded connection allows the fan to maintain their positive view of their team regardless of negative outcomes.

Moreover, Funk and James (2004) have developed two models that help in understanding fandom: the Fan Attitude Network (FAN) Model and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). The FAN model outlines “a process through which the fulfilment of dispositional needs serves as a catalyst for the internalisation of a sport team” (Funk & James, 2004, p. 1). This model aims to advance our understanding of attitude formation in regards to sport. In this model, “sport identity represents the internalisation of a sport object into one’s self-concept to fulfil



dispositional needs” (Funk & James, 2004, p. 2). Sport team identity is a specific determinant of attitude and it is influenced by the interaction between dispositional needs which include personality traits and endearing features, which Funk and James (2004) describe as “the various attributes of the sport setting, including performance outcomes, prior success, competition level, style of play, quality of service, geographic proximity to team, media influences, community solidarity, star players, family entertainment, success and socialization” (p. 9). It is through such a process of internalization that a person forms a connection with a sports organization and endorses expressions which lead to engagement and commitment. The PCM, on the other hand, “provides insight on the sport spectator and sport fan involvement, and outlines general parameters that may mediate the relationship between an individual and a sport or a team” (Funk & James, 2001, p. 1). This model’s four levels – awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance – highlight a fan’s level of psychological commitment to the team.

Awareness denotes when an individual first learns that a certain sports and or teams exist, but does not have a specific favourite. Attraction indicates when an individual acknowledges having a favourite team or favourite sport based upon various social-psychological and demographic based motives. Attachment is when a psychological connection begins to crystallise, creating various degrees of association between the individual and the sport object and allegiance is when an individual has become a loyal or committed fan of the sport or team this results in influential attitudes that produce consistent and durable behaviour (Funk & James, 2001, p. 3).

## **Sports Marketing**

Sports marketing applies marketing principles in a sport context. Smith (2008) defines sport marketing as a “means to be focused on satisfying the needs of customers or consumers. In turn, this means that sport marketing is focused on meeting the needs of sport customers or consumers, including people involved in playing sport, watching or listening to sport programs, buying merchandise, collecting memorabilia, buying sporting goods like clothing and shoes, or

even surfing a sport-related website to find out the latest about their favourite team, player or event” (p. 22).

Recent theoretical approaches and models in sport marketing attempt to reflect industry needs. Wakefield’s (2012) approach is one such example. He defines sports marketing as “specialized, building a highly identified fan base such that fans, sponsors, media and government pay to promote and support the organization for the benefits of social exchange and personal, group, and community identity within a cooperative competitive environment” (Wakefield, 2012, p. 12).

Sport marketing has two objectives. The first is the application of general marketing principles and practices to sport-related goods or services (marketing of sport). An example of this would be the team’s promotion of their own players and merchandise. Second, is the marketing of other consumer products or services (marketing through sport), where other organizations are promoted through sponsorships and venue operations. This is a marketing approach, unique to professional sports organizations, allowing them to leverage both tangible and intangible assets to promote their team. Understanding the differences between these approaches is significant because they cater to different consumer needs.

The marketing mix is a set of strategies and activities that cover product, price, promotion, and place (distribution). These are commonly referred to as “The Four Ps”. “The fact that these four elements are grouped into a set, or a ‘mix’, is important, because they should be coordinated together in an integrated fashion” (Smith, 2008, p. 98). However, in addition to the marketing mix, within a sport context there are two other key features to consider: sponsorship and services. Sponsorship occurs when a sports team receives support, primarily financial, from another organization in exchange for promotional exposure, in a relationship that benefits both

parties. In terms of sport services, Smith (2008) takes into account “the use of three additional ‘Ps’: participants (staff and customers), physical evidence (tangible elements of the service) and processes (the system of service delivery)” (p. 235).

Wakefield (2012) further highlights the uniqueness of marketing within sport, arguing that product consumers generally possess a loyalty to goods and services while sports fans identify with a franchise. He addresses the question of how an organization builds and develops an identity among its fan base and identifies five factors that lead organizations to this desired outcome: “sports organizations must build fan identification through attractive players, building social acceptance in the community, converting variety seekers into more identified fans, building local involvement with the sport, and fielding competitive teams in a way that fans can have some source of positive feeling related to being a winner” (Wakefield, 2012, p. 36).

Wakefield (2012) further suggests that sports organizations that have a fan base that identifies strongly with the team will benefit economically, with increased attendance and viewing of games, and increased purchases of merchandise even when the team may be having a losing period.

One key to realizing the benefits of loyal fan behaviour comes from building a successful brand image. This is particularly important due to the fluctuation in losses and wins a professional sports team can experience. Smith (2008) highlights how a franchise with loyal fans is least likely to suffer economically regardless of wins or losses. He also notes that “the consequence of successful branding and the acquisition of strong market positioning is not merely a single transaction. Rather, sport marketing reflects the establishment of an ongoing relationship between a sport brand and its users” (Smith, 2008, p. 3).

## **Branding and Fan Loyalty**

A strong understanding of what drives fan loyalty and the concept of fandom allows for marketers to engage fans using innovative techniques. It is important to understand the significance of fan loyalty and how organizations can build on this with traditional marketing mechanisms as well as by using social media and online marketing efforts. The literature on sport marketing includes a heavy emphasis on branding and how to leverage this to create long-term, loyal fans, which in turn creates potential profitability for the sports franchise.

Branding is a sub-category of marketing. Specifically, branding is the practice of differentiating one product from another with distinguishing symbols, design, and identities. There are five segments in brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, other propriety brand assets, and brand loyalty.

Kaynak et al. (2008) define brand awareness as “the anchor to which other associations can be attached, a familiarity and signal of commitment” (p. 340). In turn, Wakefield sees loyalty being manifested by the repeat purchase of a good or service while being sensitive to a variety of brands (Wakefield, 2012). This personal reaction that occurs and shapes the sentiments of identity to a sports organization is what defines a fan and their loyalty. Tachis and Tzetzis (2015) note that “in sport team settings, loyalty has been defined as the commitment to a team that persists, resists to changes and has an impact on cognitive thoughts and behavior” (p. 4). Loyalty is a result of proper marketing and branding strategies combined with having a well identified fan base. The benefits of achieving loyalty are repeated financial support regardless of team outcome.

A sports franchise's non-product-related brand attributes (e.g., logo or tradition) have a particularly large impact on attitudes and behaviour. Bauer et al. (2008) argue these "represent promising starting points for a successful sports organization and differentiating team brand strategy. Research seeking to understand or elucidate fan loyalty has received a good deal of attention, and in particular, the notion of brand image" (p. 206). Brand image models seek to find causalities among brand attributes, benefits, and attitudes. For Bauer et al. (2008), fan loyalty is positively influenced by a fan's brand association. Gwinner and Eaton (1999) further discuss brand associations and highlight that they "are developed from a variety of sources including brand and product category experiences, product attributes, price information, positioning in promotional communications, packaging, user imagery (e.g. Typical brand users), and usage occasion" (p. 47).

Much research treats the concept of fan loyalty by emphasizing an individual's devoted behaviour. Sport management and psychology researchers have studied the "behavioural indicators of fan loyalty such as spectator attendance figures and sport merchandise purchases" (Dwyer, 2011, p. 447). In addition to studies based on behavioural characteristics such as purchasing season tickets, more recent studies have examined fans' degree of attachment to a team and explored attitudinal loyalty to a sports team. Studies on fans' attitudes include Keaton, Watanabe, and Gearhart (2015), who argue that "strategically targeting social or collective identities has been purported to link to managerial outcomes such as decreased price sensitivity and performance-outcome sensitivity, making it easier to sell tickets at higher prices even in cases when teams do not perform well" (p. 43). Tachis and Tzetzis (2015) also note the strong relationship between psychological commitment and attitudinal loyalty that results in a maximized behavioural loyalty.

Research into branding and fan retention emphasizes the importance of creating a positive viewpoint among fans, which aids the sports organization in differentiating its team in a competitive marketplace. Bauer et al. (2008) contends that paying attention to brand image and fan loyalty are integral for professional sports organizations and may potentially result in long-term success. Brand loyalty, they note, “ensures a more stable following even when the core product’s performance falters. Moreover, brand loyalty creates opportunities for product extensions beyond the core product” (Bauer et al., 2008, p. 205). Kunkel, Hill, and Funk (2013) argue that having fans with increased loyalty toward their respective sport brands can result in higher profits for both the league and its teams. A franchise with a high brand image and fan loyalty will realize long-term economic gains and the benefits arising from brand equity.

Perceived quality motivates fans to purchase merchandise and attend games, making this a factor on which it is critical for organizations to differentiate themselves and gain a competitive advantage over others. It is vital to create positive feelings through brand association where fans possess an optimistic view of their franchise. Proper branding also creates a competitive advantage within a professional sports league. The brand equity model introduced by Kaynak et al. (2008) demonstrates that providing value to customers by enhancing satisfaction and confidence in their purchase decision results in added value for the sports team, leading to a greater competitive advantage.

Some models explore the connection of these factors by measuring “sport team identification” (STI), which is the “extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team and the team’s performances are viewed as self-relevant” (Keaton, et al., 2015, p. 45). Keaton et al. (2015) explore a variety of influences on STI, such as, family socialization, geography, and media. Family and childhood experiences can make a significant impression on a

person. Whether one becomes a fan of a team based on the preference of older siblings and parents or simply based upon meeting a player at a public appearance, these moments can shape identification processes. Geography and proximity to the team, including accessibility to the home arena and merchandise, can also shape a fan's identification process. Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) claim that "community affiliation is the most significant correlate of fan identification" (p. 18). Keaton et al. (2015) further adds "ties between a local team and its community provide the strongest long-term effect on identification" (p. 45).

The research conducted by Richelieu and his colleagues emphasizes branding and capitalizing on fan sentiment as factors in establishing a thriving franchise. Richelieu and Pons (2011) note that "by capitalising on this emotional attachment, professional sports teams are able to generate additional revenues through the sale of a variety of goods and services" (p. 2). Psychological and symbolic associations need to be leveraged in order to create a sense of identity among fans, resulting in a long-term and loyal fan base. "Moreover, the identity of a team and especially of a team brand represents the foundation on which the team can position itself on the market versus other sports clubs or entertainment options, and enable its managers to articulate a unique selling proposition; which would lead to, as well as sustain, marketing actions" (Richelieu & Korai, 2012, p. 134). The identity of a sport franchise includes both tangible and intangible elements. As Richelieu and Pons (2011) note "sports teams have the characteristics of true 'products', composed of (1) intangible benefits, such as emotions fans experience at the arena; as well as (2) tangible dimensions, such as the result of the game and merchandising products" (p. 3). By focusing on both the tangible and intangible dimensions, sport marketers can create reciprocity between the fans and their team to ensure long-term brand value.

The idea that fan loyalty includes intangible elements suggests that only measuring behavioural attachment – e.g., attending games and buying tickets – provides a limited picture of fans’ attachment to a team. “Although repeat attendance may be the most evident manifestation of a person’s attachment to a team, this strictly behavioural indicator ignores the underlying psychological processes explaining why some people attend more games over time. In fact, research has shown attendance alone is a poor measure of loyalty” (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000, p. 16). Bauer et al. (2008) argues that “a measure of game attendance, for instance, does not provide insights into the behavioral pattern of fans watching the team’s games on a regular basis. For example, games might be watched regularly because the person was given a season ticket” (p. 207). Without knowing other aspects such as fans’ inner motivation or processes, it is not possible to fully understand the factors behind a strong attachment to a particular team.

Lastly, media popularity can sway a fan’s loyalty and can be quite influential. The media can influence a team’s overall popularity, based upon how much media coverage the team is receiving, whether or not it is getting positive or negative attention, and if television or digital coverage of a team’s games is generally accessible (Keaton et al., 2015). Ensuring accessibility and taking proximity and family relationships into account for sports consumers are significant factors to consider for sport marketers when attempting to build fans’ sport team identification. The long-distance fan can benefit greatly from modern media. “Fans, Sports and the Internet” (n.d.) notes that “the internet provides the long distance fan all the tools necessary to be an active and engaged fan as everybody else. A fan of the Los Angeles Dodgers who resides in Florida can be a fan just as voraciously as any local fan” (para. 4).



## **Social Media and Online Marketing Efforts**

Much of the recent literature on sport marketing and fan identification has dealt with an online presence and building imagined communities to facilitate fan engagement. Researchers examine social media platforms as tools that have the potential to increase fan identity and brand equity. Social media is defined “as a group of internet-based applications that build the ideological and technical foundations of web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Witkemper, Blaszkla & Chung, 2016, p. 168). With the growth of the Internet over the last two decades, the opportunities for online fan engagement have expanded traditional methods for marketers to reach fans. Online sports marketing has grown and has become a key element in expanding online communities for professional sports leagues and team fans (Ioakimidis, 2010). With technology, there are a number of new outlets sport marketers are now able to explore and apply to the benefit of their organizations. Professional sports teams now have their own websites, while also using social media tools such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The emphasis on user-generated content and engagement provides sport marketers with innovative ways of communicating with consumers. “Many of these new media communication approaches are far more rapid, responsive and interactive than other marketing strategies” (Smith, 2008, p. 259).

A common theme in the research literature on North American sports leagues and specifically the National Football League (NFL) is the heavy reliance on an online presence. Two professional sports leagues in the US, the NFL and NHL, have the highest use of online strategies and services for sports marketing compared with the European Premier League or British Premier League. With respect to the use of media services, the NFL has outdistanced the NHL (Ioakimidis, 2010).

Witkemper et al. (2016) identify four communities of social media users: competition, cooperation, proactive, and passive. Social media users in the competition community typically have a high activity and high interactivity uses of social media, meaning these fans are more likely to trash talk and engage in fantasy sport leagues. A fan in this community can be found posting comments on their team's rival's social media feeds and often sharing and promoting videos and photos. Fans in the cooperation community demonstrate low interactivity and high accomplishment; essentially, they will partake in promotional giveaways and ticket discounts. If the team has a "buy one get one free" offer, the cooperation community fan will be first in line. A proactive fan will have a high interactivity and low activity. They are active on LinkedIn and professional networks and will also stay current with the use of blogs and educational webinars. Lastly, a fan member in the passive community will have a low interactivity and low activity. These fans will follow news coverage, fan communities, and athletes' personal websites.

The online community is growing exponentially and gaining much influence. The goal of social media use for fans is to increase team awareness and a sense of participation, which enhances fan identity and loyalty. In light of this, Waters, Burke, Jackson, and Buning (2011) explore which social media platforms are the most efficient for professional team's purposes as it relates to fans. In the case of the NFL, Waters et al. (2011) have determined "that NFL teams were actively using stewardship to cultivate fandom among their online communities" (p. 10).

Despite the benefits of social media, critics point out "organizations' limited control over these sites, its design and the lack of demonstrated return on investment for social-media endeavors" (Waters et al., 2011, p. 163). Similarly, Brown (2003) challenges online marketing as lacking direct benefits like profitability. By contrast, research suggests that a team's own website is more efficient in terms of fan engagement and most importantly in building a consumer-seller

relationship. Taking into account that this was noted prior to the growth of modern social media, Brown (2003) argues that the benefit of establishing a website is to reach a desirable demographic and establish customer loyalty: “the most important marketing communication objectives of a website owner is providing information on its organization to visitor and increasing awareness of the organization” (Brown, 2003, p. 1).

Recent social media advances have made online engagement more interactive. As a result, Connelly (2016) asserts, “sport marketers will have to create more original content around live events if they are to meet the demands of the modern 24/7 sports fan” (Connelly, 2016, p. 1). Online strategies aim to target what they consider the “24/7” fan, those who crave continuous and up-to-date information accessible to sport consumers. Twitter, for example, is a relatively new method in reaching out to fans and offers “another element which can aid in building stronger relationships between the organization and the fans to increase brand strength” (Witkemper, Hoon, & Waldburger 2012, p. 2). When considering Twitter, it is critical that a sports franchise reflect on the needs of the user.

Professional sports organizations can increase fan loyalty online, by “exploiting fans’ attachment through the creation of interactive web spaces, extending team experiences and building fan loyalty” (Ioakimidis, 2010, p. 2). Online marketing and getting fans involved on a digital platform has become the primary source for interaction between fans and their teams and providing an outlet is critical in creating loyal fans. Ioakimidis (2010) further states that “establishing an online community provides a virtual home for fans to increase their ‘felt’ connection to the team and to each other – the other fans; it also offers opportunities to express personal ideas and a sense of belonging through a felt sense of community and the team” ( p. 3).

Despite new technology, it is important to note the value in marketing principles and “The Four Ps”. Media advancements should be used in addition to marketing practices and not simply replace them. The added communication offered by these online strategies builds value for both the fan and the organization. Smith (2008) echoes this: “It is important to note that the new media marketing approach does not render the standard principles of marketing obsolete, but it does give the sport marketer new principles to wield that are relevant to the current environment. The presence of new technological tools should therefore sharpen sport marketers’ thinking about the pace of marketing and the nature of interaction and communication with consumers” (p. 261).

## **Conclusion**

It is important to understand the differences between consumers and fans, as well as the traits that make sports marketing unique from marketing. Tangible examples that are unique to sport are the athletes and coaches while intangible examples are the team logo and corporate sponsorships. Online strategies have helped sport marketers create imagined communities by facilitating dialogue and engagement, creating a stronger experience for sports teams. These imagined communities offer user empowerment and interaction, which has become vital for fan loyalty and brand strength. The results of good branding are strong emotional and personal relationships with fans, where relationships are based on reciprocity, which fans appreciate. Studying the relationship between branding and self-identified fans is important for franchise success. Furthermore, literature demonstrates the interdependence between the two and how strong branding results in a loyal fan, and in turn how that loyal fan ensures economic viability for the team.

In light of the importance of branding to building a community of fans, this thesis examines these ideas in the context of a professional sports team new to a market, but one that also has a complex history with the host city. This allows for TNSE to leverage their brand identity by keeping the “Jets” name, as well as their traditions, for example the Winnipeg Whiteout during playoffs, while being under new management with different corporate practices. It is important to examine how a team can leverage its connection to a city, building on this to strengthen loyalty among fans, so as to ensure long-term prosperity in hopes of avoiding financial instability and repeating history.

### **Chapter 3: Methods and Methodology**

This chapter examines the design and methods used to gain insight on brand image and fan loyalty in the National Hockey League, specifically, with the Winnipeg Jets. It outlines the methods used to examine the team's branding strategies and the fans' response to these tactics. It also discusses and justifies the specific data collection, analysis, and participant recruitment processes. Details of the study's limitations and delimitations conclude this chapter.

#### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to determine the branding strategies of True North Sports and Entertainment Ltd. (TNSE) while subsequently surveying fans to determine their level of loyalty to the Winnipeg Jets. For this study, a mixed methods approach was used.

Creswell and Clark (2007) define the purpose of this research method is “to obtain different but complimentary data on the same topic to best understand the research problem” (p. 62). This methodology allowed for quantitative feedback from Winnipeg Jets fans with the use of a survey that was distributed electronically. This was combined with in-depth interviews with members of TNSE's management team, which resulted in qualitative data that captured an internal view of the organization. “This design is used when a researcher wants to directly compare and contrast quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings or to validate or expand quantitative results with qualitative data” (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 62). Equal priority and weight are given to both research approaches. The merging of the data occurs during data analysis, where “the researcher attempts to merge the two data sets, typically by bringing the separate results together in the interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 64).

This study focuses on the attitude-behaviour relationship, where I outline the Winnipeg Jets' branding strategies and the tactics used to execute them, and from there analyze how these shape fans' psychological commitment. This is done by using the Psychological Commitment to a Team (PCT) scale as "previous research on the loyalty construct suggested the importance of using both behavioral and attitudinal measures when attempting to assess the loyalty of consumers" (Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000, p. 15). This scale was used to design and then analyze the data collected from surveys that were conducted with self-identified Jets fans. I also conducted interviews with three members of TNSE management and senior management team (see Figure 3.1) to better understand the Jets' branding strategies. Two interviews took place on January 26, 2018 and one on February 1, 2018 which explored themes in their branding strategies.

Figure 3.1. TNSE staff interviews

Name	Title	Date of Interview
Dorian Morphy	Vice President, Marketing	26-Jan-18
Josh Dudych	Director, Creative and Marketing Services	26-Jan-18
Andrew Wilkinson	Director, Digital and Marketing Services	01-Feb-18

For the purpose of studying ideas, beliefs, and perceptions that people hold about reality, this study adopted a constructionist approach. Newman and Robson (2012) note that "most researchers who use an interpretive approach adopt a version of the constructionist view of social reality" (p. 25). This epistemology was applied to this study when I interviewed members of the Winnipeg Jets management and senior management team and surveyed Winnipeg Jets fans, because I asked them to examine their social realities. Neuman and Robson (2012) indicate that

as “people grow up, interact, and live their daily lives, they continuously create ideas, relationship, symbols and roles that they consider to be meaningful or important, these include things such as intimate emotional attachments, religious or moral ideals, beliefs in patriotic values, racial-ethnic or gender differences and artistic expression” (p. 27). Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) reiterate a similar thought, where “constructivism is a research paradigm that denies the existence of an objective reality, asserting instead that realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals” (p. 11).

Constructionist theory allows for an individual’s interpretation of their reality while demonstrating their beliefs. Darlaston-Jones (2007) argues that “the use of qualitative methodologies is predicated upon social constructionism and the adherence to a social constructionist philosophy requires the use of qualitative research methods” (p. 25). While qualitative research methods are common within the constructionist paradigm, Mackenzie and Knipe (2007) also note “quantitative data may be utilised in a way, which supports or expands upon qualitative data and effectively deepens the description” (p. 3). This was done with the use of the PCT scale, which was used to interpret quantitative data and to more fully understand the loyalty Jets fans have for the team.

Darlaston-Jones (2007) notes “understanding the relationship between philosophy and methodologies makes the selection of appropriate methods easier because we understand the foundation upon which that choice is predicated” (p. 25). Using a constructionist approach dictated the methodology used to execute this study. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) further note that “constructivist research is most likely to rely on qualitative data collection methods and analysis or a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed methods)” (p. 3).



In order to gain both a fan and management perspective, this study used a mixed-methods approach.

## **Methods**

This section details both the quantitative and qualitative research approaches used in this study. Furthermore, it outlines the participant selection of TNSE management as well as the selection of Winnipeg Jets fans, describing in detail both the survey questionnaire and interview questions. The subsequent sections detail how data was collected and analyzed.

### Quantitative Data

This study focuses on the psychological commitment and loyalty of Winnipeg Jets fans, in particular, the attitude-behaviour relationship they share with their team. I have chosen the Psychological Commitment to a Team (PCT) scale because it captures this research theme.

### *Participant Recruitment*

The recruitment process began on January 28, 2018, shortly after ethics approval was received (see Appendix A). I posted a link to the survey on the “Fans of the Winnipeg Jets” Facebook group, which has just over 18,000 followers and is the team’s largest independent fan page. I contacted the Facebook page moderator directly to request that the link be posted for one month’s time. The survey link was active on this page for a period of five weeks until March 3, 2018, which yielded 142 completed surveys. Selecting a Facebook group that was independent of TNSE was necessary, as it may have reduced bias but also attracted those who self-identify as Jets fans.

### *Data Collection*

The survey questions were based on the PCT scale, modified to suit this study (see Figure 3.2). Mahony, Madrigal and Howard (2000) define the PCT scale in the following way: “The PCT scale provides researchers with a reliable and valid tool for measuring attitude loyalty, or the strength of fan’s commitment to a particular sport team” (p. 20). Mahony et al. (2000) also note that research on loyalty is comprised of two elements, behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. They “established a scale for assessing the strength of an individual’s commitment to sport teams. It is expected that fans who demonstrate loyalty toward a sports team possess an attitude bias that is both resistant to change and persistent over time” (Mahony et al., 2000, p. 17). Both resistance to change and persistence over time are important factors when determining a fan’s commitment: “determining the strength of an individual’s attitude or commitment therefore, would allow for meaningful differentiation between ‘fair-weather’ and ‘deeply committed’ fans” (Mahony et al., 2000, p. 18).

Figure 3.2. Psychological Commitment to a Team scale modified for this study

1. I might rethink my allegiance to the Winnipeg Jets if this team consistently performs poorly
2. I would watch a game featuring the Jets regardless of which team they are playing
3. I would rethink my allegiance to the Jets if management traded away its best players
4. Being a fan of the Jets is important to me
5. Nothing could change my allegiance to the Jets.
6. I am a committed Winnipeg Jets fan
7. It would not affect my loyalty to the Jets if management hired a head coach that I disliked very much.
8. I could easily be persuaded to change my favorite NHL team preference.
9. I have been a fan of my favorite team since I began watching professional hockey
10. I could never switch my loyalty from the Jets, even if my close friends were fans of another team
11. It would be unlikely for me to change my allegiance from the Jets to another team
12. It would be difficult to change my beliefs about the Winnipeg Jets
13. You can tell a lot about a person by their willingness to stick with a team that is not performing well
14. My commitment to the Jets would decrease if they were performing poorly and there appeared little chance their performance would change

To ensure that the survey was clear and concise, each question was numbered and I avoided jargon and vagueness. Neuman and Robson (2012) note that questionnaires distributed electronically allow for a fast response. They also argue that “survey researchers sample many respondents who answer the same questions, in the same order, in the same way; they measure many variables, test multiple hypotheses, and infer temporal order from questions about past behaviour, experiences or characteristics” (Newman & Robson, 2012, p. 154).

### *Data Analysis*

The PCT scale is an example of a Likert scale. Boone and Boone (2012) define this type of scale and how best to approach data analysis: “Likert scale items are created by calculating a composite score (sum or mean) from four or more type Likert-type items; therefore, the composite score for Likert scales should be analyzed at the interval measurement scale” (p. 2). An interval scale determines the central tendency of survey results. The central tendency is a single value that describes a set of data. Boone et al. (2012) further note that the “descriptive statistics recommended for interval scale items include the mean for central tendency” (p. 2). The PCT scale identifies fan loyalty by collectively analyzing the 14 questions to determine a single value. For this analysis, the weighted average from the PCT scale was used.

This scale uses a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. “Positively worded items were scored from 1 for strongly disagree to 7 for strongly agree, whereas negatively worded items were scored from 7 for strongly disagree to 1 for agree” (Mahony et al., 2000, p. 18). This way, a higher score represents a higher level of psychological commitment. The PCT scale takes into account and tests the correlation of three behavioural loyalty measures: overall commitment to a team over time, how often an individual watches their favourite sports team on television, and lastly games watched during the regular season.

Mahoney et al. (2000) mention that “previous research has shown that capturing the dispositional nature of attachment is crucial to establish true loyalty” (p. 20).

The PCT scale is an example of a market segmentation scale, which can be divided into four loyalty categories: high (true), spurious, latent and low loyalty. For marketers, “knowing what percentage of a team’s existing fan base falls into high, spurious, latent, or low loyalty categories provides a starting point for developing customized programs that account for varying levels of attachment held by fans” (Mahony et al., 2000, p. 21). When analyzing a market segmentation tool, Dolnicar, Grun and Leisch (2018) highlight two marketing components to consider: strategic and tactical-based marketing plans. Dolnicar et al. (2018) note that “the strategic marketing plan states where the organisation wants to go and why. The tactical marketing plan contains instructions on what needs to be done to get there” (p. 3). Identifying fans’ level of loyalty allows sports marketers to strategize how best to market their team, evolving “beyond the build it and they will come philosophy of sport marketing” (Mahony et al., 2000, p. 25).

### Qualitative Data

This portion of my study includes interviews with three members of TNSE’s management and senior management team: Dorian Morphy, Josh Dudych and Andrew Wilkinson. The participants are key informants on the organization’s marketing practices and play a role in the organization’s fan engagement strategy.

### *Participant Recruitment*

During my time as a marketing intern for the Jets organization from December 2013 to May 2014 I was able to foster many relationships within the department, as well in others. This

specific branch of the organization designs and implements the strategies used in both branding and fan engagement. Due to this experience, I was able to personally invite these participants via email (see Appendix B). Purposive sampling is common, and as Neuman and Robson highlight, “the topics that researchers are interested in studying through the use of qualitative interviewing do not easily lend themselves to probability sampling” (p. 254). Due to the specificity of my study, target sampling was appropriate in this case.

### *Data Collection*

The interviews were semi-structured and included 10 open-ended questions (see Figure 3.3). The interview questions allowed for dialogue and provided further opportunity to ask unplanned, yet related questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The first interview participant was Dorian Morphy. Dorian oversees five functional areas of the organization, including marketing of the TNSE brands and venues, creative, digital, game production and broadcasting, and retail. Josh Dudych is responsible for the design and visuals of the brand. The third participant was Andrew Wilkinson, who manages the digital incentives for TNSE, which includes a variety of websites, mobile apps, email marketing, and social media.

Interview questions were rooted in branding and considered variables such as attitudinal loyalty, psychological commitment, and fan identification. The intention of this study was to gather as much detail and depth as possible from these interviews so that I was able to draw meaningful conclusions about what the participants believe are TNSE’s branding best practices and what benefits (if any) stem from these. Tactical examples of how these strategies were and are implemented were drawn from the Winnipeg Jets’ social media pages.

Figure 3.3. TNSE interview questions

1. Can you describe your role with True North Sports and Entertainment? In what ways do you influence decisions concerning the Jets brand and/or interact with Jets fans?
2. What is your primary objective while in your current role with True North Sports and Entertainment?
3. How does your role in the organization help to maintain a high psychological commitment level with Jets fans?
4. What branding strategies are set in place to drive a committed fan base?
5. What branding practices do you use to differentiate the Jets from the rest of the league and influence fan preferences and perceptions and what are the results of these practices?
6. Is it important to create a tradition for the franchise and why? What traditions are important to True North Sports and Entertainment? How does True North Sports and Entertainment intend on creating and maintaining these traditions?
7. Does winning play a role in ensuring a committed fan base? How do you offset a losing streak in maintaining loyalty?
8. What is the greatest benefit offered by a loyal fan base for a sports franchise?
9. How does True North Sports and Entertainment play a role in increasing civic pride within Winnipeg?
10. What do you foresee being the biggest challenge with fan retention in Manitoba? In Winnipeg?

Prior to each interview, the participants were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix C). Once this was completed they were able to be part of this study and could withdraw at any time. The interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed. A copy of the transcript was sent to each participant via email. It was at this time they were able to make any modifications or remove statements all together (member checking). Audio recordings, transcripts, and signed consent forms, as per ethics guidelines, are stored in a secure location, with all digital files stored on a password-protected computer.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis began following the collection of data and once the interviews were transcribed and verified. Interviews were initially coded using open coding, which is defined as “a first coding of qualitative data in which a researcher examines the data to condense them into

preliminary analytical categories or codes for analyzing data” (Newman & Robson, 2012, p. 316). Through open coding I was able to identify similar themes across the three interviews that reflected opinions shared by the three interview participants. These themes included fan-identification, psychological commitment, and loyalty. Cresswell and Clark (2007) note that “when conducting qualitative research amongst a sample size, there can be varying opinions. Coding allows you to pull together similar observations. Presenting the results may involve a discussion of the evidence for the themes or categories; the presentation of figures that depict the physical setting of the study; or frameworks, models, or theories” (p. 42). Developing themes and gathering data was the primary focus of open coding.

When I completed open coding, I then proceeded to axial coding, which is the process of organizing the codes, distinguishing them from primary and secondary levels, and determining the relationship between them. The emphasis during this second step is on the themes rather than the data. TNSE’s branding strategies were highlighted during this part of the analysis, which resulted in six themes. Neuman and Robson (2012) note that “a researcher asks about causes and consequences, conditions and interactions, and strategies and processes and looks for categories or concepts that cluster together” (p. 317). These six themes interact with one another and outline the strategies used to drive fans from partial to avid fans and the tactics used to implement these strategies. Developing links among the six themes was the focus during this process. Axial coding reinforces the relationship between the themes set out in open coding.

The final step in the coding process was selective coding. This involves “scanning data and previous codes and determine a core category around which the remaining categories all fit” (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 320). Memo writing was also used throughout this three-step process. Neuman and Robson (2012) define this step: “The analytical memo is a special type of

note. It is a memo or discussion of thoughts and ideas about the coding process that a researcher writes to himself or herself” (p. 322). This explains my interpretation of the data and outlines the reasoning behind my selection of the six themes that emerged during the axial coding process.

### Limitations

As the participants that I interviewed and collected survey responses from are either TNSE employees or self-identify as fans, a certain level of bias is to be expected. In addition, the three interviewees come from similar socio-economic, cultural, and gender backgrounds, which may limit the diversity in responses.

With the survey participants having self-selected, I cannot guarantee that they are a differentiated group, which may result in a lack of variation in responses from the participants. There is also a level of restriction to take into account, because they were asked to access the survey electronically via Facebook. They required access to the internet, had to be current Facebook users, and members of a specific Facebook group. This may have limited participation from certain age groups and may also have precluded those who are not technologically savvy from participating.

### Delimitations

A delimitation of my study is that I am focussing on brand-based fan retention management, concentrating on a specific aspect of the Winnipeg Jets organization. Although I consider it to be an essential part of a sports franchise, there are other considerations that are not addressed. I did not consider sponsorship, ticketing, or other external variables that may have an impact on fan loyalty. I have also chosen to conduct my study in Winnipeg and focus on the Jets, which may



limit my ability to apply my research findings to other franchises within the National Hockey League or to sports other than hockey.

## **Chapter 4 – Results**

The purpose of this study is to uncover which True North Sports and Entertainment Ltd. (TNSE) branding strategies are set in place to create a loyal fan base and the tactics used to implement these strategies. Meanwhile, Jets fans were surveyed concurrently to determine if they are loyal to the Jets, and at what level. This chapter focuses on the results of the interviews with TNSE's marketing team and the results of the survey of Jets fans.

This chapter examines the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study separately. I begin by delving deeper into TNSE's branding strategies. The analysis outlines the methods TNSE uses to deepen the connection with fans with the use of their branding strategies. These strategic discussions are illustrated with tactical examples that were drawn from TNSE social media pages. The quantitative section discusses the survey results and highlights the commitment and loyalty level of a group of Winnipeg Jets fans by measuring the fans' resistance to change and the persistence of their allegiance to the team over time. The results are separated into positively worded and negatively worded questions to reduce any ambiguities. The results demonstrate Jets fans' loyalty level, whether they feel a psychological commitment to the team, and at what level.

### **Qualitative Data**

The three interview participants were Dorian Morphy, Andrew Wilkinson and Josh Dudych. Morphy oversees all marketing functions for TNSE, Wilkinson is responsible for fan interaction via online platforms, and Dudych oversees the design and creatives of the brand. The individual interviews focused on the Jets' approach to branding.

An analysis of the interviews showed that the TSNE branding strategy is based on six themes:

- Focus on the players
- Digital and social engagement
- Customized offerings
- In-game experience
- Traditions
- Being content driven

Ultimately, the goal of this strategy is to move fans along a continuum from partial to avid fans and to strengthen their attachment to the team by personalizing their experiences of the brand. An avid fan will engage more on digital platforms, buy Jets merchandise, attend games, and be loyal regardless of on-ice performance. These themes are used to guide organizational decision making regarding tactics and outreach to fans.

### Focus on the Players

Sharing stories about individual players allows fans to connect with the team. The interviewees all highlighted that the team's greatest marketing assets are their players. Morphy asserted that "we've always focussed on players, that's been one of the things we determined from the very start." Leveraging the players is their top priority. Dudych also noted that "the first and foremost strategy for us, one of our pillars is we always want to market our players." Morphy further highlighted, we "hang our hat on them and really focus in on our players. You know, for the most part hockey players have good values and from a young age many of them leave home to play junior [hockey] and grew up in small towns so they understand teamwork and respect. We

can definitely hang our hats on players because they all have stories.” Tapping into the players’ authentic self allows the fans to know the players on what feels like a personal level and strengthens the links between the team and the fans. Morphy noted that TNSE highlights “stories about our players and stories about our team. Again, when people see these stories and see players with their helmets off it really helps to bring them along that continuum from partial fan to avid fan.”

Allowing fans to engage with the players outside of the arena builds a deeper connection with the brand, resulting in a more committed fan base. Marketing of players is done through community events and with the use of engaging content. Players are involved in community outreach and fan engagement tactics. These outreach tactics allow the players to further connect with the fans. Wilkinson stated: “getting to know a player on a personal basis is what the fans really want, so our players are always paramount to our strategy. We try to give the fans a glimpse of who the guys are off the ice and have them involved in different initiatives and the events we do in community.” There are many events that take place to entrench the brand in the community. Wilkinson pointed to specific events like Fan Fest, Hockey is for Everyone (HIFE), and You Can Play.

Fan Fest is an annual event hosted at the Bell MTS Iceplex that is inclusive to the community and removes the gap between the team and the fans. It offers free admission and is available by public transportation, making it accessible to all fans. Hosted by TNSE, approximately 5000 fans gather in anticipation for the season ahead. The event has a full agenda to engage fans for the season ahead. Interviews with Jets’ prospects and players, along with General Manager Kevin Cheveldayoff, are hosted on the main stage to discuss the team’s talent

and upcoming season. The event concludes with on-ice sessions and a chance to purchase Jets merchandise.

HIFE is an NHL-driven commitment to diversity and inclusion. The Jets website states: “HIFE is conducted in partnership with the You Can Play Project, a non-profit organization that works to ensure safety and inclusion for all who participate in sports, including LGBTQ athletes, coaches, and fans” (“Jets to host”, 2018, para. 4). The month of February is dedicated to HIFE and the annual “You Can Play” game was hosted February 13, 2018, as “the players will support You Can Play by using sticks with rainbow tape during warm-up” (“Jets to host”, 2018, para. 2). These sticks are then auctioned with proceeds going to You Can Play. Jacob Trouba, the Jets spokesperson, noted: “the You Can Play game will help to promote the HIFE campaign and its message to use the game of hockey to drive positive social change, and foster more inclusive communities” (“Jets to host”, 2018, para. 2).

In addition, “Take a Jet to Work” is a TNSE-led tactic and another example of how players are integrated within the community. Players are invited to a fan’s place of work, and are given full exposure to that fan’s workplace. For the day, they are a trainee to the fan. For example, Jacob Trouba visited the Assiniboine Park Zoo where he was trained on how to feed seals and groom horses; he received a full behind-the-scenes experience. By the end of the day, Trouba walked away as an honorary zoo keeper. This is leveraged on the Jets website with a series of videos, where they proclaimed: “see your Winnipeg Jets in a Winnipeg workplace” (“Take a Jet”, n.d). These community tactics give the fans an opportunity to see Jets’ players in a new light. The marketing department then leverages this strategy using digital platforms. These tactics provide opportunities for fans to be engaged through social media.

## Digital and Social Engagement

From the organization's perspective, social media is used to communicate to fans and create conversations around the team. These conversations create engagement among fans and increase the visibility of the brand. The "Rise Together" campaign is an example of a tactic that includes engaging content and was executed on all social and digital platforms.

The Rise Together campaign debuted during the 2017-2018 season. This marketing campaign was designed as an inclusive strategy, to make fans feel like they were part of the team. Dudych noted: "strategically we wanted to really make sure the fans still felt they had a place in the brand and that they were contributors to that success." Wilkinson reiterated the inclusiveness of the campaign: "our season campaign of Rise Together ...was a conscious effort to make sure that we are going to involve our fans in the branding. Through imagery and words we really wanted to make them feel like they were as much part of this campaign as the players were and that we needed each other to drive success."

That acknowledgement and inclusion of the fans was the foundation of this campaign. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show the campaign kickoff. The image in Figure 4.1 was posted on Instagram on August 30, 2017, and generated over 5,400 likes and nearly 50 comments. Its counterpart on Facebook, see Figure 4.2, generated 566 likes, 45 comments, and was shared 106 times. Nine months later, Figure 4.3 was posted on Instagram on May 20, 2018, at the end of the 2017-2018 season. This post generated 37,136 likes and 1,341 comments. The same post was also shared on Facebook on May 20, 2018 (see Figure 4.4) and was liked 17,000 times, generated 1,400 comments, and was shared 4,176 times. After a successful season where the Winnipeg Jets were ultimately eliminated in the Western Conference Final, this demonstrates an increase in engagement with the fans over the course of the 2017-2018 season.

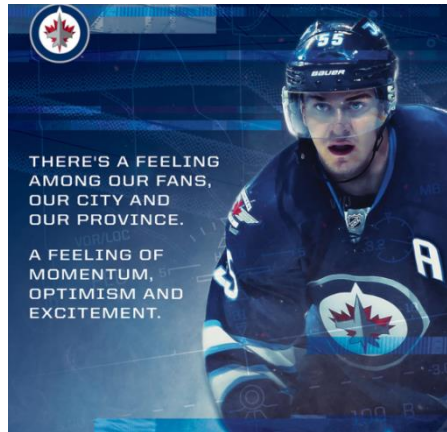


Figure 4.1. Instagram post of the Rise Together campaign kick off, posted on August 30, 2017. From the Winnipeg Jets official Instagram account, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BYbQY9SgBkN/>



Figure 4.2. Facebook post of the Rise Together campaign kick off, posted on August 30, 2017. From the Winnipeg Jets official Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/nhljets/photos/a.167819323298799/1452052658208786/?type=3&theater>



Figure 4.3. Marking the end of the 2017-2018 NHL, posted on Instagram post May 20, 2018. From the Winnipeg Jets official Instagram account, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BjA-zcMF6tF/>



Figure 4.4. Facebook post to thank the fans at the end of the 2017-2018 NHL season, posted on Facebook post May 20, 2018. From the Winnipeg Jets official Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/nhljets/photos/a.167819323298799/1710363309044385/?type=3&theater>

### Customized Offerings

To further engage fans, TNSE collects data from fans to offer them a more personalized brand experience. Consumer data allows a franchise to engage with fans in a more meaningful way, by providing content and offering more valuable communication with which they are more likely to engage. The Jets are able to acquire consumer data and offer customised offerings through their loyalty program, Jets Rewards. Morphy noted: “we want to gather more information about our fans and deliver more customized offerings whether it’s ticket offers, [or] retail offers, but at the same time reward them for their loyalty.” Through the loyalty program, the Jets are able to track fan behaviour and create fan profiles.

With a stronger understanding of the fans, TNSE is better equipped to communicate to them. Morphy noted: “the more we know about our fans the more we can customize their experience with us.” This is executed in a number of ways: leveraging a fan’s favourite player to anchor their marketing emails to sell merchandise, or noting what concessions are most popular



and including these items in promotional coupons. Alternatively, it is useful to note what the fans dislike. Should a fan attend games sparingly, it is not beneficial to promote season tickets.

Morphy added: “the better we know them the more we can customize their experience as a fan, and they won’t get frustrated with the clutter.”

### In-Game Experience

In 2019, “Stadium Journey,” an independent website that ranks stadiums and arenas, gave Bell MTS Place an overall score of 4.86 out of 5. Despite their non-scientific approach, these rankings are still appreciated by TNSE. Morphy noted: “we were just voted best arena experience in the NHL for the second year in a row by ‘Stadium Journey’ and that’s something we really take pride in.” There are many elements that contribute to the overall in-game experience – from concessions, music, and visual components such as the scoreboard – that all contribute to the overall atmosphere of the arena.

In-game experience, however, begins with reinvestment in the arena. Morphy detailed TNSE’s reinvestments in Bell MTS Place: “since 2012 we’ve invested close to \$50 million dollars back into our building and facility in upgrades that would include things like additional washrooms, and improving premium spaces. We have a new HD scoreboard and all the things that come with that – the powering, additional LED boards, and then obviously a control room to run it all. We upgraded the audio system, added some lower seating. We improved the glass railing to seamless [glass] so the fans can see better. And just this last summer we refinished our concourses.”

In addition to physical improvements, there are certain factors that play a role in the atmosphere of the arena. The “True North” chant, unique to Jets 2.0, was started on social media

and enhances the atmosphere within the arena. Fans demonstrate their gratitude to TNSE for bringing the Jets back to Winnipeg by chanting True North during the national anthem. Although the True North chant is specific to the Jets, this practice among fans is not unique to the Jets. Dudych offered more detail: “the True North chant is something that was entirely a fan initiative that was started by some fans in the preseason of 2011 ... It was something that started on Twitter and it was some fans that were excited and I guess wanted to acknowledge the organization and I guess thank them for their efforts on bringing the Jets back. That was how it originated.” The chant quickly became, for fans, synonymous with both Jets’ home and away games. The True North chant, Dudych noted, “over time ... became something of a rallying cry; something that fans can utilize to announce their presence and show their engagement and commitment.”

In-game experiences are not confined to the arena. As a result of the Jets making the playoffs during the 2017-2018 season, outdoor viewing parties were hosted for fans to cheer for the team as an extension of the Winnipeg Whiteout which occurs within the arena. More than an element of the in-game experience, the Winnipeg Whiteout is an example of how TNSE capitalises on their history.

### Traditions

Traditions are organic tools that help differentiate one brand from the next. Like the True North chant, many traditions are fan-led, meaning they begin organically without the influence of the sports franchise. Once established however, traditions can be capitalized upon to move fans along a continuum from partial to avid fans. Morphy added: “it helps you distinguish yourself from others and when we talk about that continuum it’s those traditions that’ll help further move you down the line towards an avid fan.” These traditions are the basis of one of TNSE’s branding

themes. Wilkinson noted the benefits of traditions: “I would say the most important thing about traditions is creating that link between the team and its fans.”

Traditions are great economic and emotional tools to encourage fan loyalty. TNSE were also able to generate revenue in new playoff merchandise and generate excitement among fans by invoking Jets history. Morphy noted that “a pillar in our branding strategy is now an acknowledgement of the past, so we’ve adopted [this] when we first made the playoffs in 2016. We adopted the Whiteout. We adopted “go Jets go” as our hashtag, which pre-existed from Jets 1.0. We have the heritage jersey as part of our series of jerseys, we’ve now established an alumni program, and we’ve started to induct players from the past into a hall of fame.”

One of the best-known and unique Winnipeg Jets’ traditions is the Winnipeg Whiteout. Originating with Jets 1.0, fans wear white when attending home playoff games to display unity when the Jets make the playoffs. Dudych further explained: “we decided it would benefit us more to really capitalise on the excitement and the momentum of going into the playoffs and that was something we were going to embrace.” TNSE embraces the Whiteout by providing fans with free white towels at home playoff games to enhance the in-game experience. They also make white Jets merchandise available for purchase.

The inclusion of the Whiteout in the team’s branding strategy was ultimately a decision based on the fans. Dudych added, “we’re going to embrace the Whiteout because it was something we felt was important to our fans and for us to turn our backs on that was almost like turning our back on the fans as well, and in terms of maintaining that brand trust and that relationship.” While the current iteration of the Jets is relatively new to Winnipeg, this tradition was leveraged to build fan loyalty for the team.

Honoring Jets' players, past and present, is another aspect of this strategy. Banners were created to honor Jets alumni. In October 2016, Anders Hedberg, Bobby Hull, and Ulf Nilsson, also known as the "Hot Line," were inducted into the Winnipeg Jets Hall of Fame. The Hot Line generated "573 goals, 1,377 points in 855 games" (Shea, n.d., para. 2) in the 1970s, before the team joined the NHL and played in the World Hockey Association. The Hall of Fame homepage further mentions: "the players had instant chemistry dazzling opponents and establishing itself as one of the most feared combinations in all of pro hockey and led the Winnipeg Jets to win two World Hockey Association championships" (Shea, n.d., para. 1). Mark Chipman noted: "Given the Hot Line's enormous accomplishments and what they did to put Winnipeg on the international hockey map, it is an obvious choice to honor Anders, Bobby and Ulf for our first induction ceremony" ("Hot Line first", 2016, para. 2). Recognizing players from the WHA is a way in which Jets 2.0 can leverage their rich history.

### Being Content Driven

For Morphy content is "stories about our players and stories about our team. Again, when people see these stories and see players with their helmets off it really helps to bring them along that continuum from partial fan to avid fan." The previous five branding themes determine the focus of the sixth theme: being content driven. The three interviewees highlight two focuses of Jets content: a focus on the players and the evolution of the team's skill level and on-ice success.

From a brand loyalty perspective, content is used to instill emotional connections with fans. Wilkinson added, "through the communication of information and content we keep our fans engaged and committed to us at all times." Increasing traffic to the Jets social media platforms, enhancing brand loyalty and increasing merchandise sales are all aided by candid off-ice moments. Morphy touched on the brand awareness benefits, "as we have players that are among

the best in league, you know like the Mark Scheifeles, the Blake Wheelers, the Patrik Laines, Connor Hellebuycks. Nikolaj Ehlers is an upcoming player. As we have those kinds of players, we also know that attention will be on our team, both nationally and internationally.”

“Life of Laine,” a blog written by fan favourite Patrik Laine, is an example of how digital content is leveraged to gain a more personal sense of the Winnipeg Jets. In the blog, Laine candidly discusses what contributes to his on-ice success and his love for the fans. Laine noted: “Jets fans are just as wonderfully passionate as ever. When we win, the whole city rocks, and the fans are so excited” (Laine, 2017). The blog is available on the Jets website and is shared on the Jets social media platforms where fans can comment, share, and engage with other fans. This is an example of how fans are able to gain personal insight into a player and this ultimately makes him more relatable.

Jets TV, TNSE’s digital channel, is another platform that uses engaging content to connect with fans. Jets TV gives fans a glimpse into what happens behind the scenes, from interviews with coaching staff and players, to how TNSE designed their jerseys. Players are used in episodes like “What Does Winnipeg Mean to You?” to get a more personal sense of how the players have made Winnipeg their home and what role the fans have in contributing to that experience. In this episode, Laine stated that “Winnipeg has the best fans in the league,” and while Mark Scheifele echoed this sentiment: “the amount of passion they have each and every game is amazing and pushes us to want to play that much better” (“What Does Winnipeg Mean To You?”, 2018). Engaging content allows for the fans to connect with the players. In addition, this gives an opportunity for the players to thank the community and their fans for the continuing support.

From a creative perspective, the team also tailors its branding to focus on the team's on-ice success. This was part of an effort to maintain fan commitment despite some unsuccessful seasons. Dudych noted: "we needed to respond to that [unsuccessful seasons] in a positive way in order to maintain that commitment." Dudych further explained leveraging creatives to highlight the Jets on-ice success: "we have tailored our visuals and creative this year to respond to our team and its on-ice performance, sort of how our team has evolved." That evolution of skill is represented using a narrative that highlights the Jets players' skillset. Dudych further added: "this year we really doubled down on the idea of technology and kind of equating it to precision, which again equates to some of the narrative around our team, the skill that we've got with our players."

Dudych outlined the evolution of the brand and how they put an emphasis on technology with their visuals: "the visuals of our brand this year have really steered towards themes with more precision and skill and sort of a refinement and especially in contrast to what we did last year which was really heritage themed." Figure 4.5 shows images posted to the Jets Instagram account during the 2016-2017 season. These images demonstrate how the visual assets have a heritage theme. Using a yellow tint gives the photos an aged look and feel. In addition, some photos have the etched edging with a cursive "go Jets go" caption on the upper corner. Figure 4.6 shows the evolution of the team's Instagram images during the 2017-2018 season. These use cooler tones and sharper images to communicate game announcements and updates, with the "Rise Together" caption appearing in block lettering.

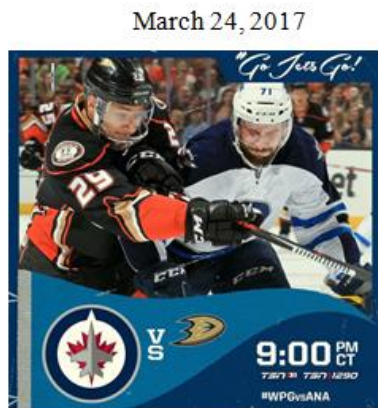


Figure 4.5. Instagram posts demonstrating a heritage theme from the 2016-2017 NHL season. From the Winnipeg Jets official Instagram account. <https://www.instagram.com/nhljets/?hl=en>

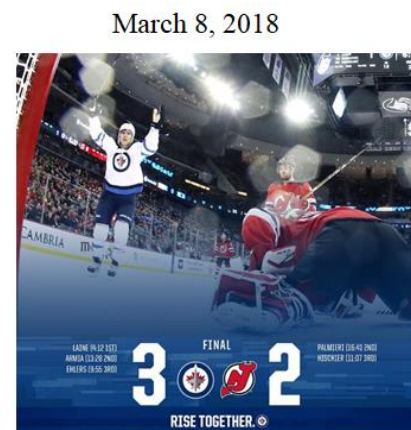


Figure 4.6. Instagram posts demonstrating a change in narrative from a heritage theme to reflect an evolution of skill and the Rise Together campaign during the 2017-2018 NHL season. From the Winnipeg Jets official Instagram account. <https://www.instagram.com/nhljets/?hl=en>

The evolution of skill and increased on-ice success helped rebrand the Jets as more of a luxury item, something that fans are proud to associate themselves with. Dudych further explained the intention behind this narrative: “in some way we wanted to reposition the Jets [into] being something a bit more like a luxury item. That commitment to a heightened

expectation level for on-ice performance while delivering a more precise and eloquent hockey game was articulated through the ‘Rise Together’ campaign.”

The six branding themes are used to bring fans along a continuum. These strategies are implemented with a variety of tactics in the hopes of creating a more committed and self-identified fan base. Next, this study explores Jets fans loyalty by examining the results of survey data and their interpretation using the PCT scale.

### **Quantitative Data**

The purpose of this section is to examine the results of the fan survey using the PCT scale, and how they relate to fan loyalty. When studying loyalty it is important to consider two variables, resistance to change and persistence over time. Mahony et al. (2000) further note that “it is expected that fans who demonstrate loyalty towards a sports team possess an attitude bias that is both resistant to change and persistent over time” (p. 18). Fans who demonstrate both attributes are considered to have high team loyalty.

The PCT scale was applied to the data collected through a Jets-specific online survey. The survey was posted on an independent fan Facebook page titled “Fans of the Winnipeg Jets” and received 142 responses in a period of 5 weeks. The 14 questions found in this Likert scale are used to collectively measure attitudinal loyalty. Winnipeg Jets fans yielded a weighted average of 6.19 (see Figures 4.7 and 4.8). As discussed in chapter 3, interval scales use descriptive statistics including the weighted average. For this analysis, the 14 questions found in the PCT scale are to be examined collectively, using their weighted average.

The survey results discussed below are divided between positively and negatively worded questions. A positively worded question indicates that an agreement is a meaningful answer, where a response of “strongly agree” equates to a score of 7 on the Likert scale. By contrast, a



negatively worded question is reverse scored where a disagreement is the meaningful answer and a “strongly disagree” answer receives a 7 on the Likert scale. Comparing the positively and the negatively worded questions demonstrates response patterns more clearly. Using varied questions challenges survey participants to fight response patterns as the positive and negative questions are blended within the survey. It is also worth noting, “negative items do not affect the response pattern for positive items when combined in the same scale” (Salazar, 2015, p. 197).

### **Positively Worded Questions**

Resistance to influences and change are variables to be strongly considered when studying loyalty. There are many factors that can influence a sports fan: poor team outcome, losing a star player, one’s social network, and more competitive teams within the league. This portion of the analysis examines the positively worded questions in the survey using the PCT scale. Figure 4.7 summarizes the positively worded questions.

Figure 4.7. Summary of the Positively Worded Questions

Questions	Positively Worded Questions							Weighted Average
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	More or less disagree	Undecided	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
2. I would watch a game featuring the Jets regardless of which team they are playing	1.41% (2)	0.7% (1)	0%	0.7% (1)	2.11% (3)	21.13% (30)	73.94% (105)	6.61
4. Being a fan of the Jets is important to me	0.7% (1)	0%	0.7% (1)	3.52% (5)	6.34% (9)	24.65% (35)	64.08% (91)	6.45
5. Nothing could change my allegiance to the Jets	0.71% (1)	2.86% (4)	5% (7)	5.71% (8)	7.14% (10)	28.57% (40)	50% (70)	6.01
6. I am a committed Winnipeg Jets fan	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	4.23% (6)	19.72% (28)	73.24% (104)	6.59
7. It would not affect my loyalty to the Jets if management hired a head coach that I dislike very much	2.11% (3)	5.63% (8)	2.82% (4)	6.34% (9)	11.27% (16)	42.25% (60)	29.58% (42)	5.64
9. I have been a fan of my favourite team since I began watching professional hockey	1.41% (2)	10.56% (15)	4.23% (6)	2.11% (3)	4.93% (7)	30.28% (43)	46.48% (66)	5.75
10. I could never switch my loyalty from the Jets, even if my close friends were fans of another team	0.7% (1)	2.82% (4)	0%	1.41% (2)	3.52% (5)	24.65% (35)	66.9% (95)	6.46
11. It would be unlikely for me to change my allegiance from the Jets to another team	0%	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	2.11% (3)	25.35% (36)	70.42% (100)	6.62
12. It would be difficult to change my beliefs about the Winnipeg Jets	0%	2.11% (3)	1.41% (2)	2.82% (4)	8.45% (12)	36.62% (52)	48.59% (69)	6.22
13. You can tell a lot about a person by their willingness to stick with a team that is not performing well	0.7% (1)	3.52% (5)	2.82% (4)	6.34% (9)	8.45% (12)	39.44% (56)	38.73% (55)	5.92

### Resistant to change

Pritchard, Howard, and Havitz (1992) note: “borrowing aspects from several of the commitment related consistency theories, consumer behaviour researchers discussed commitment in terms of preference stability and consumers’ resistance to persuasive communication” (p. 161). When

studying loyalty, resistance to poor outcomes and negative communication are a recurring theme throughout the survey. Pritchard et al. (1992) also note “the tendency to resist change in preference in response to conflicting information or experience” (p. 161). Throughout the resistant to change analysis, three overarching themes emerged: overall commitment, resistance to external influences, and resistance to organizational changes. A summary of the questions follows.

Overall commitment within the PCT scale can be seen with Questions 6 “I am a committed Winnipeg Jets fan” and question 12 “it would be difficult to change my beliefs about the Winnipeg Jets.” Specifically, the PCT scale takes into account whether or not fans have the ability to change their beliefs about the Jets and who exhibits strong dispositional sentiments towards the team. A weighted average of 6.19 suggests high commitment to the Jets.

In terms of external influences, a weighted average of 6.19 suggests that Jets fans are resistant to their social circles altering their loyalties. This is reflected in the PCT scale with question 2 “I would watch a game featuring the Jets regardless of which team they are playing,” question 10 “I could never switch my loyalty from the Jets, even if my close friends were fans of another team,” and question 11 “it would be unlikely for me to change my allegiance from the Jets to another team.” With a weighted average of 6.19, this suggests Jets fans are resistant to external influences like their social circle and the success of other teams within the NHL.

In addition, Jets fans also demonstrated they were resistant to organizational change and on-ice success. This is reflected in the PCT scale with question 7 “it would not affect my loyalty to the Jets if management hired a head coach that I dislike very much” and question 13 “you can tell a lot about a person by their willingness to stick with a team that is not performing well.” The

PCT results of 6.19 suggest that Jets fans have a willingness to stick with a poorly performing team.

#### Persistent over time

Long-term commitment is also reflected in the PCT scale. Hans et al. (2008) note “fans show a high level of psychological commitment if they feel a deep inner attachment to their favorite team and if their commitment is persistent over time” (p. 207). The three questions from the PCT scale that reflect long-term commitment are: question 4 “being a fan of the Jets is important to me,” question 5 “nothing could change my allegiance to the Jets,” and question 9 “I have been a fan of my favourite team since I began watching professional hockey.” With a weighted average of 6.19, this suggests an unwavering allegiance and long-term loyalty to the Jets.

#### **Negatively Worded Questions**

Figure 4.8 summarizes the results of the negatively worded questions that reflect resistance to change and persistence over time within the PCT scale. These included: question 1 “I might rethink my allegiance to the Winnipeg Jets if this team consistently performs poorly,” question 3 “I would rethink my allegiance to the Jets if management traded away its best players,” question 8 “I could easily be persuaded to change my favourite NHL team preference,” and question 14 “my commitment to the Jets would decrease if they were performing poorly and there appeared little chance their performance would change.”

Figure 4.8. Summary of the Negatively Worded Questions

Questions	Negatively Worded Questions							
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	More or less disagree	Undecided	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Weighted Average
1. I might rethink my allegiance to the Winnipeg Jets if this team consistently performs poorly	57.04% (81)	31.69% (45)	4.93% (7)	2.11% (3)	3.52% (5)	0.00%	0.7% (1)	6.34
3. I would rethink my allegiance to the Jets if management traded away its best players	30.99% (44)	34.51% (49)	12.68% (18)	9.15% (13)	4.93% (7)	4.93% (7)	2.82% (4)	5.51
8. I could easily be persuaded to change my favourite NHL team preference	78.87% (112)	16.2% (23)	2.11% (3)	1.41% (2)	1.41% (2)	0%	0%	6.7
14. My commitment to the Jets would decrease if they were performing poorly and there appeared little chance their performance would change	43.66% (62)	30.28% (43)	9.15% (13)	2.82% (4)	8.45% (12)	3.52% (5)	2.11% (3)	5.79

#### Resistant to change

Fans' resistance to change is also reflected in the negatively worded questions in the PCT scale. This is represented with question 1 "I would rethink my allegiance to the Winnipeg Jets if this team consistently performs poorly," question 3 "I would rethink my allegiance to the Jets if management traded away its best players," and question 14 "my commitment to the Jets would decrease if they were performing poorly and there appeared little chance their performance would change."

#### Persistent over time

Similarly, the PCT scale accounts for persistent over time from a negatively worded perspective. This is reflected with question 8 "I could easily be persuaded to change my favourite NHL team preference."

## Conclusion

Six branding themes emerged through the interviews. These themes differ from one another yet maintain a common goal, to bring fans along the continuum from partial to avid fans. It is important to note which strategies are used and how these are being communicated to the fans. A focus on players offers a more personal, behind-the-scenes perspective for the fan, both off the ice and entrenched in the community. Leveraging content in both digital and social engagement strategies welcomes the fan into the brand in a more meaningful way. Tactics such as player-led blogs and inclusive campaigns like Rise Together engage fans. In a more intrinsic fashion, traditions offers an opportunity to engage fans from the Jets 1.0 era, leveraging a more rooted emotional connection through the Winnipeg Whiteout.

There are 14 questions in the PCT scale that reflect loyalty and are considered collectively to determine a single measure of fan loyalty. From the 142 surveys, and a weighted average of 6.19 from the responses, fans reveal that they are committed to the brand. Jets fans' loyalty is both resistant to change and persistent over time. This suggests that fans do not allow social circles or external points of view to dictate their fandom. Furthermore, Jets fans exhibit high loyalty despite on-ice performance and head coach selection.

Psychological commitment to the Winnipeg Jets is seemingly high, but how does this translate to brand strength? The next chapter merges both sets of data and discusses in more detail the relationship between branding strategies and self-identified fans. Specifically, it examines the role the six branding themes play in contributing to the fans' commitment and loyalty to the brand.

## **Chapter 5 – Discussion**

Examining the interview and survey data concurrently, this chapter focusses on the influence that the branding themes have on fan loyalty. As previously discussed in chapter four, the six branding themes identified in interviews with Jets marketing staff Dorian Morphy, Josh Dudych, and Andrew Wilkinson are a focus on the players, digital and social engagement, customized offerings, in-game experience, traditions, and being more content driven. In order to best understand the team-fan base relationship, this chapter considers the concepts of brand strength, fan self-identity, and loyalty.

The section on brand strength introduces the NHL economic model and discusses the importance of a loyal fan base. Fan self-identity is a precursor to loyalty. Funk and James (2001) highlight a progression from identity to fan loyalty with the use of a model that includes: awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance. This model represents the dispositional evolution a fan experiences in becoming truly loyal. Gargone (2016) finds that “the progression from team identity to team loyalty largely depends on the evolution of a fan’s attitude toward that team” (para. 9). As a result, the dispositional nature of Jets fan identification with the team and how this influences brand affect will be discussed in greater length.

Based on the results of the PCT scale, the surveyed Jets fans’ score indicates that they exhibit high (true) loyalty. The quadrants of the loyalty model are further explained below and the outcomes of fans exhibiting high (true) loyalty are explored. While examining fan loyalty, attitudinal (intangible) and behavioural (tangible) loyalty are highlighted.

## **Brand Strength**

The Winnipeg Jets have a strong brand that is supported by a high level of fan loyalty. According to the interviewees, the Jets capitalise on the emotional and economic investment of fans to further bring them along a continuum from partial to avid fans. When a fan base exhibits strong loyalty, sports franchises experience revenue stability. Richelieu (2014) notes: “high fan identification leads to deep fan loyalty and, eventually, a strong sport brand” (p. 407). A loyal fan base offers economic stability for a sports franchise and can offset financial challenges.

Morphy discussed the impact of the NHL’s economic model on the Jets: “our challenge with the current economic model, where for every dollar earned 50% goes to players, will be to continue to generate revenue at the pace that we need to generate revenue. So, you know, ticketing revenue is probably one of the most important revenue lines overall.” Hodgson (2017) also notes the limits for Canadian franchises: “the Canadian market for NHL franchises also has limits, the loonie’s fall to around 75 cents raised the Canadian dollar-cost of a new NHL franchise” (para. 9). This may result in downloading some costs onto fans and increasing the importance of loyalty among the fan base. Wilkinson added: “another thing we’re seeing is that the salary cap is slowly increasing, which means that we have to pass some of that cost on to our fans.” In addition to offsetting potential cost to fans, Morphy further explains the need for alternate revenue streams: “we’re going to need to find new revenue streams to keep up with those larger markets. And, again, there’s not panic in that regard right now but as we look beyond five years from now, ten years from now, we’re going to need to be creative.”

In addition to exploring alternate revenue streams, there is also greater pressure for on-ice success to offset financial instability. Buckstein (2018) finds, “the financial costs of missing the Stanley Cup playoff tournament are enormous. Teams lose out on lucrative gate revenues as



ticket prices are substantially raised each round the team advances, unencumbered by player salaries, which are only paid until the end of the regular season. Add in the adversity of a 75 or 80 cent Canadian dollar in a league where all players are paid in U.S. dollars, and it looks like a recipe for financial trouble.” A team clinching a playoff spot at the end of the season can reap many benefits. In addition, to the dispositional attributes fans gain such as brand affect, there are also many financial rewards for the club. In the case of the Winnipeg Jets, there are the additional sales of white merchandise and the Winnipeg Whiteout party held outside Bell MTS Place, which drives fans to the arena and increases concession spending.

For a sports franchise, success comes in waves and there are many benefits to having a committed fan base to endure an unsuccessful season. Revenue stability is possibly the most critical. Wilkinson noted: “if people are loyal and they’re invested in your brand and in your team you’re going to have a higher renewal rate in season tickets, you’re going to be able to sell more individual tickets, you’re going to see more repeat purchases and larger purchases when it comes to merchandise.” This is mirrored by a True North Sports and Entertainment Ltd. (TNSE) executive, John Olfert, who reveals, “it is still a gate-driven league. As you do well at the gate, that means your suites are doing well. Your food and beverage are doing well. Your merchandise is doing well. The fact you’ve got people in the building shows a bit of heat to your product, and that will drive interest in your team and increase the value of your broadcast deal, not to mention the corporate side” (cited in Buckstein, 2018). Revenue stability goes beyond ticket and merchandise purchases. Wilkinson noted: “more people are viewing your content which drives revenue since we monetize our website and mobile app through banner ads and sponsorships.”

A loyal fan base can influence consistency in driving fans to Bell MTS Place gates and viewing digital content. Fan loyalty begins with self-identity. Richelieu (2014) finds that

identifying with a brand is “composed of a set of attributes or values that define its personality” (p. 406). This is best outlined by the fan progression from awareness to attachment, ultimately leading to allegiance.

### **Self-Identity and Branding**

As discussed in chapter 2, Funk and James (2001) outline fans’ progression from identity to loyalty with the use of the Psychological Continuum Model. This model outlines the three As, leading to allegiance and loyalty. These are: awareness, attraction, and attachment. Awareness represents the initial introduction to the sports team. Attraction is best described as the dispositional nature towards to the team. Attraction studies the motives that influence behaviour, such as social interaction, entertainment, and environment. Funk and James (2001) find that “people enjoy attending games of their favourite team as an escape from their daily routine” (p. 128). Lastly, attachment is formed when a fan self-identifies with a team and is moved along that continuum towards loyalty. Funk and James (2001) conclude:

Attachment develops when the team elicits responses and tendencies from memory that strengthen internal links between the team and other important attitudes, values, and beliefs (core characteristics related to self-concept). This intrinsic process would help explain how meaning is attached to external associations (e.g., success, pride in place, stadium) and take on internal psychological significance (p. 133).

Marzocchi et al. (2013) suggests, “brand loyalty is primarily influenced by identification with the brand community, through the mediation role of brand affect” (p. 93). Brand affect has the ability to draw positive disposition within the fans and encompasses a number of variables that contribute to attitudinal loyalty (Marzocchi et al., 2013). Marzocchi et al. (2013) argue that “brands that make consumers ‘happy’ or ‘joyful’ or ‘affectionate’ should prompt great purchase and attitudinal loyalty” (p. 98). Brand affect is influenced by the pride fans experience for the

team. In Winnipeg, this includes pride in the Jets' on-ice success while playing in the league's smallest market, which is leveraged in TNSE's branding themes.

### Fan Pride

Citing the branding themes, Wilkinson highlighted the digital branding strategies that instill pride among Jets fans. Wilkinson noted: "through images and content and through our social media accounts we really try to instill that pride in our team and what we're doing both on the ice and off the ice, which includes stuff we do in the community and things that our players are involved in." Events like Fan Fest reinforce the team's inclusion within the community, which may lead to increased allegiance. One 2018 news article noted of Fan Fest: "it's a great day for the family to get out and be reminded of why hockey is so much fun, it's the best chance to get some inside access to players and coaches, and the whole day is free!" ("What Do The Winnipeg Jets", 2018, para.7).

Fan pride is also influenced by the Jets succeeding at Canada's pastime while playing in a large league. Martin (2013) finds that "fans who express pride in their team are more likely to exhibit customer commitment and loyalty toward that team" (p. 46). On-ice success helps create pride within the community. In the Winnipeg context, Mayor Bryan Bowman notes of the Jets' recent (2017-2018) post-season success: "I think that's one of the really nice parts about this playoff run. It's allowing Winnipeggers to take stock in where we were in the '90s and compare it to where we are now. People are feeling good about the city and their confidence and swagger is growing" (cited in "Winning in Winnipeg", 2018). Increased pride among fans is supported by the "being content driven" theme.

A successful sports franchise will embed its brand in the community, reinforcing the connection between the community and the sports brand. Dudych added: “ideally the way it works is you do these initiatives and that just further weaves your brand in the fabric of the community and really entrenches yourself with being synonymous with what it means to be a Winnipegger or a Manitoban.” The importance of brand affect within the PCT scale can be seen in question 12 “it would be difficult to change my beliefs about the Winnipeg Jets.” This suggests that brand affect is considered when examining attitudinal loyalty. As Marzocchi (2010) notes, “the attachment and belongingness a person feels toward a community should reinforce the pleasure of association and, in turn, his or her in-group favouritism” (p. 97).

Winnipeg is well known around the league for its small market size and smaller arena. Morphy further explained: “playing in our small market, smallest population, and smallest arena. Yet we’re in the biggest league in the world playing a sport that’s Canada’s pastime and passion and we’re able to compete against large markets on the ice and currently we’re one of the top five teams in the NHL.” As a result, the level of success the Jets had during the 2017-2018 season could have a positive influence on fan-pride.

Playing in the league’s smallest market with a less than ideal climate also presents its set of challenges. In a recent tweet, Tomas Hertl, a player for the San Jose Sharks described Winnipeg as “cold and dark” (cited in Bernhardt, 2018, para. 2). Wilkinson points out that “being based in Winnipeg, we have a bit of a chip on our shoulder as a city and the smallest NHL market based on the challenge we have in our climate and stuff that gets played out in media.” Scott Brown, TNSE’s Senior Director of Hockey Communications, noted “the widely held misperception of the city is one of the challenges we face as an organization” (cited in Bernhardt, 2018, para. 7). TNSE leverages their passionate fan base and on-ice success to

overcome these misperceptions. Morphy noted: “as a city despite our size and climate we also punch above our weight class by being in the NHL and I think that translates to civic pride through our team performance obviously, but [also] how passionate our fan base is.” This suggests that perhaps the Jets exceed what is expected from a small-market team in terms of on-ice success and this is echoed by the fans’ level of loyalty. Finding success while playing in the smallest market contributes to civic pride. Wilkinson added: “I think having success and having a team in a major sporting league in our city has gone a long way to add to the pride.”

In addition to market size, as mentioned by Wilkinson, winning plays a role in increasing fan pride. Morphy noted: “ultimately fan bases cannot be sustained I think without some level of success.” On-ice success builds excitement around the team and as a result an increase in repeat purchases. On the other hand, consistent losing may result in lower behavioural loyalty. Dudych observed: “you may have people rethink how much they’re spending on tickets and things like that, so it’s not to say their commitment has diminished but maybe their willingness to invest financially has changed.”

Although on-ice performance plays a role in fan pride and ultimately brand affect, the overall weighted average of 6.19 scored on the PCT scale by survey respondents suggests that fans would remain loyal despite on-ice performance. The PCT scale takes on-ice performance into account with the following questions: question 1 “I might rethink my allegiance to the Winnipeg Jets if this team consistently perform poorly,” question 13 “you can tell a lot about a person by their willingness to stick with a team that is not performing well,” and question 14 “my commitment to the Jets would decrease if they were performing poorly and there appeared little chance their performance would change.”

Establishing on-ice success while playing in a small market results in pride and ultimately brand affect within the community. When a fan exhibits pride for the community and team, they become emotionally attached to the brand. Dudych noted that “the people that are coming to our games, living in the city or the province are key stakeholders for our brand. My sense is that to a Winnipegger, being a Winnipeg Jets fan is akin to civic pride in itself.” Once fan identification is established, fans have moved along the continuum from awareness to attachment, ultimately exhibiting allegiance and loyalty. Richelieu (2014) emphasizes the importance of this connection for marketing: “when fans identify themselves with their team, their support is reflected, among other things, by packed stadiums and the enthusiastic purchase of licensed goods” (p. 406). Fans who self-identify with their favourite team begin to exhibit true loyalty. A loyal fan displays strong disposition (attitudinal loyalty) towards the team with repeat purchasing of branded products (behavioural loyalty).

## Loyalty

The loyalty model proposed by Mahony et al. (2000) has four fan loyalty quadrants: high (true) loyalty, spurious loyalty, latent loyalty and low (non) loyalty (see Figure 5.1). Each quadrant represents the intersection of both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.

Figure 5.1. Loyalty Model (Mahony et al., 2000)

		Psychological Commitment	
		Strong	Weak
Behavioral Consistency (Attendance Frequency)	High	High (True) Loyalty	Spurious Loyalty
	Low	Latent Loyalty	Low (non) Loyalty

Fans identified as having high (true) loyalty demonstrate both high attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. Fans that fall within this quadrant are likely to be highly committed to the team, engaged on social platforms, and continuously purchase merchandise and attend games. Second, spurious loyalty represents fans that exhibit high behavioural loyalty and low attitudinal loyalty. Fans within this quadrant may attend games and own Jets merchandise, but are not very emotionally invested in the outcome of the games and are not likely to engage on social platforms. Third, fans who exhibit latent loyalty have high attitudinal loyalty and low behavioural loyalty. Fans in this quadrant are highly committed and engaged; however, perhaps due to economic reasons, their loyalty is not displayed through purchasing behaviours. Lastly, fans who exhibit low (non) loyalty have both low behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. These fans have little commitment and exhibit no purchasing behaviours.

In considering the results of the survey of Jets fans, Mahony et al. (2000) provided the scale, but did not expand on how fans are grouped within each quadrant. For this study, a score on the PCT scale of 6.0 and greater was considered meaningful. Self-identified Winnipeg Jets fans who participated in the survey have an overall total weighted average of 6.19. As a result, the group of fans surveyed have been placed in the upper left quadrant, suggesting high loyalty. Mahony et al. (2000) argue that “for these fans, the relationship with the team has probably become a significant part of their lives, and they are unlikely to change their behaviour or level of commitment” (p. 22).

When examining loyalty, it is important to differentiate between behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. While attitudinal loyalty represents the disposition a fan feels towards a sports team, behavioural loyalty puts this into action with economic expenditure. Mahony et al. (2000) find that “previous research on the loyalty construct suggested the importance of using both

behavioral and attitudinal measures when attempting to assess the loyalty of consumers” (p. 15). Considering both loyalty elements allows marketers to differentiate between genuinely loyal fans and fair-weather fans. Mahony et al. (2000) note, “the ability to measure consumers’ strength of attachment to a particular sport product or service in order to separate the highly loyal from the spurious loyal is crucial to distinguishing genuine loyalty from habitual purchase behavior” (p. 17). As previously mentioned, the PCT scale determines psychological commitment, a main element to attitudinal loyalty. Mahony et al. (2000) note that “a number of researchers have argued that psychological commitment best describes the attitude component of loyalty” (p. 17). A strong attitudinal disposition towards a sports team influences consumption, as a result, for the purpose of this study: “attitudinal loyalty is considered as an antecedent of behavioural loyalty” (Marzocchi et al., 2013, p. 97). Behavioural loyalty is built on attitudinal loyalty, and for this reason the latter is considered first.

### Attitudinal Loyalty

Attitudinal loyalty is represented by the fans’ dispositional needs and is based on the fans’ sentiment towards the team. Attitudinal loyalty focuses on the emotional connection and attitude towards the team and does not take into account any economic behaviour. Surveyed Jets fans have a high dispositional nature towards the team. Dispositional needs are the personality traits and individual characteristics that influence the interest in a sports team (Funk & James, 2006). Mahony et al. (2000) note: “previous research has shown that capturing the dispositional nature of attachment is crucial to establishing true loyalty” (p. 21).

The Jets marketing team develops strategies that influence attitudinal loyalty and this is reflected in the branding themes. Attitudinal loyalty includes the emotional attributes of a sports



brand, which is best captured in the ways in which the fan experience and storytelling are prominent in the Jets' branding themes.

### *Fan Experience*

Richelieu (2014) suggests that “branding helps you change the attitudes of people, build a bond with the fans, and develop their allegiance to the team” (p. 406). Rix and Chung (2018) note, “today’s fans crave a deeper understanding of the person behind the jersey” (para. 8). To form a strong connection between the players and the fans, marketers can share stories and use their social media platforms to show the players’ authentic selves. Rix and Chung (2018) state, “the most impactful work taps into an athlete’s authentic self and shares aspects of her or him that are most relatable, entertaining, human and real” (para. 9). Smith (2015) further notes, “there are many ways to help your fans get to know players through content” (para. 2). As a result, TNSE creates a bond with their fans through the use of content and sharing behind-the-scenes moments of players, offering fans a more personalized experience. This is delivered both in the arena and on social media and digital platforms. Richelieu (2014) observes that “fans find themselves in a privileged position, where they can live their favourite sport brand not only during the games, but also between matches, during the off season, in the virtual world as well in the real world” (p. 410).

The branding themes “in-game experience” and “traditions” complement one another in delivering a meaningful fan experience inside Bell MTS Place. Rituals and traditions experienced at Bell MTS Place allow fans to internalize the brand and feel connected to the team. Richelieu (2014) highlights that “when fans take possession of the sports brand, they create rituals, becoming co-creators and ambassadors” (p. 409). When fans create these rituals and become more intrinsically connected to the brand, this then builds excitement and impacts the

fan experience in the arena. As Borges, Silva and Anana (2014) argue, “consumers’ satisfaction with sporting events is largely determined by the quality of their experiences and these experiences are impacted by other consumers, by the physical surroundings and by the consumers’ mood or feelings” (p. 2). And, as previously discussed, popular rituals among Jets fans are the True North and Go Jets Go chants. An author for Expedia wrote a piece on NHL arenas and noted of their experience at Bell MTS Place: “before the anthem is even sung, enthusiastic “Go, Jets, go!” chants fill the arena. During the national anthem, fans traditionally honor True North Sports and Entertainment (the owners who brought the team to Winnipeg) by repeating “True North” at the appropriate time in the song” (Vukelich, 2016, para. 12).

Recently, TNSE has improved Bell MTS Place to enhance the fan experience. Cortsen (2013) notes that “for professional sport teams to connect successfully with fans and to enhance the total experience of attending a game, the team must strive to control what goes on before, during, and after the game” (para. 2). A part of the improved fan experience is a financial investment in facilities. Kevin Donnelly, TNSE’s Senior Vice President of Venues noted how Jets fans’ were top of mind during the arena updates: “it speaks to Jets’ fans and it speaks to the whole Jet experience” (cited in “Jets fans get”, 2017, para. 2). The fan experience is a priority for TNSE. Donnelly further highlighted: “we’ve tried to address the entire patron experience and bring it to a whole new level” (cited in “Jets fans get”, 2017, para. 5).

As discussed in chapter 4, Bell MTS Place improvements include: additional washrooms, improved premium spaces, an HD scoreboard, upgraded audio systems, seating, the installation of glass railings, and an upgraded concourse. Falconer (2019), an author for “Stadium Journey”, highlights the Bell MTS Place experience: “inside the arena, the Jets game day production is second to none. There is never a break in the entertainment and there are lots

of interactive opportunities for fans to enjoy” (para. 6). These improvements increase the fan experience by reducing congestion and wait times for the washrooms, offering a higher quality experience with the use of improved audio and visual equipment, and the installation of a glass railing that improves sightlines. There continues to be amenity improvements at Bell MTS Place. Morphy added: “the amenities that people get at games continue to grow and sports teams have enhanced the game experience and the premium offerings.” Falconer (2019) notes the impact of the facility improvements on the fan experience: “the facility itself is well thought out, now entering its second decade, the building looks remarkably new thanks to constant renovations and additions” (para. 22).

Rituals and improved physical amenities have the ability to add to the overall experience of the arena. Expedia, a travel and destination expert, ranked Bell MTS Place for having the “liveliest fan experience.” The Expedia article concludes that “Bell MTS Place provides arguably the best fan experience in the entire league. The atmosphere, between the fans and the food, is difficult to rival” (Vukelich, 2016, para. 11).

### *Storytelling*

Digital and social media engagement encourages a variety of behaviours. Achen, Ryerson, and Clavio (2017) define this as “including liking, commenting, sharing, tweeting at, re-tweeting, sharing online, and ‘favoriting’ various pieces of social content” (p. 8). Engaging content is used to share stories and further connect with fans and to help move them along a continuum from partial to avid fans. To aid in this transition, Smith (2015) notes, “off-the-field stories and facts help humanize players and make them relatable to fans. If fans feel a personal connection to a player, they might be more likely to share content and pay attention” (para. 1).

A successful social media tactic “should focus on posting content that elicits engagement, encourages discussion, and builds conversation with consumers... Actively engaging fans can increase the value of social media to organizations by increasing visibility and improving brand image” (Achen et al., 2017, p. 2). For sports franchises seeking to engage fans, Richelieu (2014) argues that “stories fascinate people and are often more easily remembered than facts. Brand stories can be used to create and reinforce positive brand associations” (p. 409).

The Winnipeg Jets did not exceed 90 points in either the 2015-2016 or 2016-2017 NHL seasons, eliminating them from playoff contention. Mark Chipman, TNSE’s Executive Chairman, characterizes the team’s frustration with this on-ice performance: “the fans want to see a team in the playoffs. They want to have a team to cheer for and we haven’t given them a lot since we’ve been here. You can tell the fans want to see a winning product on the ice. They deserve a team that goes out there to compete every night for a spot in the playoffs. We owe that to them as well as to have a good season” (cited in Shoalts, 2017, para. 10). In response to this lack of success, the Rise Together campaign was developed to instil optimism for the 2017-2018 season. Dudych added: “our fans stuck with us through some challenging times and now there’s a reason for optimism.” In the light of seasons of poor on-ice performances, inclusive and captivating stories can be used to instil optimism in the fans. The results of the Jets’ fans survey, with a weighted average of 6.19, suggests a high degree of loyalty and that, despite poor on-ice performance, a story with a comeback narrative can maintain attitudinal loyalty with Jets fans.

The Rise Together campaign is an example of content being used to tell an engaging story. Like the Jets, the Atlanta Falcons of the National Football League executed a similar strategy, called the “Rise Up” campaign, after experiencing unsuccessful seasons (Richelieu, 2014). These are examples of how sports teams can connect with fans and the community by

instilling optimism and encouraging inclusion. As Richelieu (2014) notes, “a brand can also resonate in the heart of fans when the message of becoming relevant again matches the performances on the field. In other words, the promise of the brand is met” (p. 408).

Transparency between the team and fans helps create a more committed fan base. Dudych noted the organization’s thinking behind the Rise Together campaign: “it was definitely a calculated risk. We had some conversations with hockey operations and hockey management to really get a sense of the pulse of where they thought the team was at so we weren’t going to go out and make promises that we couldn’t necessarily back up.” Dudych also added: “we’ve been fortunate that the team has risen to the occasion.”

The perception of the team is anchored with the Jets’ branding themes. Martin (2013) reveals that “fans with positive perceptions of their favorite team often choose to remain psychologically loyal to that team, developing a social attachment with that team and its players” (p. 46). The results of the PCT scale echo this from the fan perspective, and suggest that Jets fans have a high perception of the team and are strongly committed to the team. This psychological commitment can lead to behavioural loyalty. When a fan is emotionally connected to a team and exhibits psychological commitment to it, they are more likely to exhibit behavioural loyalty. As Martin (2013) notes, “attitudinal loyalty revolves around a mental commitment toward the brand and the consumer’s expected commitment to purchasing” (p. 43).

### Behavioural Loyalty

Mahony et al. (2000) observe that “total attendance, increases in ticket sales, and the extent of repeat attendance have been used as behavioural indicators of consumers' loyalty to a sports team or organization” (p. 16). When a fan exhibits strong psychological commitment and pride, they are more likely to exhibit purchasing behaviours. George and Stavros (2013) suggest that

“attitudinal loyalty will mediate the effect of psychological commitment and positively influence behavioural loyalty, (past and future behaviour) and frequency of attendance. As attitudinal loyalty increases, behavioural loyalty should also be strengthened” (para. 14).

Behavioural loyalty is comprised of tangible benefits for a sports franchise. Richelieu (2014) notes that “tangible dimension, such as the product on the field, the amenities offered at the venue and the merchandising products that they can buy or receive at the arena” (p. 406). As discussed in chapter 4, TNSE leverages their branding strategies to influence behavioural loyalty. Martin (2013) suggests that “therefore, the second form of customer loyalty, behavioral loyalty, is critical to the conceptualization of loyalty as it defines loyalty as a customer’s inclination to purchase a product based on a precedent of past purchases” (p. 44). TNSE increases behavioural loyalty with the use of the following brand themes: “traditions” and “customized offerings”.

### *Traditions*

Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) define retro branding as the “relaunching of a product or service that is also brought up to contemporary consumers’ standards” (cited in Scola & Gordon, 2018, p. 197). In the case of the Winnipeg Jets, during the playoffs, many Jets fans wear white in support of the Winnipeg Whiteout; a tradition that originated with the Winnipeg Jets 1.0. In addition, for the first time in franchise history, the Jets hosted Whiteout parties outside the arena. The Winnipeg Whiteout parties proved to be popular with fans: “a total of 120,500 fans attended the nine street parties over six weeks. That figure does not include the sellout crowd of roughly 15,000 fans who watched each game inside Bell MTS Place” (“Winnipeg whiteout”, 2018, para. 2). As a result, TNSE capitalised on this opportunity to augment merchandise sales with the use of white merchandise. Scola and Gordon (2018) highlight the sales of retro themed merchandise as a branding tactic: “as companies are striving and existing through retro brands alone, it is no

surprise teams and leagues are also heavily invested in promoting and selling their retro merchandise” (p. 202). When the Jets clinched a playoff spot in 2015, it was their first playoff appearance since 1996. As mentioned in a CBC article: “Flags and jerseys and anything else with a Jets logo is on full display around the city. And there will be more to be seen, a lot more, based on the scene at any store selling Jets stuff. Dozens of people waited Friday morning for the doors of the Jets Gear store at St. Vital Centre to open, while the store at Bell MTS Place is also elbow-to-elbow with shoppers” (“Jets Fans Snap Up”, 2015, para. 5). This was no different at the end of the 2017-18 NHL season when the Jets again earned a playoff spot. Hoye (2018) speaks to the rising demand for white apparel when noting that “local apparel companies work to keep up with rising demand for whiteout crowd gear as Jets enter post-season” (para. 1).

Jets fans’ high attitudinal loyalty suggests that fans are likely to participate in traditions like the Whiteout. The Winnipeg Whiteout gives fans the opportunity to display their fandom with the use of white-branded merchandise during the excitement of the NHL playoffs. Engaged fans have a greater probability of exhibiting behavioural loyalty. Da Silva and Las Casas (2017) find that “engaged fans are likely to purchase club products, such as match ticket, attire and general merchandise, on a frequent and continued basis” (p. 39). The act of consuming in terms of felt experiences is a complex relationship between the fan and the object of consumption. Holt (1995) outlines how consumers experience consumption: “consumers do not create their experiences anew; rather they apply interpretive frameworks to experience consumption” (p. 14). Fans identify with their object of consumption and therefore use this act of consumption as a catalyst to be involved in this brand community. Traditions like the Winnipeg Whiteout engage the fans and increase excitement within the fan community.

### *Customized Offerings*

Tradition engages customers and encourages them to participate through merchandise purchases, while customized offerings target fans with relevant and meaningful offers that they are more likely to act upon, regardless of the team's on-ice success. As discussed in chapter 4, TNSE place an importance on data collection to gain further insight into Jets fans and reinforce their shopping behaviours with the use of promotional offerings. "Global Sports" (2017) observes that "customer data is the holy grail for sports marketers in the digital age; the only sound basis for communicating with fans (and potential new fans) in a bespoke, personalised way to offer them the information, products and services they want" (para. 2). Crowl (2016) further notes that "the foundation of this personalization is your customer data, which makes data acquisition an utmost priority" (para. 8). In order to best deliver meaningful communications there is a priority to better understand fan behaviour. Fan behaviour includes: "game attendance, purchase activity, TV viewership and other activities" (cited in "The Ins and Outs", 2017).

Hughes (2018) suggests that "access to data has created even more opportunities, allowing businesses to provide potential buyers and clients with customized recommendations that match their buying habits" (para. 3). Matching the fans' shopping behaviours can influence the probability of fans continuing to purchase further. Mulqueen (2017) finds that "customization is gaining protagonism in all areas of our lives, from our online behaviour to our entertainment habits, with digital ads targeting offers based on data stored in our browsers" (para. 5).

Jets fans surveyed ranked high in behavioural loyalty, and the PCT scale suggests those who rank high in this quadrant may benefit from personalized approaches. Mahony et al. (2000) recommend that "marketers should use a reinforcement strategy that includes reinforcing behavioral loyalty through economic incentives and attitudinal loyalty through personalized



encouragement. This strategy is designed to increase the yield from this segment and to avoid any chances of losing the segment” (p. 23). Giorgio (2018) adds, “greater knowledge of attendees’ profiles could enable better targeting of fans who attend live games throughout the season—and those who do not.” Morphy was aware of this approach, acknowledging TNSE’s interest in “customized offerings which will help us gather more information about our fans and deliver you know, more customized offerings whether its ticket offers, retail offers but at the same time reward them for their loyalty.”

## **Conclusion**

The results from the data suggest that sport franchises should prioritize strengthening the relationship between the brand and its fans. Mahony et al. (2000) note the purpose of developing the team-fan base relationship “is to progressively increase the yield from these best consumers by developing a long-term, interactive, value-added relationship” (p. 23). Morphy further discusses moving fans along a continuum to more loyal fans: “We’re not needing to acquire new fans. We’ve already got that high concentration. We’re not teaching people about the game of hockey or teaching people on who the Jets are. Some companies have to flip their marketing on awareness. We’re not in that mode, so we’re not in acquisition mode, we’re in activation mode. So again, we’re trying to move them along that continuum.”

Winnipeg Jets management have used many strategies to push their fans along this continuum, converting casual fans to loyal ones. Whether these strategies are intentional such as community or social media efforts, or unintentional such as fan-led traditions that are later capitalized upon, these tactics are consumed by the fans and impact how they perceive the brand. Results from the PCT scale suggest that Jets fans have high brand loyalty. TNSE leverages their

connection with Winnipeg and reinforces that relationship through their branding, and in return, Jets fans that identify with the brand have high loyalty towards the team.

## **Chapter 6 – Conclusion and Implications for Future Research**

With the use of three semi-structured interviews and survey data, chapters four and five explored the team-fan base relationship. Specifically, these chapters discussed True North Sports and Entertainment Ltd.'s (TNSE) branding strategies, the tactics used to execute them, and Jets fans' loyalty using the PCT scale. The integration of the data demonstrated how the six branding themes influence fan loyalty and bring fans along a continuum from partial to avid fans, while leveraging the emotional connection between the team and its fans. This chapter summarizes these findings and discusses the implications for future research.

### **Summary**

If, as an organization, you are perceived to be grateful or thankful for your fans maintaining their loyalty, you're going to have an easier time maintaining that connection and ultimately maintaining your revenue. That's an important thing to not lose sight of. That's a value that True North really does instill. There's definitely an acknowledgment and gratefulness to the community and to our customer base that they have that commitment, even if the team isn't achieving on-ice. We try to give reason for optimism to stick with it so when the good times do come, and now we're seeing the benefit of that, that's been some of our messaging for the past few years and now that we're seeing success, it's paying dividends. (Dudych)

As Dudych highlighted, there are benefits for a sports franchise to invest in the team-fan base relationship. Building upon the emotional sentiment fans feel for their team with the use of branding strategies brings them along a continuum resulting in stronger commitment and loyalty. Morphy noted that the ideal is "an avid fan. That's really the level of commitment in a perfect world all our fans would have. That's sports marketing, it's very irrational. You make decisions not always rationally, it's more emotional."

As previously discussed in chapters four and five, the six branding themes are used to guide fans and build a stronger allegiance to the team. Morphy contrasted different levels of fan

allegiance: “from being just a casual fan who may know a little bit about our team or know a few players, and who may watch the odd game on TV. Your avid fan is likely to buy every jersey we come out with, will schedule their life around our games, will take losses to heart or get upset and emotional when we lose.” Capitalising on emotion can result in a fan base that’s both resistant to change and persistent over time, ultimately yielding high attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.

The foundations of attitudinal loyalty for TNSE are the fan experience and engaging storytelling. The fan experience is of high importance for the sports franchise. Wilkinson noted: “overall it’s being consistent and continuing to look for opportunities that add value into our fans experience, you know they’re paying money to be entertained and we can’t control what happens on the ice but we can control everything else so making sure we have good music, giveaways, promotions, food and beverage, the service that they get – ensuring that it’s all at a certain level.” This commitment is evident with the significant reinvestment and improvement made to Bell MTS Place. Providing an exceptional in-game experience could justify, for the fan, the cost incurred to attend. Richelieu (2014) found that “managed properly, a sportainment offer can not only justify the premium that fans are asked to pay to attend a game, it may also strengthen the privileged emotional connection that ties the fans to their favourite club” (p. 412).

The attitudinal benefits of traditions include positive disposition towards the team, such as with the use the Winnipeg Whiteout. The Winnipeg Whiteout, original to Jets 1.0, is celebrated when the Jets clinch a spot in the playoffs. Fans are able to rally together with their white-branded merchandise. This tactic allows for the fans to build on nostalgia from Jets 1.0 while celebrating the current Jets on ice success.

To further engage fans, sports teams can capitalize on fan emotion through the use of storytelling. Lundqvist, Liljander, Gummerus and Van Riel (2013) note: “stories fascinate people and are often more easily remembered than facts... brand stories can be used to create and reinforce positive brand associations” (cited in Richelieu, 2014, p. 409). The most significant story told during the 2017-2018 season was the Rise Together campaign, which Wilkinson noted was “a conscious effort to make sure that that we’re going to involve our fans in the branding. Through imagery and words we really wanted to make them feel like they were as much a part of this campaign as the players were and that we needed each other to drive success.” Storytelling can be a useful tool to further move fans along to stronger commitment.

Similarly, literature suggests a strong correlation between attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. Mahony et al. (2000) argue in their study that “because a strong relationship is expected between attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty, a series of analyses were used to determine if the Psychological Commitment to a Team (PCT) scale was significantly related to various measures of behavioural loyalty” (p. 21). As a result, behavioural loyalty was also considered in this study.

Behavioural loyalty is influenced by the “traditions” and “customized offerings” branding themes. Traditions can be capitalized on to reignite merchandise sales. Specifically, TNSE are able to leverage the Winnipeg Whiteout to sell white branded merchandise. In addition to traditions, customized offerings also play a role in increasing sales. Acquiring fan data can give the tools needed for TNSE to monitor fans shopping behaviour, and also reduce the amount of messaging fans might receive. Customized offerings can increase the probability of fans purchasing tickets, concessions, and merchandise by taking into account fans’ shopping behaviours and offering relevant promotional offerings.

These branding tactics are consumed by fans and their response to them is reflected in the PCT scale. With the use of 14 questions, the PCT scale measures attitudinal loyalty. This is measured by taking into account both resistance to change and persistence over time. It is expected that those who exhibit both dimensions possess high attitudinal loyalty. Jets fans surveyed for this study scored a weighted average of 6.19, suggesting high (true) loyalty. In this loyalty quadrant, Mahony et al. (2000) argue that “marketers should use a reinforcement strategy that includes reinforcing behavioral loyalty through economic incentives and attitudinal loyalty through personalized encouragement” (p. 22). As discussed in both chapters four and five, TNSE’s branding theme “customized offerings” indicates that the organization places an importance on providing fans with a more personalized experience. Mahony et al. (2000) suggest that doing so, increases the probability of maintaining a loyal fan base.

A fan base that exhibits both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty can help maintain economic sustainability for a sports franchise despite poor on-ice performance. Wilkinson noted: “I think the biggest challenge would be what we can’t really control, which is team success. It’s going to have an impact on fans”. Since on-ice performance cannot be controlled from a branding perspective, tactics are used to instil loyalty. By contrast, on-ice success helps deepen the connection between the fan and team. Wilkinson noted that winning “plays a role in a level of commitment as well as the revenue that goes along with a deeper level of commitment. I think our fan base is pretty committed since they’ve gone through a lot with losing a team and it coming back. So as much as they may express their frustration with losing, I think in their heart they’re still committed to the team.” It is important to note that this study was conducted during a successful 2017-2018 NHL season for the Jets. The Winnipeg Jets finished the season with 114

points, before losing in NHL playoffs conference finals. The excitement generated during this season could have impacted the results of the PCT scale in relation to self-identity and loyalty.

Although winning isn't the sole factor in having a committed fan base, losing can result in a general loss of connection over time. More generally, Dudych discussed the impact of any possible loss in connection between the team and fans and "that pride of place that the brand has and that commitment level. That's probably the biggest threat. If you don't have fans then you really don't have anything." This suggests that consistent poor performance may lead to a less loyal fan base. However there are instances where sports teams experience consistent poor performance while maintaining a loyal fan base, the Chicago Cubs in baseball for example. Dudych remarked that, "if you look at other examples in other sports like the Chicago Cubs who didn't win the World Series for a hundred years but still had committed fans and a successful brand – that would be a good example of how a team's brand can sustain itself despite perhaps a level of underachievement." This suggests that with the use of branding, marketers have the ability to influence both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.

From a managerial perspective, there are strategies that a sports team can implement to influence fans' perception of the brand. The results of this study suggest that TNSE should continue to implement their "content driven" branding theme to influence fans' disposition towards the Jets. This includes sharing behind-the-scenes moments and inclusive story telling campaigns like Rise Together. It is imperative that TNSE remain authentic in their communications with the fans and ensure that the brand promise is met. The findings in this study also suggest the importance of the "traditions" branding theme. TNSE should continue to foster rituals among fans that are built on the team's history. These contribute to the fans' ability to internalize the brand and become ambassadors for the team. The results of the PCT scale

indicate that fans under the high (true) loyalty segment respond best to a personalized sales approach. This suggests that TNSE should continue with the “customized offerings” branding theme to further drive revenue.

The interviewees highlighted a lack of a need to develop new fans or expand the existing fan base, noting essentially, “we have enough fans.” This suggests that TNSE are depending on their current fan base to remain loyal. Beech and Chadwick (2007) note that due to “the unswerving loyalty that many fans have to their team or their sport. Sport marketers may thus tend to be a little blasé when considering the scale of the marketing challenges they face” (p. 12). This could lead to marketing myopia. This study captured fans specifically in the high (true) loyalty quadrant. If future research identified fans within these segments, TNSE should focus their marketing efforts on fans in the spurious and latent loyalty quadrants. For spurious fans, this can be done by “promoting the positive attributes of the product or service, getting the fans to articulate why they support the team, and/or coupling attendance with support of a relevant social cause” (Mahony et al., 2000, p. 22). For latent fans, sport marketers should focus on “removing significant barriers to behavior and by offering economic incentives to engage in certain behaviors” (Mahony et al., 2000, p. 22). The PCT scale being a market segmentation tool, can aid in identifying these fans and ultimately move them along the continuum.

### **Future Research**

Conclusions drawn from this study have identified gaps that can be addressed with future research. Future studies could expand on identity and loyalty concepts and provide a more holistic view of the team-fan base relationship. Although attitudinal loyalty influences behavioural loyalty, this study did not survey fans on their behavioural loyalty specifically. Research could be expanded to include quantitative data for both loyalty elements (attitudinal



and behavioural). Identity and loyalty influence brand equity and offer a sports brand stable profitability. However, time and availability to fiscal data precluded this study from taking into account other revenue-generating items like tickets sale and sponsorships, and asking how and at what degree of loyalty does a loyal fan base positively influence profitability?

This study examined attitudinal loyalty and by association, behavioural loyalty. Although attitudinal loyalty influences behavioural loyalty, the PCT scale's 14 questions specifically measure attitudinal loyalty. Surveying Jets fans with the use of a scale to examine behavioural loyalty would be beneficial in providing more insight to Jets fans' loyalty. Quantitative data reflecting behavioural loyalty elements could potentially provide more clarity on the relationship between attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty in the context of Jets fans.

In addition, how identity and loyalty influence brand equity could be researched in more detail. It would be worth examining the economic implications of a loyal fan base on a sports franchise. This study demonstrated how branding can increase behavioural loyalty, but it did not explore the long-term economic effects of a loyal fan base. A comparative analysis between a successful sports franchise and a team that may not be performing on-ice, but has a loyal fan base could shed some insight on the economic effects of loyal fans.

Lastly, a study on branding strategies relatable to each loyalty quadrant could be useful for sport marketers. Although the PCT scale provides recommendations, a more thorough analysis could be done to offer insight on how best to move forward given the loyalty quadrant into which surveyed fans fall. Doing so would provide sport marketers insight on how best to action strategies that are relatable to their sports franchise.

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## Appendix A: Facebook Introduction Letter



Faculty of Kinesiology and  
Recreation Management

Faculty of Kinesiology and  
Recreation Management  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2

Research project title: Exploring the Impact of the Winnipeg Jets Marketing Initiatives on Fans' Self Identity and Loyalty

Principal investigator and contact information: Courtney Punton, [puntonc@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:puntonc@myumanitoba.ca)

Research supervisor and contact information: Dr. Russell Field, Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, [Russell.Field@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Russell.Field@umanitoba.ca)

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a graduate student in the faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management at the University of Manitoba. Currently I'm working on a research project that will seek to determine True North Sports and Entertainment's (TNSE) impact on Jet's fan identity and loyalty. Specifically, my master's thesis will look into the branding initiatives set by TNSE and how/if these have an impact on their fans. This research project will consist of two methods:

1. Interviews with current TNSE staff who play a role in developing and executing branding strategies
2. Survey of Winnipeg Jets to examine fans psychological connection to the team and what/if branding plays a role in this connection.

Since you operate the largest independent Facebook page for Jets fans, I was hoping you could post a link to my survey on 'Your Winnipeg Jets Hockey Homepage' feed. The participation in this research study is voluntary and any of the followers of the page can choose not to participate. Those who decide to participate in this survey may withdraw at any time by exiting the survey without penalty. However, if they complete the survey there is no option to withdraw as the data entered will be completely anonymous. The option to withdraw once the survey is submitted is not possible as I can't identify survey participants. Participants may skip questions that they are not comfortable with answering without penalty.

The procedure involves completing an online survey that will take less than 5 minutes. The responses will be confidential and I do not collect identifying information such as name, email address, or any other demographic based questions. The results of this study will be used for my master's thesis, which I intend to present and publish. There are no benefits involved in participating and minimal risk. Participants will not be provided with a briefing of the information, as all data collected is anonymous.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons



or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or via email at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca).  
A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

(Name) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Qualitative Participant Recruitment



Faculty of Kinesiology and  
Recreation Management

Faculty of Kinesiology and  
Recreation Management  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2

Research project title: Exploring the Impact of the Winnipeg Jets Marketing Initiatives on Fans' Self Identity and Loyalty

Principal investigator and contact information: Courtney Punton, [puntonc@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:puntonc@myumanitoba.ca)

Research supervisor and contact information: Dr. Russell Field, Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, [Russell.Field@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Russell.Field@umanitoba.ca)

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am conducting research on your organization's impact on Jets fan identity and loyalty. Specifically, my master's thesis will examine the marketing initiatives set by True North Sports and Entertainment (TNSE) and how/if these have an impact on their fans. This research project will consist of two methods:

1. Interviews with current TNSE staff who play a role in developing and executing branding strategies
2. Survey of Winnipeg Jets to examine fans psychological connection to the team and what/if branding plays a role in this connection.

The purpose of the interview is to shed light on specific branding objectives, and will also help determine the organization's goals from these initiatives. Each interview will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes and will focus on your background and your experience in branding in relation to the Winnipeg Jets.

Each interview will be audio recorded to allow for the subsequent transcription of each interviewee's observations. This material will only be used for research purposes and will be securely stored during the duration of this study. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of your interview within four weeks of the interview. Your feedback is requested within three (3) weeks' time, after which it will be assumed that revisions are not needed.

You will have the option to review, verify, and if necessary modify your comments by adding or deleting any material. Only the principal investigator will have access to the primary data, identifiable and non-identifiable data will be stored in two separate locked cabinets. Audio recordings and observation notes will be destroyed five (5) years (01/2023) after the data is collected. Transcription notes will be destroyed within eight (8) years (01/2026). In all cases, digital files will be deleted from hard drives and any other electronic storage devices. Paper records will be shredded.

Please be assured that you are under no obligation to participate in an interview. If you do choose to participate, you may at any time during the interview refuse to answer any question(s), stop

the interview, or withdraw without penalty from the study. You will be free to raise questions or concerns with the principal investigator throughout the interview and will have the opportunity to view the transcript of your interview before the completion of this study. You may choose whether you want to be identified within the study and its published results either by name or by pseudonym. If you choose the latter, any details that might be used to identify you directly will be removed from the transcript and your name will not be used in the published study. Should you choose to move forward with a pseudonym there remains a risk of your identity being discovered, there is limited staffing at TNSE and the interviews target specific staff.

Although the findings of this study will not benefit you directly, by participating you will be contributing to the understanding of how branding strategies impact Winnipeg Jets fans. The findings of this study will contribute to a master's thesis.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or via email at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

I am hopeful that you will be interested in participating in this study. If you are, we could schedule an interview now, or you could get back to me by phone or email [puntonc@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:puntonc@myumanitoba.ca)

Sincerely,

Courtney Punton

## Appendix C: Qualitative Informed Consent Form



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Kinesiology and  
Recreation Management

Faculty of Kinesiology and  
Recreation Management  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2

Research project title: Exploring the Impact of the Winnipeg Jets Marketing Initiatives on Fan's Self Identity and Loyalty

Principal investigator and contact information: Courtney Punton, Courtney.punton@gmail.com

Research supervisor and contact information: Dr. Russell Field, Russell.field@umanitoba.ca

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This project will seek to determine True North Sports and Entertainment's (TNSE) impact on Jet's fan identity and loyalty. Specifically, my master's thesis will look into the branding initiatives set by TNSE and how/ if that has an impact on their fans.

Each interview will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes and will focus on specific branding objectives, and will also help determine the organization's goals from these initiatives. The questions asked will focus on your background and your experience in branding in relation to the Winnipeg Jets.

Each interview will be audio recorded to allow for the subsequent transcription of each interviewee's observations and the principal investigator may also take notes during the interview. This material will only be used for research purposes and will be securely stored during the duration of this study. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of your interview within four weeks of the interview taking place. You will have the option to review, verify, and if necessary modify your comments by adding or deleting any material. Your feedback is requested within three weeks' time, after which it will be assumed that revisions are not needed.

You may choose whether you want to be identified within the study and its published results either (i) by name or (ii) by pseudonym. If you choose this second option, any details discussed during the interview that might be used to identify you directly will be removed from the transcript and your name will not be used in the published study. However, there remains a level of risk to the participant's choosing to use a pseudonym. TNSE has limited staffing and in addition I will be interviewing participants in specific roles, identities could be determined through process of elimination. Only the principal investigator (PI) and the PI's advisor will have access to the primary data. All audio recordings and observation notes will be destroyed five (5) years (01/2023) after data has been collected. Transcription notes will be destroyed within eight (8) years (01/2026). In all cases, digital files will be deleted from hard drives and



any other electronic storage devices. Paper records will be shredded. The data will be stored in two separate locked file cabinet, separating the identifiable and non-identifiable data to which the principal investigator has the only keys.

You are under no obligation to participate in an interview. If you do choose to participate, you will be free to raise questions or concerns with the principal investigator throughout the interview and will have the opportunity to view the transcript of your interview, if you wish, before the completion of this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time, by notifying the PI, and all paper and digital records of your participation will be destroyed.

You will not be subjected directly to any physical or emotional risks beyond the most minimal risks. Be assured that you do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer nor would you be expected to divulge any information that you are not comfortable sharing.

Although the findings of this study will not benefit you directly, by participating you will be contributing to the understanding of how marketing strategies impact Winnipeg Jet's fans. The findings of this study will contribute to my master's thesis, which I plan to present and publish.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or via email [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

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Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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Researcher and/or Delegate's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please indicate how you would like to be identified within this study:

By name: \_\_\_\_\_ By pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

*Note: You have the option to revise your preference when you review the transcript of this interview.*

2. Please indicate how you would like to receive a copy of your interview transcript for review:

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Post: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

3. If you would like to receive a summary of the findings of this research, please indicate the method by which you would like this delivered to you:

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Post: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_