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Bruins Nation: A Study of Fandom and Identity

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Abstract:

Living in Boston presents endless opportunities for supporting the country's premiere sports teams. Fans of Boston teams, specifically the Boston Bruins, are a part of unique fandoms that provide a sense of community, allegiance, and supporting what many fans refer to as "our team". This study examines how the Boston Bruins organization acts as an agent in the negotiation of identity as fans search for belonging as well as the constructed culture pattern of fans.

Introduction and Rationale:

Growing up in Boston, or “Title Town” as many proudly hail the city, presents endless opportunities for supporting some of the country’s premiere sports teams. Terms like “Red Sox Nation”, “Bruins Nation” and “Patriots Nation” are often used to describe the level of commitment and engagement that are made up of devoted, loyal, and proud fan bases of the Boston area. Fans of Boston teams, and specifically fans of the Boston Bruins, are a part of unique fan bases that provide a sense of community, allegiance, and the goal of supporting what many fans would refer to as “our team”. Fans deep-seeded connections to a team like the Boston Bruins are reinforced by the longstanding history and culture of sports, and given hockey’s securely rooted place in culture, individuals must negotiate and navigate their personal identity in relation to their support and devotion to the Boston Bruins.

Sports have formed such a vital aspect of American culture that Washington & Karen (2001) argue that “sports must be considered a field which has its own dynamics, history, and chronology of which it is a part” (p. 190). For nearly four thousand years, since the origination of the game hockey, the sport has acted as a cornerstone in the formation of culture as well as a component of personal connection, inclusion and community and the Bruins organization acts as an agent for individuals to unite with a common purpose and create a sense of belonging.

As a lifetime resident of Massachusetts and an avid hockey fan, the Boston Bruins present a particular level of curiosity and serve as the focus of this research. Founded in 1924, The Boston Bruins are one of the original six teams in the National Hockey League, and present numerous opportunities to explore the deep-rooted fan-base that has been forming for over ninety years. As sports have historically been a cultural facilitator, I seek to explore the relationship between the involvement of spectators in the Boston Bruins’ hockey fandom in

relation to the construction of individual and group identity. In addition to the formation of identity in regards to being a part of a fandom, I aim to explain the experience of belonging in the Boston Bruins community as well as how Bruins spectators interpret what it means to be a fan. I draw upon the abundant research regarding the prevalence of location, media, gender, and individual sports themselves to argue that belonging to a specific fandom holds an important role in the formation of identity.

The relationship between fandom and the formation of identity is a topic that aims to explain the rationale and intricacies under the surface of a typical “fan”. While this study looks particularly at fans of the Boston Bruins and aims to uncover a specific culture of Bruins fans, this research also alludes to the notion that fans of other sports teams engage in similar practices that will assist in an accurate profile of what it means to be a fan. The research and understanding of fan culture in the United States is an area of study that must be continually observed as the norms and behaviors of sports fans are constantly emerging and changing in our fast-paced world. As millions of people in the United States tune into sporting events, wear their favorite team’s apparel, and utilize sport as a means of connection and conversation, sport culture has positioned itself as a vital piece of American culture. This study hones in on the engagement of Bruins fans and explores the relationship with identity and belonging, but serves as a marker for the larger, more broad area of study.

This research is important to explore because while the subject of sports is often considered to be non-intellectual, simple, and unimportant in the academia, the ways in which Boston hockey assists in the creation of an inclusive, constructed space for citizens serves as an important example of the impression sports make on people’s lives. The discourse community created from the Boston Bruins offers an additional connection and a shared set of meanings for

fans in the greater Boston area. This research consists of in-depth interviews with fans of the Bruins as well as participant observation at Bruins games in order to assess the commonalities of fan behavior and the nuances in regards to the ways in which fans interpret what it means to be a fan. Major ideas that will be explored in my research are the inclusivity of fans, such as saying “we” and “our” when referring to the Bruins (ie: “Are *we* winning?” “Their team is better than *ours*”). My study also places an emphasis on the definition and perceptions of what constitutes a fan, along with the notions of “true fans” and “bandwagon fans”, as well as delving into *how* fans support the Bruins whether it be by attending games, watching on television, or wearing Bruins apparel.

In this study, I examine the ways in which The Boston Bruins organization acts as an agent in the negotiation of identity as Bruins fans search for a sense of community and belonging as well as the communicatively constructed behaviors and attitudes of fans. Specifically, the research questions that propel this study are:

RQ1: How does being a part of a fandom construct the formation of individual and group identity?

RQ2: How do Bruins spectators interpret what it means to be a fan?

Similarly to Philipsen (2003), I take an ethnomethodological approach that seeks to understand the culture pattern of Bruins fans. I also draw upon the theoretical concepts of such as “intersubjectivity” (Mead, 1934) and “symbolic interactionism” (Schutz, 1967) to analyze how communication and involvement in the Boston Bruins fandom shapes identity. I explore the relationship of fans engaging with “Bruins Nation” and employing practices, rituals, and behaviors that informs an identity derived from the constructed community.

Literature Review

The subject of fan culture is a concept surrounded by much discussion in academia as well as in everyday life. Numerous sources, both qualitative and quantitative, delve into the nuances, mechanisms, and cultural practices in place that inform fan culture, on many levels, around the world. Upon reviewing roughly twenty sources of literature, common themes began to surface. The major themes displayed in the literature discuss the relationship between identity and fan culture and can be categorized into four major issues: the construction of identity in relation to location, media, individualized sports, and gender. The four major themes of this literature review all assist in creating a diverse and interwoven picture of the ways identity is constructed on individual levels as well as in terms of community pertaining to fandom and sport culture.

Location:

Much of the literature centers around the construction of identity in specific locations, under a specific set of circumstances. While the basis of the discussions in the texts begin in broad terms to establish a foundational understanding of identity, they continue on with the use of that foundational understanding to discuss the specific communicatively constructed formations of identity in a given location in relation to sports. Location is a critical aspect in the construction of culture, and much of the literature provides interesting findings in regards to specific locations. For example, Gibbons (2014) creates a discussion of many theoretical approaches to understanding identity with specific emphasis on English national identity. The text reviews foundational concepts in relation to identity such as the term *habitus*, a word similar to 'identity' and originally developed by Bourdieu (1990) in that it refers to the embedded characteristics (such as behavior, thought, and action) of individuals that are developed through

cultural groups (Gibbons, 2014). The text continues and discusses the ways in which cities or nations, in this case England, construct a *national* habitus through the symbols such as flags, emblems, anthems as well as social interaction and other mundane aspects of daily life. While this national habitus may be unconscious or at the edge of consciousness, it nevertheless informs the way in which fans perceive themselves, their team (or club as it is referred to in Europe) and their country. Gibbons goes further with this notion and discusses the ways in which English fans exhibit behaviors that are consistent with the notion of placing their club loyalties over their country loyalties, specifically in international matches where the conundrum of where loyalties lie may arise. While the discussion pertains, in this case, to English football teams, the same idea can be carried over into American sports. Many American sports teams have active fandoms and are extremely loyal to one team or one city and even proclaim themselves a “nation”. Red Sox Nation and Patriots Nation are two of many examples of the ways in which fans proclaim themselves part of their own loyal entity regarding sports fandoms from which there is no straying for another team. This notion of team loyalty is also discussed in Dixon’s (2001) article where the text analyzes the ways in which location may inform how fans support specific sports teams. The article discusses the motivations for supporting a hometown team versus a professional team and whether one is superior than the other. Dixon (2001) discusses the “partisan” supporter, who is a fan of a team due to a personal connection or familiarity. On the other hand, there is the “purist” fan who supports the team that, according to their opinion, exemplifies the best traits despite the fact that there may not be a personal connection as a hometown team. Whether a fan supports a team because they are a local team and that person has grown up with the connection, or because that particular team exemplifies the best traits in the game, the role of location in the decision-making provides an interesting insight.

Continuing in the discussion of a location playing a role in constructing identity, Blake's (2010) book thematically studies the ways in which hockey influences the national identity of Canadians. While hockey is a sport played worldwide, including (but not limited to) the United States, Russia, Finland, the Czech Republic, and other northern European countries, hockey remains the central sport in Canada as well as a defining symbol of their national identity. The novel discusses the many reasons why the game of hockey is so prevalent in Canada as well as the ways in which social interaction, and therefore a constructed reality and identity, evolves from hockey. As hockey has been played in Canada, Blake states that "hockey is an effective unifying symbol for a vast and heterogeneous country" (2010, p. 17). While Canada is split into provinces with different flags, time zones, and different regional languages, the east may feel like a different country altogether than the west. For these reasons, Canada has fallen on the traditions of their forefathers, who played hockey during long winters, to bring everyone together is the game of hockey. No matter where a person is, the game is always played with the same rules and is a common denominator or link of sorts despite all other differences and therefore, over time, has become a national symbol. Hockey is so universally recognized as a symbol in Canada that it even appears on their \$5 bill (Blake, 2010). Barring any major surprises, there is no sport in the United States that would ever make its way onto a form of currency, and to think of it seems silly. However, in Canada and for Canadians, hockey has over time become an integral piece of the way the country identifies and unifies itself. While no one sport is dominant in the United States as hockey is for Canada, the literature shows that sport has the capacity to inform individual, group, and even national identities.

Ilycheva's (2005) article takes a quantitative research approach, unlike the other literature above, but nonetheless still discusses the internet discourses surrounding Bulgarian

nationalism and sports with the aim of expressing what “Bulgarian-ness” means to them. The interpretations of what Bulgarian-ness means reflects identity on the level of the individual in their own answer as well as on the level of national belonging through the common themes in found in the discourses. The study uses empirical methods to organize the language of the sports fans in order to analyze what it means in relation to banal nationalism. Banal nationalism, as described in the text, is the use of typical language that is identifiable as patriotic, but in a more routine, mundane manner that is not at the forefront of consciousness. These insights, principles, and findings into the interpretations of Bulgarian-ness, while in this particular study is in Bulgaria, can be applied to national discourses and behaviors that explain American-ness, British-ness, Canadian-ness, etc. The ideas of sports fans using conventional language that display patterns in relation to communities is a way to discuss the formation of identity and fan groups.

Another characteristic that the theme of location brings to the discussion in this literature is discussed by Sorek (2007). Soccer is the world’s most popular sport, and in Israel (much like many other parts of the sports world) there are two rival teams. The importance of these two fan groups, the Beitar and the Sakhnin, is that, due to the political and religious conflict in Israel, the real-world conflicts are making their way into the soccer stadium. For example, the Beitar fans shout explicit anti-Arab slogans to the Sakhnin, and both fan groups seek the games as a prime opportunity to express themselves, their group identity, their group and ethnic pride, and the behavior that is, outside of the arena, regarded as anti-establishment (Sorek, 2007). The youth that attend the games in Israel are nearly half of the fan population and therefore learn to adopt the behaviors, attitudes, and language expressed by their communities that continues to add fuel to the rivalry. The ways in which political conflict are brought into sports is not new, and is not

unique to the Beitar and the Sakhnin. Similar situations of long-lasting political disagreements unfold between the Spanish football teams FC Barcelona and Real Madrid to this day. While some rivalries revolve around conflict, most do not, and though nearly every team has its own specific 'rival', the behaviors and attitudes expressed between fans are similar in the notion of attempting to put down the other, but each rivalry, each team, has its own dynamic and constructed patterns of communication that have formed over time. Additionally, while the Israeli rivals are inter-country rivals, the same does not necessarily ring true for all; some sports rivalries reign from different countries, such as one of the oldest and greatest rivalries in hockey between the Boston Bruins and the Montreal Canadiens.

One of the most interesting sources relating to the way location informs fan behavior is Markvits (2011) article. The article compares sports fans in the United States and in Europe, particularly in terms of violence. What may be surprising, considering the common beliefs about the United States being a more violent place than Europe, is that the article discusses the ways in which the United States has "celebratory" violence such as riots, celebrations-turned-public vandalism due to excitement over a particular sports team winning an important game or title. Otherwise, sports games are generally peaceful, despite some acts of violence at particularly heightened rivalry games, as discussed above. This overall lack of violence is in contrast to that of the violence in European sports games due to more local events with close proximity to the enemy which causes more violence (Markvits, 2011). Another interesting point of discussion is that sports teams in the United States do not represent the country as a whole on a national level, so there is no emotionally charged identification with a national team, but a more intense connection with respective city and state teams. The idea that a team in the United States represents a city rather than a nation creates a sense of inner-community and an emphasis on that

city's teams. Each city, such as Boston for example, may have up to five professional sports teams to root for and spread the emotional investment over the course of the year, so if one team does poorly, there is always hope for the next team's season to elevate the city morale. All of these factors, specifically in regards to sports in the United States, create a discussion of team loyalty, of identifying oneself with a team and a team or city community that roots for a team (or teams). Over time, living in a location with active sports fans and successful sports teams, or vice versa, informs the way a person views themselves and the community around them.

A last viewpoint regarding sports in relation to identity formation is discussed in terms of immigration and attempting to acculturate by means of sport spectatorship. Shankar (2016) discusses how as someone new to a country, integrating into sports viewership can contribute greatly to socialization and becoming part of a community. Most of the articles focus upon, whether deliberately or not, group identities and behaviors of members already in the community and more-so the deeper meaning behind the behaviors. This article displays the behaviors from someone attempting to experience being part of a group and the ways in which the acculturation process works. One interesting aspect the article discusses in regards to the acculturation process is "the role of sport knowledge and spectatorship play in mediating diaspora and creating cultural entrees into mainstream American societies, especially workplaces" (Shankar, 2016, p. 53-54). Essentially, the role of sport knowledge is integral to immigrants looking to integrate themselves into American communities. Talking about, and knowledge of, sports of all things is a way to create relationships with others. Although many overlook sports as a pastime or a silly indulgence, Shankar's knowledge outlines the importance of sports as a vital cultural entity in the United States. Overall, the theme of location and identity formation in relation to sports in specific locations translates well into the broader scope of research and applying information

taken from one location to that of another country, another state, and another body of research.

Media:

In addition to location, the discussion of media in relation to the formation of sport fandom and identity is a collective theme among the literature. Otto, Metz & Ensmenger's (2011) article depicts the relationship between the internet and the ways in which sports fans interact with their respective teams. The article discusses how internet-based activities such as fantasy football add new dimensions to being a fan. Before the era of the internet and media, sports fans would go to sporting events or perhaps watch on television or even listen on the radio. Today, through social media, the internet, and thousands of television channels, it is possible to stay connected to sports all the time. The article "'Faithful until death': Sports fans and nationalist discourse in Bulgarian internet forums" (Iliycheva, 2005), in which sports fans who frequent online internet forums, were asked to participate in talking about what Bulgarian-ness means to them. This article, and the participants who actively engage in internet forums provide an example of sports forums existing online where fans can discuss their team any time they wish. Because each sports team, and most individual players, have their own official Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and often Snapchat accounts in order to stay connected with fans and keep fans updated, more fans use media as a means to connect with their team and their fellow fans. Media creates another level of interaction and commitment of being a fan, and contributes in driving sports as social currency (Otto et. Al, 2011). Iliycheva's article discusses how, because there is more information available, there are more sports-based activities for fans to participate in, such as fantasy based games with friends. The internet adds media influence on sports fans, and more motivations for sports fans to be interactive and therefore the connections made due to media presence communicatively increase sport as social currency as well as

fandom as a central role in the formation of American identity (Otto et. Al, 2011). Similarly, Chris Atton's (2004) book enhances Iliycheva's notion by contributing that due to the internet, online "fanzines", or fan magazines, have "developed as a means of building and maintaining taste communities across geographic boundaries" (Atton, 2004, p. 139). So, according to Atton and Iliycheva, the internet both assists in the creation of communities across physical boundaries as well as increases the number and frequency of inclusionary opportunities for fans. Jolie Jenson (1992) also discusses media and fan culture, but in a different context. Jenson argues that, due to media and a lack of scholarly research, there is a characterization of fans as obsessed and hysterical. Despite Otto's argument that fandom and sport are a central aspect to the formation of American identity, Jenson states that scholars still tend to avoid, and even "other" fandoms for seeing the pathological behaviors present as fans get carried away (1992, p. 19). Scholars see the presentation of fans, (whether it be sports fans, fans of a television program, or die-hard Madonna fans) through various media as obsessed and hysterical. While this generalization of fans is due to a lack of research, Otto et. Al's work shows that, given the increased media presence, it is quite possible for fans who continuously become more and more involved, to reach an obsessive state. Similarly, a piece by Gorton (2009) discusses fandoms in relation to television, and offers a definition of "fan", which perhaps is in part why some scholars may avoid researching fandom simply based on the name itself. Gorton states that "the word 'fan', short for 'fanatic', has its roots in the Latin word "fanaticus", which means "of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee"" (2009, p. 35). The derivation of the term "fan" connotes a sense of obsession or devotion, that while today is much less prevalent, may still hold true to those scholars who connect today's fans with the root of its meaning.

Individualized Sport:

Perhaps the most obvious theme among the literature is the theme of sport that is inherent in the various texts. The discussion of fandom surrounds sport and sport culture, and many examples of individual sport informing identity are analyzed. Schulkin's (2016) article offers a definition of sport and its influence on societies through time spanning from the ancient Greeks all the way to present day. Schulkin discusses the ways in which modern day sports still have ancient rituals embedded in their roots such as violence, the beauty of the body, as well as a primitive notion of 'us versus them', a concurrent notion with John Fiske (1992) who argues that in the cultural economy of sports, which aims for cultural capital, fans are extremely discriminatory in terms of boundaries within fandoms.

Referring back to Schulkin (2016), the article discusses the origins of many sports, including soccer and hockey. While the text claims that the origins of soccer are somewhat uncertain, it states that hockey "has been developing for close to four thousand years: Egyptians, Ethiopians, Romans, Greeks, Aztecs, English, Irish, and Scots all played some version of it" (Schulkin, 2016, p. 8). With these notions of sport being deeply embedded in history and culture, it begins to lead to further research. Blake's (2010) book discusses the how the sport of hockey is relevant in shaping the identity of Canadian hockey fans and players alike. For example, the text discusses the violence exhibited in the sport of hockey (Blake, 2010). Hockey is known for being aggressive, cutthroat, and fights often break out, to the delight of the crowd, among players on the ice. While players receive penalties for fighting, there are no real consequences, and often times coaches and players strategize to fight with the opposing team for various reasons including a boost in morale. As spectators continuously see violent behavior deemed as acceptable, and often promoted, the fan community may internalize this behavior. The text

discusses at length the dichotomy between violence and the common reputation of Canadians. While Canadians are typically and often stereotyped for being extremely polite and well-mannered, the hockey environment cultivates violence among players and aggression among fans. This notion of violence is echoed by Robidoux (2002). Robidoux argues that “sport in Canada was intended to promote physical excellence, emotional restraint, fair play, and discipline; yet these ideological principles were consistently undermined by the manner in which Canadians played the game of hockey” (2002, p. 209). Robidoux reinforces Blake’s argument that while Canadian sport ideally endorses a sense of high ethical standards, the ideology of the polite nature of Canadians is not reinforced by the way they engage in sport. Robidoux continues and furthers his point in posing the question that, as Canadians have been perceived as being the epitome of just plain nice, “why a game such as hockey, known for its ferocity, speed, and violence, would come to serve as Canada's primary national symbol” (2002, p. 209). In this question, Robidoux brings to attention that hockey is considered Canada’s national symbol, therefore supporting the notion of Blake, and discusses how hockey in and of itself plays a role in the identity formation of Canadians and specifically Canadian sports fans. Canadian sports fans must, then, navigate through the violent nature of their national symbol and how it relates to group and personal identity in relation to the notion that Canadians are largely non-violent people.

Another article that discusses the emergence of identity as well as ownership in relation to a particular sport is Dolance’s (2005) article that discusses the lesbian community in relation to sports. While this article largely discusses the theme of gender, it also expresses how the lesbian fan community constructs a lesbian ownership of WNBA games. Sports arenas assist in creating a specific community or vibe that differs from a regular location. For example, all of the

people at the WNBA games, specifically in the lesbian community, gather together specifically for the purpose of the basketball game, in an arena, where they are surrounded by people with a similar interest, and from there, the fans create together a group established upon a lesbian ownership. While Dolance explains the construction of ownership in relation to basketball, the notion of a group constructing a sports-based community can be applied to sports as a whole (not strictly basketball), and broadened to include other communities or identities derived from sports such as racial, ethnic, and gender-based communities. In relation to race and gender, Washington & Karen (2001) argue that social class, society, race, and gender are key components to sports. One point the authors make is that “sports must be considered a field which has its own dynamics, history, and chronology of which it is a part” (Washington & Karen, 2001, p. 190). Because sport is such a dominant aspect of collective culture, economy, and media, the authors argue that sports should be considered their own field and receive the adequate amount of attention and research as any other field. The authors also argue that sport creates obstacles between social classes (Washington & Karen, 2001). The authors discuss what connects particular groups of people to particular sports activities as well as what role their gender, social class, and race plays in their sports habits. For example, the ways in which a male member of the upper class may have more time and resources to spend on sporting events than a working mother. From this example alone, it is put into perspective, perhaps, why many sports communities are largely homogenous and why, as Dolance discusses, some groups must claim their ownership when there is an opportunity. To elaborate, this construction of ownership makes an appearance in Sorek’s (2007) article “Soccer fandom and citizenship in Israel”. The article offers insights into the ways in which the fans of two rival soccer teams in Israel use soccer games as an outlet to express their ethnic pride as well as their differences in political and

religious beliefs. The rivalry and behaviors of the fans on both sides of the aisle actively create an identity of not only themselves and their respective groups, but a game dynamic and a “community” (or rather an ‘atmosphere’ as the two groups are antagonistic) at the soccer games. Fandom and the construction of identity both correlate to the concept of sport as a whole, as well as individualized sporting games.

Gender:

In addition to the themes of location, media, and sport in terms of the formation of identity and fandom, gender is another key theme that is abundant in literature as informing fan culture. Washington and Karen’s article “Sport and society” argues that gender is one of the key components to sports, and focuses specifically on “constructions of masculinity and femininity and Title IX” (2001, p. 197). While the article goes into great detail, at a basic level, the authors answer the most basic question in gender equality: are female athletes subject to the same treatment and resources as male athletes, and the answer is a firm ‘No’ (Washington & Karen, 2001). For example, as of 2001 when the article was written, female athletes made up only “42% of Division I athletes, received 42% of scholarship monies, 31% of recruiting monies” and much more, such as lesser facilities, hotels, restaurants, and even coaching staff (Washington & Karen, 2001, p. 197). The treatment of female athletes informs the ways in which female athletes (as well as female fans viewing the treatment) identities are constructed, especially if women are constantly treated as less important or less skilled than their male counterparts. These notions of identity construction and gender construction are also researched by Washington and Karen. The research of social construction of gender “suggest[s] that males and females are pressured to help maintain the appearances of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ [...], in which men appear to be well-muscled, strong, unemotional, and extremely oriented to a win-at-all-costs code of ethics, and

women appear uninterested in sports” (Washington & Karen, 2001, p. 198). Because men are pressured to fit and perpetuate the mold of what is considered a typical male athlete including being muscular, aggressive, and emotionally detached, their identities are actively being informed and constructed with this in mind as are the identities of young men aspiring to be like their sports heroes. The same goes for women athletes who are under pressure to appear physically flawless and what is socially considered to be feminine while dominating in terms of skill on the field and the young women watching for role models. These constructions of masculinity and femininity are present in many other sources and are also perceived as informing identity. An article related to the construction of masculine identity, specifically in England, is Mean’s article on gender in soccer (2001). Mean (2001) discusses how the increasing amounts of female athletes in English football (known in the United States as soccer) “comprises a direct threat to masculinity, creating a significant site of gender conflict” (2001, p. 789). Males, for example, attempt to defend their literal and figurative “arena” of sports through the notion of hegemonic masculinity (Washington & Karen, 2001) that men are stronger, faster, and better and it would not be safe for women to engage and therefore strip men of their constructed masculinity. While the participation of women would not literally take any masculinity away from men, the constructed identity of what it means to be a male athlete in a community where sport is masculinized would be contested by the addition of females in their arena, and lead to questions of what athleticism, masculinity, and femininity actually entail. Mean’s article also discusses forms of gender bias in sports institutions which, unfortunately, still a relevant issue. The Secretary of the English Football Association stated in 1988 that “Football is a game of hard, physical contact, a form of combat. It is, and must remain, a man’s game. Women have no place in it except to cheer on their men, wash and iron their kit, and prepare and serve

refreshments” (Mean, 2001, p.791). Despite Mean’s article being written in 2001 and the Secretary’s statement coming from 1988, the research still suggests that gender bias is still prevalent in sports.

Pelak’s (2002) article assesses a shifting gender ideologies and legislature changes that result in more female athletes in recent decades as well as the emerging collective identity formation of a women’s hockey team while forgoing prejudice behaviors based on their sex (Pelak, 2002). The article discusses that, in the last thirty years, female participation in sports has been on the rise largely in part to the Title IX legislation as well as women’s desire to be as active and as included as their male counterparts in all aspects of life, and due to this participation, there are changes in the field of sport. Due to this increase in female participation and subsequent changes, the article uses women’s ice hockey as a case study of the ways in assessing “the role that collective action plays in contesting sexist structures and practices within a traditionally male dominated institution” (Pelak, 2002, p. 93). The author discusses the ways in which the remaining sexist attitudes of males attempting to hold onto their own sports community and notion of masculinity are in turn a major aspect of what drives the construction of the female team’s identity formation of banding together as a legitimate organization in spite and in the face of adversity. Similarly, Dolance (2005) centers specifically around the constructed lesbian community at WNBA games. While the participants in Dolance’s articles are not athletes themselves as in Pelak’s women’s hockey study, the construction of female identity and community surrounding a sporting environment is the main focus and link. The articles, then, supports the notion that sports and sports arenas inform a specific sense of community, identity, and sense of belonging.

An extremely interesting source looks specifically at the construction of “real” or diehard fans versus bandwagon fans, particularly as it relates to female Boston Red Sox supporters. In conjunction with other articles, Borer (2009) suggests that race, gender, age, and ethnicity all contribute to cultural groupings, including that of sport (Washington & Karen 2001, Borer, 2009). The article discusses how women are perceived and stigmatized at Boston Red Sox games as unknowledgeable and un-authentic fans, and further, how women interact with these perceptions, offering three different categories of female fans and their reactions to the dominant male population. The categories of female fan include a ‘tomboy fan’, who attempts to disassociate with her femininity at games and adopt masculine behaviors, an ‘accessory fan’ who engages in hypersexual activity such as wearing cutoff shirts and paying no mind to the game at hand and essentially accepting the gender stereotype while the third type of fan is a ‘pink-and-proud’ fan who embraces her femininity but is also a true follower of the game and will not compromise on either front (Borer, 2009). The term ‘pink-and-proud’ refers to the pink attire that most professional sports teams distribute for female fans that are pink instead of the team’s traditional colors yet still have the team’s emblem (in Boston’s case a “B”). The engendered attire, specifically the symbol of the pink hat, “challenges the male sports fandom status hierarchy, implicitly questioning the boundaries of legitimacy by asserting femininity into the contested terrain of a male-dominated arena. The pink-and proud fan's presence confronts the accepted gender order of male sports, because her allegiance is bolstered, not negated, by her assertion of femaleness” (Borer, 2009, p. 3). The analysis of where females fit into the hierarchical structure of Red Sox games and sports games in general is a key contributor to how women communicatively construct their identities over time, based on these norms. As women are half of the world’s population, the treatment and inclusion of women in the male-dominated

arena of sport is an important theme to consider in the formation of identity in relation to fan culture.

Conclusion:

In various ways, the literature reviewed discusses how the themes of location, media, sport, and gender's influence on the construction of identity in relation to sports culture and fandom. However, despite all of the literature, there is still a gap in the research. As an avid sports fan, the conversation of sports culture, fandoms, loyalty, and identity has always been an area of curiosity. Specifically, the fan culture in Boston and surrounding the Boston Bruins hockey organization. Due to this level of interest, I have often been left with the questions, *how does being a part of a fandom construct the formation of individual and group identity?* as well as *how do Bruins spectators interpret or talk about what it means to be a fan?* While the literature discusses fan culture and identity in specific, often European, locations as well as particular sports such as soccer or football constructing common behaviors among fans, the necessity for more specific, in-depth research pertaining to hockey, and specifically hockey in the United States (namely Boston), remains.

Methodology

Qualitative research takes an inductive approach and aims to seek a deeper understanding of communities in order to uncover their norms, the ways those groups see the world around them and the way they interact with it and make meaning. In other words, "qualitative researchers study the performances and practices of human communication" (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 4). On the other hand, quantitative researchers seek causal explanations with deductive approaches. Quantitative researchers focus on data that can be measured and quantified rather

than looking at the bigger picture as qualitative researchers aim to achieve. As this research explored the intricacies of Boston Bruins fan culture, a qualitative approach, and specifically an interpretivist approach, are most suitable for the best outcome. Interpretivism hinges on the notion that “*realities* are unique, plural, simultaneous, and local phenomena. They are accomplished between human beings through their symbolic practices of expression and interpretation. *Social realities* are thus emergent and collaborative in nature” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 8). Additionally, interpretivist researchers act as positioned and partial instruments that use visual and verbal means to collect data through immersion and interaction with participants in an inductive manner (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 9). This research of the Boston Bruins culture sought to understand the constructed realities of Bruins fans as well as the ways in which their practices assist in the formation of identity. Interpretivism is the operative mode of methodology to utilize, as interpretivists seeks to “try to understand social action from the actors’ point of view. Interpretivism thus takes understanding as a central topic and a methodological challenge: the meaningful experience of others is a mystery that requires careful discernment” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 35). Qualitative methods are often used to research new types of communication strategies, and due to the nature of this study, an interpretivist approach assisted my strategic position in the research process as well as understanding the emergent realities of fans.

Reflexivity

When I conducted my research, I engaged in self-reflection that generally pertained to what worked, what did not, and what I found challenging during the course of this research. One thing I found was that, overall, conducting participant observation was highly successful. As an active member of the Bruins community, observing the behaviors of those around me came easily. As an insider to the community, I questioned the behaviors that I myself engaged in as a

member of the Bruins fandom, which I believe added another level of awareness both to my research as well as understanding my own actions. Being an established member of the community and having a prior understanding of the norms and rituals made it that much easier to observe the fan atmosphere and maintain a focus on the “why” things were happening rather than attempting to discern the “what” of what was going on. However, while researching from the inside, I was careful to find the balance between being a member and maintaining the ability to analyze what I was seeing and hearing rather than simply stating my own interpretation. I was cautious to not allow my own assumptions and personal beliefs cloud my research.

I also feel that the in-depth interviews I conducted were successful, however one constraint was my timeframe and availability due to completing an Undergraduate degree in Rhode Island and conducting research in Massachusetts. One challenge I faced was in the nature of interviewing people I know on a personal level. While the level of familiarity between interviewer and participant was excellent in the sense that I was able to ask questions and easily converse, the flip-side was a sense of apprehension I sensed in participants that I would be judgmental or that it would be easier for them to be truthful with a stranger. Eventually, after reassurance, and after becoming familiar with the types of questions I would ask, that tension faded away into the conversation, but the caveat is important to note. Additionally, I would have liked to conduct a focus group in order to enable participants to discuss their beliefs with one another as an additional source of information to pull from, however I feel that this research is sufficient and complete without a focus group. Overall, I feel that the methods I chose to utilize for this research was highly successful and assisted me in creating a portrait of fandom and identity in Bruins fans.

Procedures

My research methods and procedures relied on an ethnographic approach. The term *ethnography*, when broken down to its roots “ethno” and “graphy” mean “people study” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 134). Because ethnography is contingent upon the studying of people, this study gathered data through participant observation and qualitative interviews which both serve as procedures that allow for a deeper level of observation and involvement with participants. Ethnography is most often associated with participant observation and interviews because ethnographers are concerned with “describing and interpreting the observable relationships between social practices and systems of meaning...of a particular setting” and the data collected with participant observation and interviews allow for patterns to be uncovered in a meaningful way (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 135).

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a unique method that consists of a researcher being involved and participating in the scenario of which they are actively observing. In this study, participant observation took place at Boston Bruins games, where I was an active crowd member engaging with other fans and the fan experience. Participant observation allowed me to gather the most precise and accurate data from the perspective of a participant as well as to be closer to the participants as one of their own, as a member of the community, to establish a rapport and trust. Participant observation is “a role that is negotiated and performed” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 144) which “facilitates authenticity and accountability” (p. 147). Qualitative researchers seek to understand constructed behaviors, and gathering data through participant observation is a primary tool to gain access to the most detailed information.

Qualitative Interviews

In-depth qualitative interviews serve to gather data that cannot be gathered elsewhere: directly from participants. Information gathered from participants in an interview setting act as a primary source for data. In order to understand the fan experience, hearing directly from fans regarding their thoughts and feelings in regards to the Bruins is unparalleled. Qualitative interviews “the social actor’s experience and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 173). Allowing participants to delve into questions brings to the surface many themes or ideas that otherwise may not be collected. The way in which they discuss being a fan was brought to life as they use their own perspective to discuss how being a Bruins fan has had some part in informing their identities. Using a qualitative approach to interviews is preferred because the framing of broad, probing questions allows for interpretation and expansion of thoughts and ideas that quantitative research does not seek.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of local Boston Bruins fans. Both male and female Bruins fans were included, as the experience of being a fan may differ across gendered boundaries. Additionally, participants consist of fans in various age bandwidths, focusing on fans aged 18-35 and 45-65. The 18-35 category seeks to understand the relationship of the Bruins among young fans whose emergent identities are still forming while the category of fans aged between 45-65 seeks to explain the long-standing fan dynamic of participants who have been involved in the Bruins organization and can offer insights as to fan engagement over a longer period of time. I selected participants that display a significant interest in the Boston Bruins as shown by attendance at games, wearing Bruins apparel, or posting about the Bruins via social media and that were willing to participate. I gained entry into the research context because as a

personal life-long Bruins fan who often attends games, I am privy to the common practices, atmosphere, and information of Bruins games. As a life-long fan, understanding the game as well as engaging with other fans comes naturally. Due to my prior knowledge and understanding, my entry into the research context at games was a smooth transition.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before collecting any data, I ensured the rights of participants in the study by gaining informed consent from each participant as well as submitting my study to the Human Studies Review Board (HSRB) for approval. The informed consent (See Appendix: Figure 1) outlines the purpose of the study and why I asked certain people to participate, what participants were asked to do as well as outlining any risks and the necessary discussion of privacy. I also submitted this research to the HSRB for a human subjects approval to ensure this research is ethical as well as to protect any participants taking part in the study.

As I began my study, I utilized interviews as well as participant observation to gather data. I conducted approximately eleven one-on-one interviews in quiet and relaxed atmospheres that accommodated each participant and made them feel as comfortable as possible as well as ensure confidentiality. Respondent interviews aim to offer a space for participants to be as expansive as they wish, go in-depth, and elaborate on thoughts and feelings with my involvement being to prompt and initiate conversation. A guide of interview questions is located in Figure 2 of the appendix. Interview questions and wording may be altered based on participant's responses. My participant observations took place at 7 Boston Bruins home games at the TD Garden in Boston, Massachusetts. My role was to engage with the community and observe the emergent behaviors of fans.

The texts and artifacts I analyzed include field notes from Bruins games, audio tapes from interviews, as well as transcripts from conversations. I recorded notes from Bruins games on a cell phone as bringing a notebook would immediately draw attention and is not consistent with norms. Therefore, I took field notes to later be organized, transcribed, and coded by common themes and ideas. Qualitative researchers generally code data “after a rich data set has begun to build” in order to organize and better analyze data (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). In regards to interviews, I recorded interviews as well as took notes of responses, impressions, and questions that were transcribed and coded according to common groups of information. These practices result in the best data for my study because they allow for discretion and active involvement with my methods. They also are important because they allow me to focus on the observations at hand instead of focusing on transcription while attempting to engage with participants. I use the grounded theory, which notices a phenomenon first, then builds a theory around it, to code my data (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 250). I also analyze artifacts that will serve as data and help to better understand the ways in which fans emerge and are interrelated in Bruins Nation. Some artifacts include the industry of material culture surrounding the Boston Bruins including advertisements, marketing strategies, etc. that create a space for fans in the community. The artifacts also serve to display how the Bruins communicate with fans, include fans in marketing, and *how* that inclusion may inform a fan’s notion of identity.

I organized and formatted my data using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). According to Lindolf & Taylor (2011) CAQDAS consists of using “word-processing programs to type, edit, and store field notes, transcriptions, and other texts. The programs also allow one to conveniently cut, paste, and copy sections of text within and between documents to create directories of files” (p. 260). This method of organizing, storing, and

formatting data allowed me to easily, conveniently, and neatly store data in one place while also being able to easily create copies and include the same piece of data in multiple locations if necessary in terms of triangulation. As interpretation of data involves the “translation of an object of analysis from one frame of meaning into another”, I coded my data in a categorization method that assists in the deciphering and meaning-making process (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011. p. 266). Additionally, to support my interpretations, I included relevant qualitative theory and conceptual devices as evidence and framework. Through this process, I came to my conclusions based on the data and supporting evidence collected that draw a clear and precise parallel from theory and the observations and data collected in this study.

Discussion:

With a focus on exploring how individuals negotiate and navigate their personal identity in relation to the Boston Bruins as well as how the Bruins act as an agent for individuals to explore feelings of community and belonging, my research began to uncover a number of communicatively constructed patterns regarding behaviors and attitudes of Bruins fans. After careful analysis of this research, five main themes regarding identity formation, fan attitudes, and constructed behaviors began to emerge. The themes of this study focus on a variety of different aspects of fan culture including self-identification as a fan, gender stereotypes, familial tradition, the Boston Bruins as a cultural unifier, and fan performances of loyalty. The following discussion will describe each of the five emergent themes, offer an explanation of each theme using excerpts from the conducted interviews and participant observation, and present further support through the connection to previous literature. While each theme maintains its own

purpose, the interwoven nature of personal identity and learned behaviors manifests itself in the interconnectedness of the themes.

“I’m not part of a fan group!”: Discomfort in Self-Identification

This theme focuses largely on the palpable discomfort of Bruins fans surrounding self-identification as a “fan”. Each interviewee was asked to describe the ways in which they engage with supporting the Boston Bruins, and while each person, regardless of age or gender, described various examples of fan involvement such as attending Bruins games, wearing Bruins apparel in their everyday lives, watching the Bruins at home, or describing how much the team means to them, the trend of replies when asked to identify their fan-status was to immediately back away from the “fan” label. This contradiction between descriptions of intense fan involvement and a discomfort in actively identifying as a fan emerged in each interview. While the disconnect between descriptions of intense fan involvement and the sudden, almost defensive reaction to the word “fan” may seem deliberate, the reaction is involuntary, unconscious, and automatic. The interviewees reactions to the word “fan” are actually learned behaviors that trace back to the negative connotation of the word “fan”. As discussed by Gorton (2009), the term “fan”, short for “fanatic”, historically comes from the Latin word “fanaticus”, whose roots mean “of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” (p. 35). Considering the intense and potentially obsessive connotation of the word, it is easy to see how through time, the underlying meaning of the term “fan” remains and continues to unconsciously inform the realities of sports fans today.

Along with the deep seeded discomfort with the term “fan”, participants also exhibited a discomfort with claiming the term “fandom”. Because the term “fandom” derives from the term “fan”, the similar reactions of participants to both terms is unsurprising. In the simplest terms,

fandom means that a person is a supporter of a certain person, group, team, or media.

Additionally, fans of a particular entity such as the Boston Bruins are regarded as a community of Bruins supporters, therefore being commonly known and referred to as “the Bruins fandom” or “Bruins Nation”. The collective community surrounding the Bruins over the last ninety years has formed a subculture that holds its own unique traditions, attitudes, and beliefs. However, while participants discuss the importance of community, coming together in support of the Bruins, and the strong Boston sports culture as a main factor in supporting the team, those same descriptions are what push participants to distance themselves from being pigeon-holed into a label. In other words, the intrinsic group dynamic of being a fan that innately entices audiences is the same factor that, when asked to self-identify, informs distancing oneself from the “negative” fan label. Jensen (1992) argues that the “negative” fan label surrounding fandom is due to the lack of scholarly research and portrayal of fans in media that characterizes fans as obsessed and hysterical. De-stigmatizing the associations along with fandom is integral in informing the ways in which individuals choose to self-identify.

Accompanied by the dislike of the term “fandom” is the notion that individual identity is challenged by claiming fandom. As Schulkin (2016) discusses, the history of sport and community are centrally intertwined, spanning all the way back to rituals of the ancient Greeks that remain deeply embedded in sports practices today. This long-standing connection between sport and community that offers individuals a sense of belonging and camaraderie is a positive trait, until fans feel that their individuality is in question. The fear of losing personal identity while navigating through understanding group identity is a major proponent of the discomfort in self-identification as a fan. For example, while in conversation with one participant, I asked if he would consider himself a passionate Bruins fans, he stated: “I’m a big fan. I bleed black and

gold”. However, when questioned regarding his status as a part of the Bruins fandom, he again stated that he is a Bruins supporter, “but I’m not part of a fan group!” (2017). This expressed contradiction is rooted in the idea that individuals choose to believe they are unaffected by exterior influences even to the point of describing their involvement in a group and concurrently denying that very interaction. An individual’s behavior in relation to the Bruins is informed by the learned norms of behavior of the Bruins subculture. However, the negotiation of behavior is so natural that it is not questioned or thought of as unordinary. The idea of life appearing arbitrary can be described by Edmund Husserl’s concept of *lebenswelt*, or “life world” wherein seemingly mundane events become rich with meaning upon examination (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011).

Finally, an interesting pattern among participants regarding self-identification as a Bruins fan is the dichotomy between various expressions of ownership of the Boston Bruins in relation to discomfort in identification. Expressions of ownership can be described as phrases that include the fans as an active part of the Bruins organization such as using words like “we”, “us”, “our team” in Bruins-centric conversation. Throughout the participant observation at Bruins games, the vast majority of Bruins spectators expressed ownership of the team through inclusionary language. Some common phrases include “How are *we* doing?”, “What are *our* stats?”, and “*We’ve* got this!” that connote a level of contribution or participation in the game, even from the stands. Through interviews, participants switched back and forth between using inclusionary language and describing the Bruins as their own entity. I attribute the shift in language from games where participants are unaware they are being observed to the one-on-one in-depth interview regarding self-identification. The level of awareness in interviews creates a more conscious effect of what phrases participants may use, specifically while attempting to distance

themselves from a “super-fan” label. For example, when a young male participant was asked what makes the Boston Bruins special, his answer switches in and out of using inclusionary language that expresses ownership of the team. He says, “*They’re* the big, bad Bruins. *Their* style of play, which *they* don’t do as much now, is that *they* hit and *they* fight, and *we’re* scrappy”. At the beginning, he uses pronouns such as “they”, but once his answer begins to evolve and he is more focused in explaining a dynamic of what makes the Bruins unique, the ownership and pride of being a fan shines through with his language.

The desire of fans to express their passion for the Bruins is in tension with the notion that while explaining their commitment to the team, their actions could be construed or labeled as being excessive, negative, or obsessive. Specifically with detailed discussion of terms like “fan” and “fandom”, participants unwittingly backtrack from their descriptions of involvement through claiming not to be a part of the Bruins fandom. The negative associations with the word fandom inform personal decisions in how to express commitment for the Bruins without being cornered into a label or group that is often negatively perceived. The participants inadvertently engaged in this contradictory behavior and did not realize the contradiction of their words because in our society, sports are a normal pastime that do not require much self-reflection. Actively looking at negotiations of identity that generally go unnoticed is a daunting process that unveils conflicting viewpoints in a topic as “simple” as sport.

Gender Stereotypes as “the norm”

Another emergent theme associated to the negotiation of individual identity in relation to support of the Bruins is gender stereotypes being perceived as “the norm”. This theme emerged through a number of in-depth interviews when questions regarding female fans were the topic of discussion. While gender stereotypes, such the idea that sports are inherently male, or “a guy

thing” as one participant phrased it, are widely accepted, the discussion surrounding genuine female sports fans is a factor in sport culture that remains somewhat overlooked. Due to the fact that participants are both male and female, I felt the subject of gender to be appropriate, and questions centered around both the validity and treatment of female sports fans.

One question that garnered rich responses was whether participants see a difference between male and female fans, either in levels of investment in the Bruins, the way they are treated, or even the quantity of male versus female fans. While participants gave a wide array of responses, perhaps the most interesting aspect is that when discussing gender in relation to the Bruins, many participants, including women, automatically and routinely discuss gender in relation to accepted stereotypes, rather than their personal opinion. In other terms, when discussing female Bruins fans, the constructed belief of hockey as a “male” sport takes over and is automatically expressed, and only after more dialogue do their real opinions begin to surface. For example, one female participant stated that male fans seem more legitimate and “when you see a female fan, you’re almost like ‘isn’t that cute? She’s trying to support the team’”. This piece of the conversation with a female fan exemplifies the internalized stereotype of women not being legitimate fans, even while the discussion is with a female fan herself. However, a moment later, she stated that “it’s a stereotype. Are you asking me about the stereotype or to compare real male and female fans?”. With this qualification, the previous moments of the conversation become clear; the accepted belief of female fans as illegitimate or somehow inherently different from male fans is so engrained in common perception that a stereotype the participant did not believe herself is the conversation topic she immediately discusses. Only later, after a second of thought does her negotiation of the constructed belief come forward. The internalization of gender stereotypes is not entirely surprising. Washington & Karen’s (2001) discussion of gender

equality in sports astutely describes the ways in which male athletes are in a position of privilege over female athletes, gaining better access to scholarships, facilities, coaching staff, and even ability to participate in sports prior to Title IX (p. 197). These unequal treatments inform the construction of identity in female athletes as well as female, and even male, fans who continually see females being treated as less of an athlete than their male counterparts. The continuous constructions of masculinity and femininity in sport repeatedly suggest that sports are masculine, and therefore, females who participate are then masculine. Therefore, as many females attempt to hold onto their socially constructed ideal of femininity, shy away from sports as athletes and supporters. Washington & Karen's notion of hegemonic masculinity sums up the issue rather nicely, stating that in the social construction of gender, "males and females are pressured to help maintain the appearances of 'hegemonic masculinity' [...], in which men appear to be well-muscled, strong, unemotional, and extremely oriented to a win-at-all-costs code of ethics, and women appear uninterested in sports" (Washington & Karen, 2001, p. 198). The social construction is not something people actively think about, but rather quietly accept as the norm. That is, until the subject is discussed in a more in-depth level such as this research where the entirety of the situation is in question.

Continuing with the stereotype of women not being "real" fans, both male and female participants claimed that women go to Bruins games more for the social aspect of the sporting event rather than to actively watch the game. While many other participants disagree, and one male participant claimed quite the opposite, saying that in Bruins crowds, women are really diehard fans, often standing, yelling, and "back-seat reffing" more than the men, the stereotype of female fans as illegitimate is still widely held. Borer's (2009) article discussing the perceival of women at Boston Red Sox games is a source that breaks down the actions of female sports

fans. Borer discusses three types of female fans: the tomboy fan, the accessory fan, and the pink-and-proud fan. Each categorization of female fans, whether they are attempting to hide their femininity, hypersexualize their femininity, or embrace their femininity as well as their love of the sport, female fans are typecast no matter what they choose to do in reaction to the dominant male audience.

But why do these typecasts of female fans remain? I suppose that due to constructed view of female fans as illegitimate, the scrutiny of women enjoying a game for socialization and community is not surprising. However, many choose to ignore the fact that a sense of community and belonging is at the core of what sports stand for. Perhaps because of the continuous reinforcement of sports as male, it is okay for men to socialize and find a place of belonging, but when perceived outsiders begin to join, men continue an attempt to defend their literal and figurative “arena” of sports, even at an unconscious level of holding female fans to different standards.

Familial Tradition as Inception of Fan Involvement

As previously noted, a core piece to the puzzle in the ways sport may inform identity is social interaction. While previous research [Gibbons (2014), Blake (2010), Schulkin (2010)], largely delves into the construction of identity on a national level, there is still much to be learned about how familial involvement in sport may inform personal identity in itself and in negotiating where a person fits in their own family dynamic. My research shows that a common theme among the involvement of Bruins fans stems from a history of familial interest. Family history of an interest in the Boston Bruins, and hockey at large, is the most commonly shared factor in how participants describe hockey as being a large part of their life. While a sense of self is in constant negotiation, early childhood years are especially crucial for the development of a

sense of self. Childhood exposure to a specific team, in this case the Boston Bruins, informs where a child will place their allegiance. The overwhelming response of participants when asked how they became involved with the Bruins organization were variations of “I grew up watching the Bruins with my dad”, “my dad and siblings watched and played hockey”, or “it’s something my family has always done together”. With older participants, they add that they watched the Bruins growing up and now it’s something they do with their own children. These strong ties of the Bruins serving as family bonding experiences and quality family time form a correlation between the Bruins and enjoyment that remains as a person’s identity is continually being constructed. Bruins fans who attribute their fandom to personal connections and familiarity to a team would be described by Dixon (2001) as a partisan supporter. One interviewee expresses Dixon’s sentiment in saying that “what you are a fan of all depends on what you’re exposed to. I played hockey and grew up in a hockey family, and all of my friends are big Bruins fans who played hockey, too”. A similar sentiment is discussed by Blake (2010), who argues that hockey is a major influence of Canadian national identity. While the overarching theme of familial involvement focuses on the formation of identity on a micro level, Blake’s argument stems from the same thread that social interaction, and therefore construction of reality and identity, can evolve from the presence of the Bruins in a person’s life and family. That same participant, a 25-year-old male, goes on to say that “I guess we’re all closer to our family members because we’re Bruins fans... it’s been a bonding thing for our whole lives”. The emphasis on nuclear family in this research is significant because while previous research focuses on the national dynamic, exploring how a person expresses the Bruins in their family dynamic as contributing to the construction of family values is vital to how they may view themselves, their family, and the Bruins community at large. Bonding, whether as a family or as a nation (either “Bruins Nation”

or a literal nation) is integral in why hockey has remained a cultural pastime for nearly 4,000 years.

Bruins as Cultural Unifier: Supporting the “Home Town Team”

At first glance, sports may appear to be a surface level pastime with little to no lasting impact on an individual or group. However, the role that the Boston Bruins play in creating an environment of belonging is most easily conveyed in terms of cultural unity. As a natural human instinct, all humans crave belonging and a sense of community. Setting aside “real life” differences, the Boston Bruins offer a reprieve and an outlet from the outside world that allows a diverse fan base of all backgrounds to join together in support of a common interest: supporting the home town team.

The intense support of Bruins fans has manifested itself through the emergent Bruins fandom, a subculture harnessed in the idea of camaraderie among one another to support the Bruins above all else. When describing what the Boston Bruins mean to them, participants describe the presence of the Bruins in their lives as something more important than the team itself, but as a constant presence in their lives. One participant describes the presence of the Bruins in her life in terms of how the team has informed her beliefs of what makes Boston unique. She says, “I think it has to do with community, with the Boston community. In Boston, we’re just kind of hearty people, tenacious, and you can knock us down but we get right back up again... I don’t know if it’s just the Bruins per se or the town, the city.” She describes an overarching impact that the team has had not just on herself, but the mark they have made on Boston. Another participant goes a step further and describes the Bruins as a piece of himself, a sentiment that is expressed by numerous participants. He says, “well, it’s the Boston Bruins, it’s

the home-town team. I have always bled black and gold... and being hockey player my whole life, there's something about [hockey]. It breeds a whole different type of fan."

The Bruins' newest campaign, "In Our Blood", further exemplifies the ways in which fans consider the Bruins in their formation of identity. Dixon's (2010) idea of fandom spurring out of the connection to a person's home reinforces the participants' feelings that the Bruins are in his blood, a part of him. A lifelong exposure to the Bruins is a large factor in informing support and, concurrently, an individual's identity. This support manifests itself in a sense of pride and enjoyment in sharing a commonality with other fans. Another participant stated that "when I go to a Bruins game I feel like everyone thinks 'I'm from Boston! Yeah, we're from Boston'". Her sentiment expresses a common attitude and feeling among fans, the feeling of home-town pride in the team as well as Boston as a whole. Sorek (2007) discusses the ways in which Israeli fans use sporting events as an opportunity to express themselves, the pride they have for their city, and a group identity of coming together in support for one team that represents that pride, and on a certain level, themselves as well. A team like the Bruins is a tool to bring people together and give a focus of the ways in which we are alike rather than different.

The numerous similarities among Bruins fans manifests itself in many ways. The unique culture of a Bruins game can be seen through the masses of black and gold Bruins apparel, camaraderie among friends and strangers alike, and even the sharing of food and drink. These rituals seem simple, and they are. The simple and instinctive means of communicating that a person is at a Bruins game for the purpose of supporting a piece of their community is poignant, and further supports Husserl's "lebenswelt", that daily life appears mundane until further explored. Gibbons (2014) echoes Husserl using the term *habitus*, a word similar to 'identity' in that it refers to the embedded characteristics (such as behavior, thought, and action) of

individuals that are developed through cultural groups (Gibbons, 2014). Gibbons also discusses the ways in which cities or nations (such as Bruins Nation), construct a group habitus through symbols as well as social interaction and other mundane aspects of daily life. While this habitus may be unconscious or at the edge of consciousness, as it presents itself in many Bruins fans, it informs the way in which Bruins fans perceive themselves and the team. The group habitus is at the edge of consciousness with many Bruins fans. While participants express common practices, which they note are unique, their descriptions still paint the culture as ordinary. For example, one participant talked about the atmosphere at Bruins games. She says, “everyone goes [to Bruins games] because they want to watch and they’re rooting for their team. You hear people talking behind you and you’ll chime in which you don’t really do to other people’s conversations when you’re out and about, but doing it at a Bruins game is normal. People are more outgoing and come together for one thing, and interacting through apparel, and food and you know... watching an awesome fight or something”. What’s interesting is that this participant is clearly in tune with the social behaviors that are acceptable at a Bruins game that would not be considered normal elsewhere, but does not seem to have explored the reasons why. She does an excellent job of communicating the strong sense of togetherness surrounding the Bruins and the ways in which people come together for one common purpose with little care about outside factors of life. The Bruins serve as sort of simple microcosm that real life differences do not penetrate. This harmless camaraderie and unification among an array of different people is echoed by Blake (2010). Blake discusses the way hockey serves as a national symbol for Canadians and argues that “hockey is an effective unifying symbol for a vast and heterogeneous country” (2010, p. 17). While this research focuses on the Boston Bruins, the sentiment labeling hockey as a unifier translates to the heterogeneous population of Bruins fans. One participant put the feelings of

unification into a historical context, saying, “we get together just like the Vikings would get together. It’s human beings interacting for camaraderie, and I think that’s great”. The social behaviors and group habitus among Bruins fans shows the fan behavior that ultimately contribute to the Bruins serving as a cultural unifier.

The Boston Bruins are so effective as a cultural unifier that the team also assists as a tool of integration. Participants discuss the ways in which talking about the Bruins in everyday life serve to forge new connections and expand socially. The Bruins are a simple and effective way to start a conversation, especially if someone is wearing Bruins apparel. Wearing a Bruins shirt or hat into a store in New England is almost an invitation for others to begin a conversation about the latest game or a great goal. The Bruins’ extension into everyday life is a manifestation of the Bruins community outside of the arena often triggered by the sight of the Bruins logo, a sign that an individual is a part of your mutual community. The inclusive community of the Bruins extends as far as their logo. One participant recalled a number of instances where his Bruins sweatshirt elicited a response from strangers. He shared a story of a man who stopped him in a restaurant and said “Oh, the B’s are doing great aren’t they? What did you think of last game?”. The two had a short conversation about the status of the team, and the man said “I just had to stop you once I saw your shirt”. Shankar (2016) discusses how to new members of a community, integrating into sports viewership can greatly assist to socialization and becoming part of a community. The construction of one’s reality is intertwined with the notion of sports as cultural currency, and the ability to navigate through a conversation.

Sports in their entirety are successful because they bring people together. In other words, community is at its core. If no one was interested, sports would not stand as the cultural institution that we know today. While the majority of the time, that unification of sport is in

support of the Boston Bruins, often times that togetherness means much more than cheering on a game. In Boston, where home town pride runs so deep it is often tattooed on people's bodies, that pride comes with a desire to protect what is "yours". When I asked one participant what it feels like to be a part of the Bruins community, she responded with typical elements to being a fan such as drinking a beer with friends, dancing for the fan camera, and cheering for a fight. What is interesting is that her response evolved from standard elements of fandom into how recently, the Boston Bruins community has rallied together in a much more meaningful way. She said, "there's a sense of hometown pride. That's the part that will have the entire arena singing the national anthem after the [Boston] marathon bombings. That's the thing that makes people, even when they're afraid, come out and show up after there's been some kind of tragedy". The Bruins represent more than just a hockey team; they represent their fans, they represent Boston, and they represent a consistent piece of people's lives that bring happiness and joy despite what may be happening in their everyday lives. The Bruins community and the collective identity that ties Bruins Nation together is what spurred people out of their homes and into Boston after the marathon bombings, despite mutual fear. Bruins fans, and all of Boston, faced a time where Bruins fans had to navigate how they would react to a tragedy in our own back yard. The choices were to stay away, or come together and present a united front. The idea of Gibbons' (2014) "habitus" once again manifests itself in the embedded actions of the 15,000 Bruins fans who gathered to support their home-town. The same participant who describes the unity of fans after the Boston marathon bombings also expressed, "when you're with sports fans, its more about the fandom than the game. They are separate things: the game and then there's the fandom. They are a separate entity. And it's a special thing, it's a pride thing, it's a community thing. It's a unifying thing". Together, unified in song and as Bruins Nation, being at the Bruins game came

to represent more than the end outcome, but the pride of Bostonians and their will to pull through a tragedy as a community. Despite panic, Bruins fans chose to unite behind the Bruins, behind Boston, and prove that the love of our home town team truly was “in our blood”.

Bleeding Black & Gold: Performances of Loyalty

Fan culture around the Boston Bruins is rooted in a shared sense of loyalty and commitment to the team. In order to communicate their feelings of devotion and dedication to the Bruins, fans engage in external performances of loyalty that communicatively express their feelings as a fan. Expressing loyalty to the Bruins comes in many shapes and forms, mainly engaging in attention-seeking behavior as proof of loyalty. Over time, fans have constructed patterns of behavior to outwardly prove the loyalty they feel inside.

Some simple performances of loyalty include external practices such as cheering, clapping, and wearing Bruins apparel as a symbol of support. One participant expressed that a fan’s purpose is “cheering on the team and get them going, to let them know they have people that believe in them and want them to succeed, and hopefully get [the players] emotions going”. When fans perform by getting lively and cheering, that performance noticeably boosts the morale and momentum of players, creating an electric atmosphere of excitement and palpable energy. Many of fan’s external performances serve a deeper objective than gaining attention. However, there is an element of attention-seeking behavior at sporting events. Some attention-seeking behavior includes fan’s attempts at “drawing attention to themselves by trying to get on the jumbotron. Everyone wants to get on the jumbotron. You see a lot of black and gold colors in the stands, people starting chants, yelling directions to the players, and people wear bear costumes or other ridiculous head-to-toe costumes”. Some Bruins fans have even fashioned a Bruins Nation

flag, a variation of the American flag using black and gold stripes and the Bruins logo on top of the 50 stars, that they wave as a literal symbol of their devotion.

Bruins games are also an outlet for fans to express intense emotions without fear of consequence, an opportunity not widely available outside of sporting events. The microcosm of a Bruins game is a chance for fans to show intense feelings such as love, anger, dislike, and even sadness that are acceptable when tied to the institution of sports but are not often publicly expressed elsewhere. Perhaps the most interesting performance of loyalty is the expression of faux-hatred for the opposing team and their fans. While observing at Bruins games, many examples of presenting a façade of dislike towards the opposing team such as remarking how ugly the other team's colors were, heckling the players, and countless good-natured (and reciprocated) jokes with any "outsider" in the stands wearing something other than a Bruins jersey. One participant describes the performance of defending the Bruins territory against other fans by "giving other teams fans crap because of what they're wearing. You can't do that on the street because then it's like a hate crime.. But not that it's malicious its more just along the lines of 'get out of here this is our team, this is our house'". This fan is actively aware of the ways in which he undergoes negotiations of fan behavior in different settings. He is actively constructing and navigating through a framework for acceptable social behavior in the atmosphere of a Bruins game versus behavior that is not deemed acceptable elsewhere. While discussing opposing fans, another participant visibly negotiates with his behavior towards other fans. He says "they're not rooting for our team. So any time a fan isn't rooting for our team they're bums. They might be good people but they're not rooting for our team so at that point I wouldn't buy a beer or anything like that. Actually I would. I would just to I don't know... no... I wouldn't. I might drop a beer on them. NO, just kidding I'd never do that. Fans are fans people are people. You

know you have to remember it's a sport... but if you've got opposing fans in your area and talking garbage about your team it's like 'hey you're talking trash about my mother! Not quite that bad, I don't hold my teams to the esteem of my mother, but its like that. You get offended and argue with them or what have you''. Here, he is working through navigating acceptable versus unacceptable behavior towards other fans while at the same time constructing the emergent balance between remaining loyal to the Bruins while still showing respect to other fans. He expresses a faux-hatred of other fans and jokes about throwing a drink on them, but clearly does not mean it in the slightest, and is aiming to express his loyalty to the Bruins in the process.

Markvits (2011) discusses the way location informs fan behavior, and while the article focuses on fan behavior on a national level, the focus on sport in a city-wide or regional level creates more emotionally charged identification than a national team. The idea that a team like the Boston Bruins represents a city rather than an entire nation creates a sense of inner-community and an emphasis of support and relationship to that city's teams. Thus, a level of city to city competition emerges rather than nation to nation, explaining why team loyalty and identification with a city's team is heightened. Additionally, Iliycheva's (2005) article, which correlates once again to lebenswelt, discusses banal nationalism, or the use of typical language that is identifiable as patriotic, but in a more routine, mundane manner that is not at the forefront of consciousness. Fans describe how they cheer on the team. The fan behaviors that participants describe are explained as routine and unremarkable, wherein it becomes evident that the effect of their behavior is not at the forefront of consciousness.

Finally, while this discussion has surrounded the external practices that Bruins fans engage in to exhibit support for their team, some performances of loyalty extend past what the

current Boston Bruins roster represents. Because the Bruins are “in our blood”, the loyalty to former Bruins players remains far after a player moves on from their Boston career. The respect and appreciation that fans have towards current players extends to former players who, despite playing for a different team, are still the same talented, hard-working, and likeable people who have inspired a loyalty that is not as inconstant as the ever-changing roster for a hockey team in the NHL. Often times, when a former Bruin returns to the TD Garden with their new team, the Boston fans display their lasting appreciation by starting chants, shouting the player’s name, and often engage in extended bouts of cheering as a sign of respect. One example of a beloved Boston Bruins player’s return is that of fan-favorite Milan Lucic. Having spent eight years with the Boston Bruins, Lucic’s trade to the Los Angeles Kings and subsequently the Edmonton Oilers of Canada was a big adjustment for fans. On Lucic’s return to Boston this 2016-2017 season, after two years of playing for other teams, his welcome was as warm as ever. Once he took the ice, the entire stadium erupted in cheers. For the duration of the entire game, fans yelled his nickname “Looch”, rooted for him by saying “Go Looch!”, and expressed that they missed him and as well as his presence on the Bruins. The loyalty of Bruins fans runs deep, and once love and respect is felt towards a player, those feelings remain long after any trade or retirement.

The above themes represent patterns of behavior that Bruins fans engage in both on conscious and unconscious levels. The actions, thoughts, and beliefs of Bruins fans that emerged through this research present themselves through these five themes. This is not to say, however, that more themes could not be uncovered. In fact, I believe the opposite is true, and that this research elicits a comprehensive exploration of Bruins fans where themes can continue to emerge, and where further research may bring those additional patterns to light. As the focus of

this research is engrained in individual and group identity, the discussion of these themes is critical to the understanding of how one may navigate their own, self-proclaimed identity.

Conclusion:

During the 2017 Playoffs, the Boston Bruins released a video entitled “In Our Blood” to accompany their “In Our Blood” campaign. The video, played before games and available on the team’s website, depicts Boston locals with a chilling voiceover describing what hockey means to Bostonians. The voiceover reads:

Boston. Here, we are chosen at birth. Our loyalties determined. Our family defined. Raised in the shadows of those before us, fearlessly driven by the hope of what’s to come. For us, hockey is more than a sport. It is more than a religion. Hockey is life. It chooses us, it defines us, and becomes us. For us, it is everything. This is Boston, and here, hockey is in our blood. (Boston Bruins, 2017).

Here, the Bruins seamlessly verbalize what this team, and more broadly hockey, mean to the people of Boston. Simply put, the video describes the intense feelings of a lifetime’s worth of loyalty tied to the Bruins, how hockey is engrained in our spirits, and how Boston provides a sense of unity in hockey unlike anywhere else. The video expresses feelings. While this research aims to explain fandom in relation to identity formation, “In Our Blood” encompasses what it feels like to be a Boston Bruins fan and describes Boston fan culture in a matter of minutes.

As a native Boston fan, the “In Our Blood” video depicts so easily what I feel, yet often have difficulty expressing, in relation to the Bruins. As this research is conducted by a self-proclaimed fan, my own constructed identity hinges on the Boston Bruins as a part of my life, and in turn informs this research. My own connection to the Bruins served as an advantage in attempting to better understand the intricacies of the world around me and as a tool to uncovering

the unexamined emergent realities of the Bruins fandom. Through my participant observation as well as interviews, this research answers the part that the Boston Bruins play in informing Boston sport culture, and specifically the collective identity of Bruins Nation. This study answers how gender and location influence the construction of a collective Bruins identity including how loyalties are formed and the ways in which stereotypes continue play a role in sports. This study also answers the way in which one sport, hockey, and more specifically, the Bruins, aid in the construction of a unique collective identity and strong sense of community among fans.

New areas of inquiry regarding fan culture and the Boston Bruins may include how fans negotiate their love for a specific team in relation to other aspects of their lives. Additionally, this research is a case study of the Boston Bruins, and another area of inquiry is the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of Boston sports as a whole to further understand the complexities and nuances of Boston and New England sport culture that is not limited to the Boston Bruins.

I feel this research has contributed to the communication discipline in a significant manner in regards to how we think about sport. Sport and sport fandom tends to be a topic that is overlooked or simplified in academia, and this research delves into the inner workings of the ways sport can inform a person's identity as well as an entire community. This research examined gender, stereotypes, the process of self-identification of sports fans as well as the ideas of allegiance, loyalty, and togetherness; all of which are widely researched in and of themselves, but not often in the context of sport. My hope with this research is that communication scholars take a more active approach in uncovering the norms and behaviors regarding sport and sport culture rather than shying away from a topic that does not seem "legitimate". I believe that the more research that is conducted to explain the unexplored phenomena around us will assist in creating a complete picture of how and why people interact in under different circumstances.

Additionally, more research will help explain why sport is so effective at bringing people together in a world where we as people otherwise remain consistently divided in other aspects of life.

This research has helped me to understand the impression that the Boston Bruins have made on fan's lives. Given that sports are one of the only consistent entities in history that all civilizations have taken part in since the ancient Greeks, the popularity and importance of sport today should not be surprising. Through this research I have uncovered how fans in the Boston Bruins community feel such an intense and innate sense of loyalty to the Bruins that is difficult to even begin to express. The ways in which Bruins fans discuss "our" team and the ways in which the team informs the perception of identity has given me a concrete picture of what it means to be a Bruins fan and how unique it is to be a part of Bruins Nation.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Informed Consent (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 120)

INFORMED CONSENT FORM:

Principal Investigators: Anjali Ram, Ph.D. and Rachel Kampersal

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth understanding of the relationship between fandom and identity in Boston Bruins fans. The objectives of the study are: to understand how being a part of a fandom constructs the formation of individual and group identity, and to uncover how Bruins spectators interpret what it means to be a fan.

Procedures Experienced by Participants: By participating in this study you will be asked a series of open-ended questions in an in-depth interview. The interview will be audio-recorded and the recording is solely for transcribing data. The interview is expected to take approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Only the investigators listed above will have access to the recorded interview, which ensures your confidentiality. At no time will the investigators use identifying information associated with this study. In the event of publication, pseudonyms will be used.

Your Rights: You have the right to decline participation without any penalties or prejudice because participation is strictly voluntary. Additionally, at any point in the study if you do not feel comfortable or no longer want to participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study without prejudice or penalty. If you experience any discomfort in any way, you may request to terminate the interview and ask for all recorded data to be erased. If you have any questions you may contact the primary investigator: Anjali Ram, Ph.D. aram@rwu.edu or Rachel Kampersal, (774)-253-5331, rkampersal190@g.rwu.edu.

Compensation for Participation: There are no costs for participation in this study. There will be no compensation for participants in this study.

Risks and Benefits of being a Participant: Minimal risks are associated with this study. At any time during your participation, you are allowed to withdraw from this study without facing any penalties. A potential benefit is that you might have a better understanding of how psychological research is conducted.

Signatures:

This is to certify that I am at least 18 years of age and that I consent to or give permission for my participation as a volunteer in the research study. I have read this form and understand the content

Participant's signature

Date

Participant's Name

This is to certify that I have defined and explained this research study to the participant named above.

Investigator's signature

Date

Figure 2: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Where do you live? (Massachusetts? In a city?)
 - a. Can you tell me about how living in ___ has shaped your view of the world or how growing up in ___ is unique?
 - b. Common Values? Attitudes?
2. Can you tell me a bit about the Boston Bruins?
3. Can you tell me what the Bruins mean to you?

Prompt: How long have you been involved/a fan of the Bruins?
4. Can you tell me how you became involved with this sports team?
5. How do you generally participate in being a fan? (going to games, watching, showing support through apparel)
6. In what ways do you think where you live (location) has had an impact on you following this team rather than another?
7. Can you tell me in what ways, if any, you see a difference in levels of investment/involvement of fans?
 - a. Would you consider yourself a casual fan or a passionate fan?
 - b. What do you identify as a bandwagon fan? (definition of authentic fans)
 - c. How would you describe your level of intensity of being a fan?
8. Do you notice common/consistent patterns among fan-behavior? Appropriate behavior, etc.
9. What do you think is the role of a fan?
10. Can you tell me if you believe that your role as a fan has an impact on the team/ on a larger scale?
11. In what ways do you think being a fan of the Bruins has had an impact on your life?
12. Can you tell me about any sense of community or belonging as a Bruins fan?
13. How do you view fans of other (opposing) teams?
 - a. Positively/negatively
 - b. Do you see them as different from Bruins fans? How so?
14. In your opinion, does supporting a particular team versus another have an impact on your life?
15. Have you ever heard the term fandom?
 - a. Can you, in your own words, describe what a fandom is?
 - i. If you had to guess, what is it? **If not, offer definition**
 - b. Would you consider yourself part of a fandom?
16. Can you describe to me a typical Boston fan?

Figure 3: Human Subject Review Board Application

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION

Submitted by Rachel Kampersal
 Communication and Media Studies
 Roger Williams University

Title: Bruins Nation: A Study of Fandom and Identity

A. NEW INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PROJECT

1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Growing up in Boston, or “Title Town” as many proudly hail the city, presents endless opportunities for supporting some of the country’s premiere sports teams. Terms like “Red Sox Nation”, “Bruins Nation” and “Patriots Nation” are often used to describe the level of commitment and engagement that are made up of devoted, loyal, and proud fan bases of the Boston area. Fans of Boston teams, and specifically fans of the Boston Bruins, are a part of unique fan bases that provide a sense of community, allegiance, and the goal of supporting what many fans would refer to as “our team”. Fans deep-seeded connections to a team like the Boston Bruins are reinforced by the longstanding history and culture of sports, and given hockey’s securely rooted place in culture, individuals must negotiate and navigate their personal identity in relation to their support and devotion to the Boston Bruins. Sports have formed such a vital aspect of American culture that Washington & Karen (2001) argue that “sports must be considered a field which has its own dynamics, history, and chronology of which it is a part” (p. 190). For nearly four thousand years, since the origination of the game hockey, the sport has acted as a cornerstone in the formation of culture as well as a component of personal connection, inclusion and community and the Bruins organization acts as an agent for individuals to unite with a common purpose and create a sense of belonging.

In this study, I examine the ways in which The Boston Bruins organization acts as an agent in the negotiation of identity as Bruins fans search for a sense of community and belonging as well as the communicatively constructed behaviors and attitudes of fans. Specifically, the research questions that propel this study are:

- RQ1: How does being a part of a fandom construct the formation of individual and group identity?
- RQ2: How do Bruins spectators interpret what it means to be a fan?

I use both in-depth interviews and engage in participant observation to uncover the socially constructed behaviors and norms of hockey fans. Similarly to Philipsen (2003), I take an ethnomethodological approach that seeks to understand the culture pattern of Bruins fans. I also draw upon the theoretical concepts of such as “intersubjectivity” (Schutz, 1967) and “symbolic interactionism” (Mead, 1934) to analyze how communication and involvement in the Boston Bruins fandom shapes identity. I explore the relationship of fans engaging with “Bruins Nation” and employing practices, rituals, and behaviors that informs an identity derived from the constructed community.

2. PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this study will consist of local Boston Bruins fans. Both male and female Bruins fans will be included, as the experience of being a fan may differ across gendered boundaries. Additionally, participants will consist of fans in various age bandwidths, focusing on fans aged 18-35 and 45-65. The 18-35 category seeks to understand the relationship of the Bruins among young fans whose emergent identities are still forming while the category of fans aged between 45-65 seeks to explain the long-standing fan dynamic of participants who have been involved in the Bruins organization and can offer insights as to fan engagement over a longer period of time. I will select participants that display a significant interest in the Boston Bruins as shown by attendance at games, wearing Bruins apparel, or posting about the Bruins via social media and that are willing to participate. I will gain entry into the research context because as a personal life-long Bruins fan who often attends games, I am privy to the common practices, atmosphere, and information of Bruins games. As a life-long fan, understanding the game as well as engaging with other fans comes naturally. Due to my prior knowledge and understanding, my entry into the research context at games will be a smooth transition.

3. RESEARCH PROCEDURES AND METHODOLOGY

Communication and Media Studies typically employ a range of methodologies. I will be employing ethnomethodology, a qualitative methodology established in the Communication discipline as standard, appropriate and legitimate to such a research project. Specifically, I will gather data with a focus on participant observation and in-depth interviews of Boston Bruins fans in the New England area.

Qualitative research takes an inductive approach and aims to seek a deeper understanding of communities in order to uncover their norms, the ways those groups see the world and the way they interact with it and make meaning. As this research aims to explore the intricacies of Boston Bruins fan culture, an interpretivist approach is most suitable for the best outcome. Interpretivism hinges on the notion that “*realities* are unique, plural, simultaneous, and local phenomena. They are accomplished between human beings through their symbolic practices of expression and interpretation. *Social realities* are thus emergent and collaborative in nature” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 8). Additionally, interpretivist researchers act as positioned and partial instruments that use visual and verbal means to collect data through immersion and interaction with participants in an inductive manner (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 9). This research of the Boston Bruins culture seeks to understand the constructed realities of Bruins fans as well as the ways in which their practices assist in the formation of identity. In order to understand the relationship between fandom and identity from the participants point of view, I will be focusing on gathering data through participant observation and in-depth open-ended interviews to understand the emergent realities of Bruins fans.

My research methods and procedures will rely on an ethnographic approach. The term *ethnography*, when broken down to its roots “ethno” and “graphy” mean “people study” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 134). Because ethnography is contingent upon the studying of people, this study will gather data through participant observation in public, open-access locations and qualitative interviews which both serve as procedures that allow for a deeper level of observation and involvement with participants. Ethnography is most often associated with participant observation and interviews because ethnographers are concerned with “describing and interpreting the observable relationships between social practices and systems of meaning...of a

particular setting” and the data collected with participant observation and interviews allow for patterns to be uncovered in a meaningful way (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 135).

4. CONSENT PROCEDURES

Participants will be given the informed consent release form prior to their interview. (See Appendix 1)

5. DATA CONFIDENTIALITY

Prior to the start of each interview, I will provide a consent form for all participants to sign before any participation in this study. I will explain their right to ask questions and/or stop participation at any time during the interviews. Participants’ names will be changed to preserve anonymity in all publicly disseminated documents. I will also explain to them that their confidentiality will be preserved by using pseudonyms. The data collected will be recorded on audio files and saved to the researcher’s computer, which will be password protected. The consent forms will be preserved separately from the audio and transcribed data.

6. RISKS / DISCOMFORT TO THE PARTICIPANTS

There is no possibility of physical, mental, or social discomfort, harm or danger, otherwise beyond minimal risk. I will place a great emphasis on the fact that participants are not required to answer any question and may request to stop the interview at any time. The participants will be asked about their opinions and interpretations and may share at their discretion. This study is transparent to participants, and no information about the study will be withheld from participants.

7. BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

Sports have formed such a vital aspect of American culture that Washington & Karen (2001) argue that “sports must be considered a field which has its own dynamics, history, and chronology of which it is a part” (p. 190). For nearly four thousand years, since the origination of the game hockey, the sport has acted as a cornerstone in the formation of culture as well as a component of personal connection, inclusion and community and the Bruins organization acts as an agent for individuals to unite with a common purpose and create a sense of belonging.

As a lifetime resident of Massachusetts and an avid hockey fan, the Boston Bruins present a particular level of curiosity and serve as the focus of this research. Founded in 1924, The Boston Bruins are one of the original six teams in the National Hockey League, and present numerous opportunities to explore the deep-rooted fan-base that has been forming for over ninety years. As sports have historically been a cultural facilitator, I seek to explore the relationship between the involvement of spectators in the Boston Bruins’ hockey fandom in relation to the construction of individual and group identity. In addition to the formation of identity in regards to being a part of a fandom, I aim to explain the experience of belonging in the Boston Bruins community as well as how Bruins spectators interpret what it means to be a fan. I draw upon the abundant research regarding the prevalence of location, media, gender, and individual sports themselves to argue that belonging to a specific fandom holds an important role in the formation of identity.

The relationship between fandom and the formation of identity is a topic that aims to explain the rationale and intricacies under the surface of a typical “fan”. While this study looks particularly at fans of the Boston Bruins and aims to uncover a specific culture of Bruins fans,

this research may also allude to the notion that fans of other sports teams engage in similar practices that will assist in an accurate profile of what it means to be a fan. The research and understanding of fan culture in the United States is an area of study that must be continually observed as the norms and behaviors of sports fans are constantly emerging and changing in our fast-paced world. As millions of people in the United States tune into sporting events, wear their favorite team's apparel, and utilize sport as a means of connection and conversation, sport culture has positioned itself as a vital piece of American culture. This study hones in on the engagement of Bruins fans and explores the relationship with identity and belonging, but serves as a marker for the larger, more broad area of study.

I see the benefit of my research as exploring an area of study that is often overlooked. This research is important to explore because while the subject of sports are often considered to be non-intellectual, simple, and unimportant in academia, the ways in which Boston hockey assists in the creation of an inclusive, constructed space for citizens serves as an important example of the impression sports make on people's lives.