Is Winter Coming? A Longitudinal Study of Group Identity via #WeAreWinter

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Sport entities have leveraged the group aspect of sport consumption, as it has been posited to foster a sense of community among fans (Anderson & Stone, 1981; Heere & James, 2007). Sport entities often encourage a sense of community among fans by using terms such as “we” or “nation” in their marketing activities. Today, community-oriented messages can be initiated and spread with relative ease through social media, using hashtags to denote a particular campaign. While scholars have examined the use of hashtags in conjunction with sport events (e.g., Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Delia & Armstrong, 2015; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), they have not endeavored to understand how or if the use of such hashtags continues post-activation—the legacy of a hashtag.

In this study, we studied the case of the Canadian Olympic Committee’s (COC) #wearewinter social media campaign, launched in conjunction with the 2014 Winter Olympics. Specifically, we examined use of #wearewinter on Twitter from 2014 to 2018 to understand the extent to which the hashtag was used by individuals during and after its activation in 2014, through the 2018 Winter Olympics.

According to social identity theory, group membership contributes to an individual’s overall self-concept as a result of the derived awareness, value, and emotional significance with being a member of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The groups individuals perceive themselves as belonging to contribute to their self-image by classifying themselves with fellow ingroup members and distinguishing themselves from outgroup members. In sport, through its symbolic representations, a sport entity can create a perception of an ingroup or, community and collective identity among its supporters (Anderson & Stone, 1981; Duncan, 1983; Heere & James, 2007).

Sport consumer behavior scholars have studied team identification using social identity theory as a framework (Heere & James, 2007; Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Scholars have posited that highly identified consumers are more involved with and committed to a sport entity than lower identified consumers (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). In addition, scholars have found associations between team identification and various consumer thoughts, behaviors, and/or attitudes; compared to individuals with low team identification, highly identified individuals typically behave more favorably toward a sport entity. Beyond its influence on behavioral outcomes, scholars have also discussed how other group identities may relate to a team identity, including a city, country, or university (Delia, 2015; Heere & James, 2007). For example, Heere and James (2007) noted that a team could be symbolic of a geographic location, such as a nation.

Use of social networking sites such as Twitter has become prevalent amongst sport entities and consumers, thus changing the way sporting events are consumed (Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Sanderson, 2011; Wertheim, 2011). Consumers often use social media while consuming sporting events, and sport entities have attempted to join the conversation through digital marketing campaigns. Prior to the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) unveiled a media campaign using the slogan “we are winter,” promoting use of the #wearewinter hashtag. The #wearewinter campaign leveraged media such as print advertisements; short documentaries on YouTube and Olympic.ca; television commercials on the official Olympic broadcast partner Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC); and through social media platforms such as Twitter (Krashinsky, 2013). The #wearewinter campaign was designed to stimulate awareness and discussion of Team Canada, with the thought that such buzz would be mutually beneficial both for the Team Canada athletes, as well as the official sponsors. By increasing exposure of the athletes and team, the value transferred to sponsors may increase as well (Keller, 2003; Krashinsky, 2013).

During the 2014 Sochi Games, #wearewinter was tweeted over 300,000 times, becoming a rallying point for many Canadian sport consumers. The #wearewinter campaign drew critical acclaim from news outlets in Canada and was deemed a major success (Krashinsky, 2014). However, one might wonder: What happens to hashtag usage amongst
sport consumers over time, after the organization that initiated the marketing campaign no longer promotes the hashtag? Based on this question, we asked the following research questions:

RQ1: In the years following the 2014 Olympics, is #wearewinter still be used on Twitter?
RQ2: Will #wearewinter be used during the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea?
RQ3: If used, how and to what extent is group identity communicated through individuals’ use of #wearewinter on Twitter?

To investigate the research questions, we conducted five social media scrapes (via DiscoverText) on Twitter collecting tweets using the hashtag #wearewinter. During the 2014 Winter Olympics, 332,040 tweets including the hashtag #wearewinter were collected. In 2015-2017, data were collected during the same time period as the 2014 Olympics. We collected 1,054, 168, and 136 #wearewinter tweets in 2015, 2016, and 2017, respectively. Our final data collection will be during the 2018 Winter Olympics. We will use open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze tweets from all data collection periods.

In our presentation we will detail and discuss our findings from the five data collection periods, including the data to be collected during the 2018 Winter Olympics. Based on our analysis of the tweets from 2014 to 2017, we have found that a shift occurred after 2014 regarding how #wearewinter was used. During the 2014 Winter Olympics (when the COC activated #wearewinter), Twitter users used #wearewinter primarily to project sport-related national team identity (i.e., Team Canada). Although the hashtag was used far less in 2015, 2016, and 2017, use of #wearewinter during this time appeared to be used more broadly, to convey general national identity (i.e., Canada). This could indicate that while the digital marketing activities of sport organizations may have lasting effects on the proliferation of sport-related online communities, the long-term usage of such may be different than what it was initially established during the activation period. Specifically, the #wearewinter hashtag ultimately being used by individuals to denote not only a team identity, but also general national identity, adds support to the notion of multiple group identities involved in sport (Heere & James, 2007). In the presentation, we will discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of this finding. However, a question remains: Will use of #wearewinter in support of the Canadian Olympic Team mount again during the 2018 Winter Olympics, and how will this impact the legacy of #wearewinter?