Culture plays a key role in exploring the inclusive and exclusive nature of sport fandom. An introduction into a fan base requires that an individual learns, accepts, and adopts the cultural norms of the group (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). In addition to fans being ‘prosumers’, (Crawford, 2004; Gibbons & Dixon, 2012), they are also members of the sport organization (Heere & James, 2007). Therefore, they can influence the organizational culture of the team’s fan base.

Boundaries are one component of culture established by members (e.g., fans). Through their discourses, sport fans establish who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ of the culture. While it can be assumed that cultures have distinct boundaries, Martin (2002) conceptualized cultural boundaries as being socially constructed and not all members are in complete agreement with them. Based on Martin’s (2002) framework, sport fan cultures can be blurred, moveable, permeable, and fluctuate.

The purpose of this research was to explore how sport fans create and maintain cultural boundaries of fandom in a social media environment. Using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, the research questions are: 1. What are the cultural boundaries drawn by fans of a team? 2. What discourses are being used to draw boundaries? 3. How are discourses used to negotiate these boundaries?

A case study design was used and limited to Toronto Blue Jays’ fans (Yin, 2014). Visual Twitter Analytics (Vista) software (Hoeber, Hoeber, El Meseery, Odoh & Gopi, 2016) was used to collect tweets containing #LetsRise and #BlueJays over the 2017 season. These queries were searched for the terms ‘fan’, ‘fans’, and ‘fandom’, which resulted in 4,235 original tweets. Data were read and re-read to determine patterns of responses in the tweets. Next, 156 tweets that represented different discourses about the cultural boundaries of sport fandom were selected and analyzed using CDA.

Using Twitter, fans both reinforced and undermined cultural boundaries based on ideological discourses of sport fandom. For RQ1, cultural boundaries were drawn to create a central fan culture, then contrasted with different groups including fans of the same team (outgroup), fans of different MLB teams, and with the team’s management. For RQ2, we found that fans used discourses of unity, loyalty, and consumption to draw the boundaries. For RQ3, findings show that fans established rigid cultural boundaries when referring to other fans (e.g., outgroup Blue Jays fans) by questioning their loyalty and consumption Yet, the boundaries became permeable and moveable when their own behaviours and attitudes challenged the norms of fandom, such as not remaining loyal to the team or dealing with tensions associated with their fan identity.

The simultaneously fluid and rigid nature in which these cultural boundaries are drawn demonstrate complexity in fan behaviour. Practically, these cultural boundaries expose potential challenges for new fans seeking a sense of belonging within the culture. Additionally, even though sport organizations may call upon discourses of unity in their marketing strategies, it does not necessarily result in inclusion of various types of fans, as fans create their own subgroups.