Social media’s emphasis on user-centered content has enhanced fans’ role in the broader sport experience (Hutchins, 2016). Conversation anchored by the hashtag convention has enabled fans, sponsors, and other stakeholders to congregate and stimulate a dynamic, evolving network (Pegoraro & Hambrick, 2014). Although this line of inquiry has grown to encompass knowledge of the realized behaviors of social media (e.g., Naraine, Pegoraro, & Wear, 2019), the sentiment regarding social media user behavior as it relates to branded hashtag conversation is unknown, critical information to refine the relationship marketing process for brands and their public audiences (cf. Gronroos, 1994). Thus, the purpose of this study was to analyze the user sentiment from three brand-focused hashtags: one fan-driven, one brand-enduring, and one brand-emergent.

Twitter has proven to be a functional and illuminating prism for sport scholars (e.g., Hambrick, 2012; Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014). For example, researchers have leveraged data from this platform to explore and explain the intricacies of fans’ social networks (Hambrick, 2012; Naraine & Parent, 2016). Given that a robust and still-growing literature has demonstrated how much ‘other fans matter’ in the sport fan experience (Funk & James, 2002; Holt, 1995; Katz, Ward, & Heere, 2018), such insights are valuable.

The present study seeks to contribute to the burgeoning digital sport consumer behavior literature by exploring the sentiment of tweets in three hashtags, focusing on how multiple brand anchors serve as points of attachment (or not) for fans. Specifically, we explored the digital brand engagement of fans of the National Basketball Association’s (NBA’s) Toronto Raptors.

Data was collected over the 2017-2018 NBA season using Visual Twitter Analytics (Vista) software (Hoebber et al., 2016). Three queries were employed based on hashtags that are fan-driven, enduring, and emergent: #RTZ (Raptors Tweet Zone), #WeTheNorth (became team’s official hashtag in 2014-2015 season), and #NorthOverEverything (became team’s official hashtag in 2017-2018 season). In sum, 265,672 tweets were collected. Vista was leveraged to represent these posts visually and provided an initial sentiment analysis to code each tweet as positive, negative, or neutral. The data were also analyzed through Leximancer analytics visualization software to determine similarities/differences in relation to topics mentioned in the tweets.

Our findings suggest brands would be well-served by focusing on developing an enduring brand anchor as opposed to investing in a new hashtag each year. #WeTheNorth was used three times as often as #RTZ and more than 20 times as often as #NorthOverEverything. The large majority of all tweets within each hashtag were coded as neutral, with #WeTheNorth having the highest positive-to-negative ratio at 10:1. Lastly, we found that similar topics were being discussed in the tweets of all three hashtags. #RTZ tweets related almost exclusively to the Raptors and NBA, whereas #WeTheNorth included external topics to the Raptors, such as other teams as well as Drake (global ambassador for the Raptors). We discerned that sport brands should strive to create a hashtag as a critical digital point of attachment to stimulate longstanding engagement, rather than attempting to regularly create new campaign hashtags.