

Are We Still Winter? Hashtag Legacy a Year After #wearewinter

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For decades, sport entities have leveraged the group aspect of sport consumption, as it purportedly fosters a sense of community among fans (e.g., Anderson & Stone, 1981; Heere & James, 2007a). Sport entities often try to achieve this by using group terminology, such as “we” or “nation” in marketing campaigns. As social media usage among sport consumers increases, community-oriented marketing activities can now be initiated and spread with relative ease. While scholars have examined the use of hashtags in conjunction with sport events (e.g., Blaszka et al., 2012), they have not investigated how, or if, the use of hashtags continues post-activation—the legacy of a hashtag. In this study, we examine the case of the Canadian Olympic Committee’s (COC) #wearewinter social media campaign, in conjunction with the 2014 Winter Olympics. Specifically, we aim to understand the extent to which social media users engaged with #wearewinter one year after its activation. We argue that such consideration may allow sport marketers to capitalize on the equity of previous marketing campaigns, and the resources that were invested in these efforts.

Literature Review

Sport, Community, and Identity

Anderson and Stone (1981) emphasized the ‘unanticipated functions of sport’ (p. 170), rationalizing that the collective and relational aspects of sport consumption illustrate the value of sport beyond play and competition. Scholars have explained that the social aspects of sport can foster a sense of community, especially from a geographic perspective (Anderson & Stone, 1981; Heere & James, 2007a). In sport, through its symbolic representations, a sport entity can create a perception of community and collective identity among its supporters (Anderson & Stone, 1981; Duncan, 1983; Heere & James, 2007a).

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 group(s) an individual perceives him/herself as belonging to contribute to his/her self-image by classifying him/herself with fellow ingroup members and distinguishing him/herself from outgroup members. As Tajfel (1974) wrote, “A group becomes a group in the sense of being perceived as having common characteristics or a common fate only because other groups are present in the environment” (p. 72).

Utilizing the social identity framework, sport consumer behavior scholars have studied team identification (e.g., Heere & James, 2007b; Trail & James, 2001; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), the degree of an individual’s psychological connection to a team. 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.

Twitter and Sport

As use of Twitter by sport entities and consumers has increased, the site has changed the way in which sport events are consumed (Wertheim, 2011). Twitter consists of users managing microblogs of 140-character max messages. Murthy (2011) noted that microblogs “can facilitate virtual communities because users feel a continuous partial

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presence of other users” (p. 782). By using a hashtag, Twitter users can connect with others that he/she does not follow; thus, whether intentional or not, a Twitter hashtag can amass a group of users, allowing for the formation of a social networking community (Armstrong, Delia, & Giardina, 2014).

Research Context: Sochi 2014 and #WeAreWinter

In anticipation of the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi Russia, the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) developed a media campaign using the slogan “we are winter,” which focused on the hashtag #wearewinter. The campaign comprised various media formats, 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 serve two main purposes: to draw attention to the Canadian athletes competing in the Sochi 2014 Olympics; and to provide official sponsors of the Canadian Olympic Team increased levels of visibility. The campaign was designed to stimulate awareness and discussion of Team Canada, with the thought that such buzz might benefit official sponsors of Team Canada. 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 sport consumers interested in following and supporting the Canadian Olympic team. The #wearewinter campaign drew critical acclaim from news outlets in Canada, and was deemed a major success (Krashinsky, 2014). However, what happens to sport consumers’ hashtag usage after the activation period expires (i.e., post-event)? The purpose of this study is to investigate how hashtag usage evolves after the planned implementation period expires, and if consumers continue to use the hashtag after an event concludes how they are using the hashtag. To accomplish this purpose the authors used the following research questions:

RQ1: A year after its use in conjunction with the 2014 Olympics, is #wearewinter still be used on Twitter?

RQ2: A year after its use in conjunction with the 2014 Olympics, is #wearewinter being used in reference to the Canadian Olympic Team?

RQ3: A year after its use in conjunction with the 2014 Olympics, is #wearewinter being used in other ways besides reference to the Canadian Olympic Team?

Method

To investigate how the hashtag usage evolved over time the authors conducted two separate social media “scrapes,” on Twitter, collecting tweets using the hashtag #wearewinter. For each data collection, we used DiscoverText, a social media collection and analysis software. In Data Collection 1 (during the 2014 Winter Olympics), we collected 332,040 tweets that included the hashtag #wearewinter. In Data Collection 2 (one year after the 2014 Olympics), we collected 1,054 such tweets. We used open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze 1,000 tweets from the first data collection phase and all of the tweets from the second data collection phase.

Results and Conclusion

Our content analysis of the data is currently in progress; however, we will detail and discuss our findings in the poster presentation. Based on our preliminary analysis of the tweets from both data collection periods, we have found that a shift occurred from 2014 to 2015 in how #wearewinter was used. Specifically, during the 2014 Winter Olympics (when the COC activated the hashtag), Twitter users used #wearewinter primarily to project sport-related national identity (i.e., Team Canada), whereas in 2015, #wearewinter appeared to be used more broadly, to convey general national identity (i.e., Canada). This could indicate that, while social media sport marketing activities (e.g., a hashtag) may have lasting effects on the proliferation of sport-related online communities, the long-term usage of such may be different to usage during the initial activation period. Based on the research questions, we will discuss the findings of our full content analysis in the poster presentation, offer potential implications for sport marketers, and direction for future research.

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