“You’re on one side or the other. You’re either a Leafs fan or a Sabres fan”. An Interpretive Study of Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs Fans in Fort Erie, Ontario

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Applied Health Sciences (Sport Management)

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to the town of Fort Erie, Ontario. Those who have been lucky enough to call you home understand how special of a place you are. You exhibit notions of community, hospitality, and benevolence in everything you do. While it can be challenging to write in words what it means to be from the small-town, people like Brad were able to elicit these emotions by sharing stories of their experiences and connections with Fort Erie:

*My wife and I lived in England for three years, and I had always had intentions of coming back to Fort Erie and she didn’t have a lot of family, so we ended up coming back here and lo and behold her parents sold their place and now they live here too. And, that’s the thing, right. I said to her, you’ll leave, but there’s something about this place that sucks you back.*

-Interviewee #12: Brad, 39-years old from Fort Erie, Ontario
Nomenclature

Associazione Calcio (A.C.)
Basking In Reflected Glory (BIRG)
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)
Cutting Off Reflected Failure (CORF)
Football Club (FC)
Glory Out of Reflected Failure (GORF)
International League (IL)
Major League Baseball (MLB)
Minor League Baseball (MiLB)
National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR)
National Basketball Association (NBA)
National Hockey League (NHL)
Psychological Continuum Model (PCM)
Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW)
Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS)
Television (TV)
The Sports Network (TSN)
United States of America (US/USA/United States)
Universal Serial Bus (USB)
Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA)
Notes About Language

I attempted to be as consistent as possible with regards to language throughout the duration of this thesis. Often times different researchers use different terms when discussing the connection a fan has with a specific sporting franchise. For example, terms such as team identity and team-fan bond are used interchangeably, however both refer to the psychological connection a fan has with their favourite team. Another example is the interchange between the terms participant, interviewee and informant. I hope the reader is able to avoid any confusion and is able to comprehend when any of these terms are used.
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Introduction

Sport is special in so many ways that it is hard to pinpoint exactly one thing that makes it such a unique entity. Weiss (1969) wrote that sport “catches the interest and elicits the devotion of both the young and old, the wise and foolish, the educated and the uneducated” (p. 9). It has the ability to bring people together regardless of their different political or religious beliefs. It can cross international borders and connect different communities and peoples from various places in the world. It can be used as a method to encourage healthy and active living through enjoyment and competition. It can also give people something to be passionate about and use as an escape from their daily lives. This last function of sport can be seen in the institution of sport fandom.

Sport fandom is very similar in nature to other memberships of social groups. A sport fan essentially goes through a process of socialization (Kolbe & James, 2000). Socialization is the development of skills, knowledge, values, dispositions and self-perceptions necessary to perform in society (Kenyon & McPherson, 1973). Kolbe and James (2000) write that a sport fan’s socialization involves the “learning and internalizing of attitudes, values, knowledge and behaviours that are associated with fans of a team” (p. 23). Therefore, fans of the same team will have similar likes and dislikes, will have common beliefs and rituals, and will feel a sense of belonging to their team’s community. Melnick (1993) discusses how sport-spectating can help improve and enrich the social psychological lives of those attending events. Melnick (1993) also discusses the importance of the promotion of social and communal possibilities and makes suggestions on how sport marketing managers can maximize attendance by focussing their efforts on building such an environment. Rooney (1974) discusses how fan loyalties are among the strongest human attachments. In the literature review of this thesis I will further discuss how
people become fans of teams and how they build different connections to their favourite franchises.

Due to the impact fans have on the financial success of professional sport franchises, it is easy to understand why marketing managers would take significant interest in these sorts of individuals. However, it is not to say that industry practitioners and applied researchers are the only people who have a vested interest in sport fans and their motivations. Morris Holbrook, a prolific consumer behaviour and marketing scholar from Columbia University, suggested that there was too much of an emphasis on applied research and that too many consumer researchers attempt to make practical implications to sell their work to the industry (Holbrook, 1987). Holbrook (1987) suggested that consumer research should bring the focus back onto the consumers themselves to help understand their emic perspectives. Although Holbrook was not a sport consumer behaviourist, I followed his suggestion by conducting a qualitative, interpretive study which aimed to better understand the lived experiences of Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie, Ontario.

**Fort Erie**

Fort Erie is a small town located alongside the Niagara River in the Niagara Region of Southern Ontario. It is also located directly across from Buffalo, New York and is about 30 kilometres south of Niagara Falls, Ontario. The town has a population of about 30,000 people and approximately 10,000 seasonal residents. The town is connected to Buffalo via the Peace Bridge, which is the second busiest Canada/U.S. border crossing between the two nations (Helleiner, 2016).

What makes Fort Erie different from other small, Canadian towns is the fact that it is a borderland. According to the International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, borderlands are
“peripheral regions of nation-states where the two (or more) political, economic, and social systems of the nation-states meet” (Kitchin & Thrift, 2009, p. 332). Another example of a Canadian borderland with similar characteristics as Fort Erie would be Windsor, Ontario. Windsor is a Canadian city directly across the Detroit river from the American city of Detroit, Michigan (Detroit also has major professional sporting franchises). Aside from Fort Erie and Windsor, there is no other place in Canada that is torn between two sporting franchises of the same league where one of the competing teams is within extreme geographic proximity however in a different country. Fort Erie is located within the Niagara Region of Southern Ontario yet directly across the Niagara River from Buffalo, New York.

As mentioned earlier, Fort Erie is most definitely a hockey town. While there are local soccer, baseball, tennis, and football sport organizations, there is no doubt that hockey is the most popular sport. One example that demonstrates this can be seen in the fact that one of the town’s main attractions is the Leisureplex. The Leisureplex is a sport facility which hosts two ice rinks (the Jaycee arena and the Fort Erie Kinsmen arena). The Fort Erie Kinsmen arena is home to the Fort Erie Meteors, a Junior B ice hockey team who play in the Golden Horseshoe division of the Greater Ontario Junior Hockey League.

The Meteors are an essential part of Fort Erie’s hockey identity. The Meteors game schedule is posted on the walls of many local bars and restaurants and they have a large presence in the community. On Saturday nights, home games are regarded as a main source of entertainment for families and youth. Young adolescents often meet at the Leisureplex during Meteors home games and hang out in-and-around the arena. One example that demonstrates how important the Meteors are to the town of Fort Erie can be seen in Carol Sims who was a long-time fan and volunteer that supported the team for over 25 years (Ferguson, 2015). Another
example is that of Brandon Thomas, the former Assistant Coach of the Meteors. In an interview with the Fort Erie Times, Thomas said “I’ve been coming to games since I was 10 years old” and that it was a “dream come true” to be on the bench of his favourite team (Dubé, 2016).

While most hockey fans in Fort Erie would agree that the Fort Erie Meteors are their favourite Junior B hockey team, the same cannot be said about their professional hockey preferences. Although there are fans of multiple NHL teams within the town, there is no arguing that the two most prominent teams are the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Buffalo Sabres. Ironically enough, it is very difficult to find literature that explicitly states Fort Erie is a town divided between the two teams. However, by examining and interpreting other sources it is not difficult to see that these two teams are indeed the two most popular preferences.

Every morning, Fort Erie’s local radio station (101.1 More FM) recaps the previous night’s news and sporting events. When discussing the NHL scores, the first two teams that are consistently mentioned are the Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs. The DJ will often give details about the games involving these two teams and then say something along the lines of “some other scores around the league” before mentioning other teams’ scores. There is always a clear emphasis on both the Sabres and the Leafs games. This demonstrates that the town’s residents care much more about the Leafs and Sabres than any of the other NHL teams.

Another indirect example that demonstrates the town’s preference for the Leafs and Sabres can be seen in an article written by the Hamilton Spectator regarding the Canadian Motor Speedway (Zwolinski, 2012). In an interview with the Spectator, Fort Erie mayor Doug Martin discusses the desire to eventually host an outdoor NHL game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Buffalo Sabres in Fort Erie’s new racetrack (Zwolinski, 2012). The suggestion of having
both the Sabres and Leafs play a game at the Speedway implicitly suggests that these are the two teams the locals would be most excited to see.

Another article that demonstrates a pull between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Sabres for hockey fans in Southern Ontario is Zeisberger’s article regarding an NHL expansion in the Greater Toronto Area (Zeisberger, 2014). Zeisberger (2014) mentions that Southern Ontario already has a second team in the Buffalo Sabres, specifically because you can see their home arena (then the First Niagara Center, now the KeyBank Center) from the shores of Fort Erie.

Lastly, news articles regarding the Buffalo Sabres’ new Canadian television deal discuss the important need for the Sabres to have broadcasting rights over the Niagara region considering they draw many fans from this area (Petrocz, 2013; The Canadian Press, 2013; jmaloni, 2013). Buffalo Sabres President Ted Black mentions that although the Leafs have traditionally been the favoured team in the Niagara Region, the Sabres are a close second and hold a special place in peoples’ hearts (Petrocz, 2013). Black mentions that there are thousands of Sabres fans in the Niagara region (jmaloni, 2013) and that the Sabres are likely the second favourite team (Petrocz, 2013). Black says that “Many people don't think of the Southern Ontario region as being 'Sabres Territory' because it's in a different country, but, in reality, some of our most passionate fans come from right over the Peace Bridge” (jmaloni, 2013). These articles effectively demonstrate that the two most preferred NHL teams in Fort Erie would be the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Buffalo Sabres.
Brief History of the Toronto Maple Leafs

The Toronto Maple Leafs are a professional ice hockey team that play in the NHL. They were created in 1917 and were one of the original four teams that were included when the league was first founded. The Maple Leafs have won the league championship (the Stanley Cup) 13 times, the last time being in 1967. Their jersey is highly recognizable and displays a Canadian maple leaf crest (Richelieu & Pons, 2006) and their fan base (known as Leafs Nation) is one of the most loyal in sports. As the Montreal Canadiens came to be known as the Francophone team in Canada, the Anglophone title went to the Toronto Maple Leafs (Richelieu & Pons, 2006).

When the team first entered the NHL in 1917, they were known as the Toronto Arenas and won the league’s first ever Stanley Cup (Gruneua & Whitson, 1993). The team was renamed in 1919 to the Toronto St. Patricks (St. Pats) to appeal to Toronto’s large Irish population (Smythe & Young, 1981). The St. Pats won the Stanley Cup again in 1922 and played in the league for five more years until 1927 where they faced serious financial issues and possible threat of relocation (Williams, 2013). In 1927, an investor named Conn Smythe was able to raise enough money to keep the team from moving to Philadelphia and purchased ownership of the franchise (Smythe & Young, 1981). Smythe renamed the team from the St. Patricks to the Maple Leafs to build a stronger connection with Canadian identity (Smythe & Young, 1981). The new Maple Leafs became one of the strongest teams in the NHL, winning 11 Stanley Cups from 1932 to 1967.

When the Maple Leafs moved to their new home (Maple Leaf Gardens) in 1931, they inadvertently started a new Canadian tradition known as Hockey Night in Canada (Young, 1985). This radio broadcast was held every Saturday night on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and featured a play-by-play commentary of the Toronto Maple Leafs games.
by Foster Hewitt (Young, 1985). Although the nation-wide broadcast would evolve to incorporate other teams and broadcasters, most of Ontario would only have access to the Toronto Maple Leafs broadcasts (Williams, 2013). Because of the popularity of the radio show, Hockey Night in Canada became a television hockey broadcast which aired on the CBC’s television network every Saturday night starting in 1952 (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). To this day, Hockey Night in Canada is one of the most popular television programs in the country.

**Brief History of the Buffalo Sabres**

The Buffalo Sabres are a professional ice hockey team that also play in the NHL. The team joined the NHL in 1970 when the league expanded to 14 teams (Swados, 2006). Many sporting teams in Buffalo had names revolving around the buffalo or the bison, therefore the owners of the city’s newest professional hockey team wanted a name that was distinct from the others (Sports Team History, 2018). Through a name-the-team contest, owner Seymour Knox selected the name “Sabres” because he felt that this weapon (which was carried by a leader) was effective both offensively and defensively (Sports Team History, 2018).

Although the team has never won a Stanley Cup, they have advanced to and competed in the final series on two separate occasions – once in 1975 and again in 1999 (Sports Team History, 2018). The most famous offensive line was probably the French Connection which consisted of Gilbert Perreault, Rick Martin, and Rene Robert (Swados, 2006), however many other high-profile players came to wear the Sabres uniform.

In the 1970s and 1980s, televised Buffalo Sabres games were difficult to come across as only about 20 to 30 games would be broadcasted by local Buffalo broadcasting stations (Cichon, 2014). Then, in the digital-television era, Fort Erie residents would traditionally only have access
to Toronto Maple Leafs televised games (Petrocz, 2013). The only way to watch a Buffalo Sabres game in Fort Erie would be if it were a nationally broadcasted game or if a fan had the NHL Center Ice package (a television package that provides access to out of market games) (Petrocz, 2013). For the 2013-2014 season, Bell TV decided to air Buffalo Sabres games in the Niagara Peninsula understanding that there is an important, viable market for the team (jmaloni, 2013). Bell TV decided to end this experiment before the 2016 regular season (Vogl, 2016).

**Justification for the study**

**Gap in literature.** Sport consumer behaviour researchers have long examined team fandom creation. Some common reasons include parents (Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010), team success (Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 2006) specific players (Ahn, Suh, Lee & Pedersen, 2013), team colours and logo (Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008) and geography (Rooney, 1974, 1975; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). Geography has sometimes been conceptualized as cheering for either the closest team (Rooney, 1974; 1975), a team representing a region (Harada & Matsuoka, 1999), or a team representing a country (Garcia, 2012; Heere & James, 2007). Because of Fort Erie’s unique location, the geographical context can get a bit murky when discerning what local means.

In the past, sport consumer behaviour researchers have also conducted studies that have explored regions and cities with multiple teams (Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; Mills & Rosentraub, 2014; Robinson, 2012; Sherony & Knowles, 2009). A unique category of region that may have fans of various teams is that of the borderland type. To this date, there is no research regarding fans who live in borderlands and the specific teams they decide to support. Although some fan research may have included sport fans who live in borderlands, no research has been conducted that primarily focusses on borderland fans and their fan identification. Fort Erie is a bordertown
that embodies many of the unique characteristics indigenous to borderland areas, where the notion of local may have different meanings to its residents.

Although no research has been conducted on borderland sport fans and their motivations, one sport-related study that concerned itself with the Niagara region is that of Mills and Rosentraub (2014). Mills and Rosentraub (2014) used border-crossing data from the Niagara Peninsula to assess the propensity of Canadian residents to attend Buffalo Sabres games. Their analysis revealed that a significant portion of Sabres fans travel from Canada to attend home games (Mills & Rosentraub, 2014). Among other interesting facts, they found that when the Toronto Maple Leafs are playing in Buffalo, over 33% of fans at the game are attending from Canada (Mills & Rosentraub, 2014). Multiple sources have indicated that 15% of Sabres season ticket holders live in Canada (Dubé, 2013; Iorfida, 2009; Mills & Rosentraub, 2014; Petrocz, 2013) and former Sabres President Ted Black said he feels most of this 15% reside in the Niagara Peninsula (Petrocz, 2013). Aside from Mills and Rosentraub’s (2014) work, the Niagara borderland region has essentially received no attention with regards to sport consumer behaviour.

As Holbrook (1987) suggests, it is important to continue to advance the knowledge of consumer behaviour wherever it is lacking to ensure we fill the gaps in the research. The two research questions for this study are: “How do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs?” and “How do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres?”. The main purpose of this thesis was to add to the body of literature of sport consumer behaviour by better understanding the process by which people in a borderland such as Fort Erie become and stay fans of teams such as the Toronto Maple Leafs and/or the Buffalo Sabres.
Leaves and Sabres in Fort Erie. In 2009, the threat of an NHL expansion team in Hamilton, Ontario (an Ontario city half way between Buffalo and Toronto on the western end of Lake Ontario) brought serious concern to the Buffalo Sabres (Iorfida, 2009). Iorfida (2009) wrote that the Sabres typically enjoyed a long history with fans in the Niagara region and as far away as Hamilton. The NHL’s constitution states "each member shall have exclusive territorial rights in the city in which it is located and within 50 miles [80 kilometres] of that city's corporate limits" (NHL Const. art IV, § 4.1(c); Iorfida, 2009). Much of the Niagara Peninsula falls within both the Leafs’ and the Sabres’ territories as their 80-kilometre radius’ overlap one another (see Appendix A for visual depiction). Fort Erie is technically located within the exclusive territorial rights of the Sabres, therefore allowing this team to have a much stronger presence in the town (Potrecz, 2013). One example of a Sabres’ initiative to build a connection with the town of Fort Erie can be seen in their two-day campaign titled ‘Invade Canada’ where they visited four separate Fort Erie locations in an attempt to raise excitement prior to the 2013 season (Dubé, 2013). Considering the geographic proximity to both the Buffalo Sabres and the Toronto Maple Leafs, previous sport-literature suggests that the hockey fans in Fort Erie are most likely to support either of the mentioned teams (Rooney, 1974, 1975; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). The purpose of this research was to better understand the motivations behind these decisions and to discern if the antecedents to supporting a sport franchise were different for borderland residents than for those who live further inland.

Reasons to support each team. It was easy to understand why a hockey fan in Fort Erie would select the Buffalo Sabres as their favourite NHL team. The Sabres are closest in geographic proximity, their exclusive territorial rights span well over Fort Erie, and the team often makes an effort to connect with the Fort Erie community. Sikura (2018) – a life-long
resident of Toronto who converted from a Toronto Maple Leafs fan to a Buffalo Sabres fan – discussed some of the motives behind his decision to begin supporting the Sabres over the Leafs in a self-reflexive article. He writes that the cost to attend a Leafs game is astronomical, becoming a deterrent to fans wanting to attend home games (Sikua, 2018). Sikura (2018) also mentions that the fan culture in Buffalo is more welcoming, passionate and has a stronger sense of community. After completing a brief literature review, it became apparent that there was indeed logical reason for Fort Erie residents to support the Buffalo Sabres. With regards to geographic proximity, the Toronto Maple Leafs also appeared to be a viable option considering they were still relatively close.

In sport consumer behaviour literature, there are many articles which discuss how fans support the team closest in geographic proximity (Rooney, 1974, 1975; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; James & Kolbe, 2002). According to this theory, the Buffalo Sabres would likely be the team of preference for hockey fans in Fort Erie. However, Rooney (1974) found that cultural salience also plays an important role in team selection. In Canada, the most culturally-salient sport is hockey (Beardsley, 1988; Dryden & MacGregor, 1989; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Holman, 2004, 2009; Jackson, 1994; Kidd & Macfarlane, 1972; Mason, 2002; Rooney, 1974, 1975). In 1927, Conn Smythe bought the Toronto St. Patricks and renamed them the Toronto Maple Leafs (Smythe & Young, 1981). Part of the reason why Smythe did this was to build a connection with all of Canada instead of just the Irish population in Toronto, which the St. Pat’s name intended to do.

“I had a feeling that the new Maple Leaf name was right. Our Olympic team in 1924 had worn maple leaf crests on their chests. I had worn it on badges and insignia during the
war. I thought it meant something across Canada, while St. Patricks didn’t.” (Smythe & Young, 1981. pg 86.)

Bob Heere (2016) writes about team identity theory and suggests that the team is seen as an instrument to fulfill the need to express the belonging to the larger community. Clopton & Finch (2011) write that social identity is directly related to the sociological concept of community, and that the sport team merely functions as an anchoring point. AreaScore (2017) claims that over 75% of the town of Fort Erie is of Christian faith, that 95% of its residents are Canadian citizens and that less than 10% speak a non-official language at home. Statistics Canada (2012) claims that 89% of residents in Fort Erie reported English only as a mother tongue and that over 95% spoke only English most often at home. Helleiner (2016) conducted a case study of people who live in the Niagara region with an attempt to better understand their everyday experiences pertaining to border crossings and everyday nationalism. One of the respondents claimed that Fort Erie was a “very white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant hometown” (Helleiner, 2016. pg 123).

It is easy to understand why Fort Erie residents were Toronto Maple Leafs fans considering Fort Erie is a Canadian, English speaking town, hockey is “Canada’s game”, and sport fans often support a team that is a positive extension of themselves. Clearly, there are logical reasons for Fort Erie residents to select and support either team.
Literature Review

Within this literature review an attempt will be made to recap the studies and works relevant to this study’s research questions. Firstly, I will review and discuss the literature pertaining to social identity theory and sport. From there, I will review and discuss the different motives for becoming a sport fan. This section will directly tie into the third section which focusses on the different levels of sport fandom. The fourth section will review different antecedents to picking a favourite team. Next, I will review and discuss the attitudes and behaviours of people who live in borderlands such as Fort Erie. Lastly, I will review and discuss previous works related to nationalism in sport and the importance of hockey in Canadian culture.

Social Identity Theory

While there were many different theoretical lenses I could have used to conduct my study, I believe that social identity theory was the best fit for my examination of how Leafs and Sabres fans in Fort Erie originally selected one team over the other and how they have maintained this fandom. First introduced by Tajfel in 1978, social identity theory claims that human beings strive to create and foster a positive self-concept (End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick & Jacquemotte, 2002). This self-concept is derived from two separate categories: the personal identity and the social identity (Tajfel, 1978). The personal identity consists of individual traits, achievements and qualities (Rodriguez, 2015). The social identity includes the group affiliations that are recognized as being part of the self (Rodriguez, 2015). Two assumptions are necessary when using social identity theory as a framework for one’s study: people obtain part of their self-concept from the groups that they are members of (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011) and that people will select groups that they perceive to reflect positively on their self-concept (Lock & Heere, 2017; Tajfel, 1969). Social identity theorists examine how normative behaviour is created
through the shared values and characteristics that result from group membership (Lock & Heere, 2017).

Social identity theory has been extremely influential in research regarding sport fandom (Andrijiw & Hyatt, 2009; Burns, 2014; Fink et al., 2009; Havard, 2014; Lock, Taylor & Darcy, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1993 ; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). Lock, Taylor & Darcy (2011) write that social identity theory has been used to “explore sport fans in multiple cases and contexts under the title of (established) team identification” (p. 173). Another theory that has been used to examine the sport consumer’s connection to their favourite team is identity theory. Lock & Heere (2017) compare and contrast the differences between identity theory and social identity theory and discuss when to use the two different theoretical approaches when researching sport consumers. They concluded that identity theory focusses on social roles (e.g. the sport fan) where patterns of social structures influence the probability that a consumer will inhabit specific social roles; while social identity theory focusses on the membership of groups (e.g. the team) where consumers seek particular memberships that are coherent with, or a positive extension of, their self-concept (Lock & Heere, 2017).

There is an inherent rivalry between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Sabres (and their fanbases) considering the proximity of the two teams. According to Rooney (1974), rivalries exist throughout the sporting world because of these geographic proximities. Through the social identity theory lens, Tyler and Cobbs (2015) define a rival group as a highly salient out-group that poses a threat to the identity of the in-group or to in-group members’ ability to make positive comparisons between their group and the out-group. For example, it is possible that Leafs and Sabres fans in Fort Erie feel that their respective teams are the hometown team. When these fans build a connection between their in-group (favourite team) and their hometown,
and then that connection is threatened by the out-group (a different team and their fans), there is potential for a rivalry between the two groups (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015).

Tyler and Cobbs (2017) discovered that in-groups (fans) had multiple rivalries, that some of these rivalries were perceived to be more intense than others, and that the out-groups did not always share similar perceptions of the rivalry. They also make note that the strongest rivalries exist between two groups that are highly comparable yet unique in their own way (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Both sets of fans are Fort Erie residents who would have lived a significant portion of their lives in the small Canadian town. Neither team has won any significant championships recently and both teams have a moderate history of success and successful players. Because these two sets of groups are highly comparable yet distinct in their own way, the rivalry between the two sets of fans proved to be relatively strong.

In a study which uses social identity theory as a theoretical framework, Havard (2014) found that highly identified fans experience Glory Out of Reflected Failure (GORF) when the out-group (their favourite team’s rival) loses a match in indirect competition. Another study which investigates rivalries through the same theoretical lens is Havard, Wann and Grieve’s (2018) examination of the exposure of promotional titles and logos and their influence on fan perceptions towards the out group (rival team). This study discovered that fans who were exposed to negative promotional titles believed the out-group (fans of the rival team) behaved more poorly than those exposed to neutral titles (Havard, Wann & Grieve, 2018). These studies further support prior work on social identity theory and in-group bias (Tajfel, 1978).

Social identity theory suggests that people (fans) will choose to be members of groups (a team fanbase) that are a positive extension of their self concept (Lock & Heere, 2017). I wondered if team selection in a borderland such as Fort Erie could be a larger indication towards
something more than just team-based identity. Research has found that sometimes there is a connection between nationalism and team-selection (Heere & James, 2007; Kupfer, 2007; Mason, 2002). Could Fort Erie residents’ NHL team selection possibly represent a larger nationalistic or patriotic identity? For example, recent borderland research has found that Niagara residents have differing views and opinions with regards to the United States (Helleiner, 2016). Could there be some sort of interplay between the team selection of Fort Erie residents and their overall attitudes towards the United States? These sorts of quirks made Fort Erie a unique case study and warranted an interpretive research design.

Social identity theory acted as the theoretical framework for this study as I believed that hockey fans in Fort Erie have decided to support either the Leafs or the Sabres to extend their positive self-conception through their group membership. Although each individual may have had a differing opinion on what their positive self-conception was, I believed that each highly identified hockey fan made a conscious decision at some point to select one team over the other. The interest was in understanding why each fan selected the teams that they did and how the membership of that group reflects who they are as individuals. The theory acted as a framework and helped me guide my questions as well as my data analysis. Once I settled on the specific theory that would be used to act as a guiding framework, I began a literature review to better understand sport fans and their attitudes and behaviours.

**Fan Demographics**

To begin the literature review on sport fans, the most rudimentary way of analyzing a sports fan is to explore the relationship between the fan’s demographics and their team selection. As found in previous sport consumer behaviour literature, there are many factors that influence an individual’s decision to support one team over another. While much research has focussed on
antecedents to team fandom such as proximity, team success, and/or family influence, many scholars have discussed the impact that race, class, gender and/or age have on team selection. This section will review some of the previous works that focus on fan demographics and how they may potentially become precursors to fandom. To begin, we will review the research that investigates the effect of race on sport consumer behaviour.

Ketra Armstrong, a sport consumer behaviour researcher, discovered that race had an affect on the sport consumers’ motivations. Armstrong (2002) administered Wann’s (1995) Sport Fan Motivation Scale to a sample of sport consumers of colour to see if there were any differences in their motivations for being a sport fan; and also examined the salience of a cultural affiliation motive amongst this sample. Armstrong (2002) discovered that there were few differences with regards to sport fan motivations, however that cultural affiliation was indeed a viable motive for sport consumers of colour. Armstrong (2002) also discovered that contrary to previous research findings, there were no pronounced differences in gender preferences. Armstrong (2008) went on to find that there were significant differences in the importance of event culture (family appeal, interactions with other fans, event promotions, opportunity for entertainment) for sport consumers of colour. Furthermore, Blank, Sweeney and Fuller (2014) investigated the factors affecting African-American attendance to professional sporting events in the United States. The participants in this study consistently identified access and exposure to the sport as a major driver towards attendance (Blank, Sweeney & Fuller, 2014). Some other themes were performance and entertainment, atmosphere, comfort and convenience, and the social nature of the sport (Blank, Sweeney & Fuller, 2014). Another demographic that can have an impact on an individual’s sport fandom is that of class.
Heere and James (2007) discuss how team identity can be symbolic of other types of group identities, such as demographic categories and membership organizations. They mention that sport fans often identify with not only a sports team, but also the community that it represents (Heere & James, 2007). One category of an identity that a sports team may represent is that of Social Class Identity (Heere & James, 2007). Heere and James (2007) mention that although not as prominent as before, many sports teams were once founded with a connection to a specific social class. For example, many European soccer teams were founded by labour workers as a pastime and still hang on to that working-class identity to this day (Heere & James, 2007). According to this theory, fans of certain social classes may be inclined to support teams that represent these group identities. Another demographic that may affect a fan’s team selection could be that of gender.

Academics have investigated the differences between male and female sport fans (James & Ridinger, 2002; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2015; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016) and found that although both genders list the action of sports and the opportunity to escape from daily routine as the two main reasons for becoming a sport fan, females actually experience marginalization based on the assumption that they are inauthentic sport fans. Sveinson & Hoeber (2015) also found that female fans place less of an importance on knowledge and attendance, but rather define a fan as someone who enjoys the team and the sport, wears the colours and positively supports the team. Heere & James (2007) discuss how the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the National Basketball Association (NBA) provide a gender identity for their fans. They mention that NBA fans are 70% male and that WNBA fans are 70% female, indicating a preference in the gender of the athletes (Heere & James, 2007). Similar to gender, another fan demographic that can affect team selection is that of age.
Age is a demographic that can often be overlooked when looking to discern why an individual is a fan of a specific sporting franchise. Hyatt and Foster (2015) investigated the reasons why highly-identified sport fans could eventually become non-fans. One interesting finding was that they could group most of their participants into age-based cohorts who provided similar reasons for their de-escalation of team identification (Hyatt & Foster, 2015). Participants who were close in age shared similar stories depicting the reasons behind their descent in fandom (Hyatt & Foster, 2015). For example, the younger cohort cited the NHL lockout as a primary reason for the plunge in fandom while the older cohort discussed the league expansion as a leading factor (Hyatt & Foster, 2015).

Another study which examines age and sport fandom is that of Hyatt, Kerwin, Hoeber, and Sveinson (2018). While many studies have discussed how it is common for fandom to develop in children (Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010), these four were interested in reverse socialization of sport fandom; that is where parents become fans of their children’s favourite sports and sports teams through a similar socialization processes that often takes place when children become fans of their parents’ favourite sports and sports teams (Hyatt et al., 2018). In this study, the researchers discuss the implications of new technology on sport fandom. Hyatt et al. (2018) mention that today’s sport fandom is different from 20th century fandom, especially because of the access to technologies such as the Internet, social media, and sport-specific television packages that were not available in the recent past. They continue to discuss that similar to adults, children have access to these technologies too, therefore providing them with avenues and methods to become fans of teams independent of their parents’ preferences (Hyatt et al., 2018). The researchers finish this thought by writing “It is as if today’s children do
not need their parents to be a conduit to sports fandom the way that many of their parents did a
generation ago” (Hyatt, Kerwin, Hoeber & Sveinson, 2018, p 549).

Understanding that the demographics such as race, class, gender and age can all have an
affect on an individual’s team selection, it is also important to discuss the location of the fan and
whether their surrounding environment had any affect on their daily decisions and behaviours.
For example, hockey fans in Fort Erie would have spent most of their lives residing along the
international border between Canada and the United States. This geographic location may also
prove to be an antecedent towards their fandom. The following section will dive into the existing
literature on sport fan motives and the reasons why people choose to become sport fans.

**Motives for Becoming a Sport Fan**

The focus of better understanding people and their connections to sport teams arguably
began with Cialdini et al.’s (1976) research on basking in reflected glory (BIRG). BIRG refers to
when people make themselves look good in the eyes of others by associating themselves with
someone else’s accomplishments (Cialdini et al, 1976). This vicarious sense of accomplishment
is mirrored by Snyder, Lassegard & Ford’s (1986) notion of cutting off reflected failure (CORF).
CORF is the idea of distancing oneself from the failure of another (Snyder et al., 1986). Both
BIRG and CORF are executed in an attempt to generate a better self concept. An example of
how a fan may BIRG could be in the proclamation that “We Won!” when their team wins. On
the contrary, that fan may CORF by claiming that “They Lost!” when their team loses. Stemming
from Cialdini et al.’s (1976) study of BIRG, the literature on sport fandom began to focus on the
thoughts, behaviours and feelings of sport fans (Delia, 2017; Smith, Patterson, Williams, &
In 1993, Wann and Branscombe took a psychological approach to examine the affect and cognition of sport consumers (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Wann (1995) built on the psychological concept and took it further by creating the Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS), which he used to measure variations in fan motivation levels. The SFMS is based off previous research which discusses the eight common motives for sport fandom: eustress, self-esteem, escape from every-day life, entertainment, economic/gambling, aesthetic, group affiliation, and family (Wann, 1995). Wann, Schrader, and Wilson (1999) conducted three studies to further explore motivations among sport fans. They found that male sport fans are more likely to be motivated by eustress, self-esteem and aesthetics; female fans are more likely to be motivated by family needs; and male and female fans do not exhibit significant difference with regards to the other motives.

It is important to understand that while there are different motivations and reasons for becoming a sports fan, not all fans are created equally. In fact, there are different types and levels of sport fandom and many sport researchers have attempted to measure or categorize these groups by creating different scales and models. The following section will discuss the framework that was chosen for this study and elaborate on its details.

Levels of Team Fandom

There have been many efforts to create scales and theoretical models with the purpose of measuring and/or categorizing an individual’s level of fandom (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Kwon & Armstrong, 2004; Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Sutton et al., 1997; Wann, 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Funk & James (2001) criticize these attempts at measuring the levels of fan identification due to their sole focus on the behaviours of the fan. Funk & James (2001) discuss how a fan’s identification
goes beyond their behaviours - rather that the identification is more of a psychological connection to the team. This perspective made for one of the first articles that conceptualized fan identification outside of a business marketing orientation.

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), created by Funk & James (2001), helps categorize fans based on their psychological commitment to the team. Funk & James (2001) proposed that there were essentially four stages to sport fandom: Awareness, Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance (see Appendix B for a visual depiction) (Funk & James, 2001).

At the Awareness stage, the individual has knowledge that the team exists and is aware of who they are and what they do (Funk & James, 2001). For example, an individual at this stage would claim “I know about the Toronto Maple Leafs, they are a professional hockey team in the NHL”. This person does not have any affinity or real connection with the team - they are just simply aware that it is there.

At the Attraction stage, an individual would enjoy watching team games and would see them as a source of entertainment (Funk & James, 2001). For example, “I like the Toronto Maple Leafs. I have fun whenever I watch them play”. This individual would probably not identify as a fan because they have yet to form any strong connection with the team. They would simply view these sporting events as opportunities to socialize (Funk & James, 2001). Individuals at this stage may also be temporary fans, such as fans who support the team only when they are doing well or who take an interest in the team when there is a certain hype surrounding them (Funk & James, 2001). These spectators (ex., fans who casually attend games for the social aspect) and consumers (ex., fans who consume the team products because they like the colours) do not demonstrate attitudinal or behavioural loyalty to the team. Once an individual begins to
demonstrate these loyalties and creates a connection with the team, they will enter the Attachment stage.

When an individual is in the Attachment stage, they will identify as a team fan and feel a sense of attachment towards the team (Funk & James, 2001). For example, “I am a Toronto Maple Leafs Fan. I am happy when they win and upset when they lose”. Individuals at this stage will feel a sense of achievement when the team wins and vice versa when the team loses. They show actions of attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, such as: frequently attending/watching games, purchasing team merchandise and sport memorabilia, and demonstrating actions of joy or disappointment directly resulting from the team’s performance. At this stage, the individual feels a sense of belonging among other group members and they consider themselves to be part of the fan community (Funk & James, 2001).

The highest stage of the PCM is the Allegiance stage. At this stage, the individual will view the team as a direct extension of themselves (Funk & James, 2001). They will have a very strong connection with the team and team events will have a direct impact on their lives. For example, “I live for the Toronto Maple Leafs”. Fans at this stage consider their fandom as a key element of their identity and will have a very strong association with other fans in the fan community (Funk & James, 2001). Fans at the allegiance stage will show strong notions of behavioural and attitudinal loyalty, such as: having tattoos directly pertaining to the team, having season tickets, adjusting their personal life schedule to fit that of the team, and having feelings of aversion towards other groups of people based on the team’s on-field rivalries.

Moving beyond the PCM and the different levels of fandom, the literature review brought me to the various findings that have been discovered by previous sport consumer behaviour researchers to better understand some of the reasons a hockey fan in Fort Erie may choose to
support the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Buffalo Sabres. The following section will further elaborate on the different reasons sport researchers have found for individuals supporting their favourite franchises.

**Antecedents to Picking a Favourite Team**

There has been an abundance of research on the factors which lead to an individual’s connection to a team. Sport consumer behaviour researchers have long investigated the reasons and motivations that explain how people become fans of different teams. Previous research has discovered that a parental figure, more likely the father, will have a strong influence on team preference for younger sport fans (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). Another recurring theme is that of geographic proximity, meaning that fans are more likely to support the team that is closest to their place of residence (Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; James, Kolbe & Trail, 2002; Rooney, 1974, 1975; Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 2006).

It has been found that a sport fan will often support the team that is closest to them (Doyle, Lewis & Malmisur, 1980; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; Lock, Taylor & Darcy, 2011). Rooney (1974), a geographer who was interested in sport, defined the “fan region” as the geographical area where a significant portion of residents identify with a given team. Rooney (1974) also discussed how geographic proximity plays an important part in determining the team preference of a certain fan region. He mentions that the closer in proximity a community is to a specific franchise, the more likely that community is to have a larger population (and percentage) of fans for that team. Rooney (1975) also writes that loyalties to a team normally decrease in intensity as one moves away from the fan region. According to this theory, the majority of hockey fans in Fort Erie would be Buffalo Sabres fans considering how close the town is in
geographic proximity to the team (Fort Erie is located directly across the Niagara River from Buffalo, New York).

Fans will often build a connection between the team and the city and inevitably view the team as a representation of their city, resulting in a psychological connection with the team (Andrijiw & Hyatt, 2009; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Matsuoka & Fujimoto, 2002). The success of the team also plays a key factor in the reasons for the initial attraction to the team (End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick & Jacquemotte, 2002; Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996). Often, fans are attracted to a team because of a specific player who is on the team or because of the team colours and/or logo (Ahn, Suh, Lee & Pedersen, 2013; Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008; Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996). Andrijiw & Hyatt (2009) discovered that individuals who grew up in a fan region (Rooney, 1974) of a local team yet who supported a non-local team maintained their allegiances in an attempt to achieve feelings of uniqueness and belongingness. Sometimes, a fan may even develop a positive psychological connection with the team mascot (Schultz & Sheffer, 2018).

As demonstrated, there has been a strong focus in the field of sport consumer behaviour to investigate the motivations and antecedents that lead to sport fandom. However, many researchers have also discovered that there are also factors that result as constraints that deter or prevent an individual from supporting a specific franchise. The following section will look to discuss the existing literature that focusses on these constraints to fandom.

Constraints to Fandom

Sport consumer behaviour researchers have long sought after the understanding of what motivations and antecedents lead to/build team fandom. Much of a focus has been placed on
understanding how/why a fan chooses to select one team over the other, however few researchers have investigated the deterrents or obstacles that may prevent fandom. These constraints to team fandom will be further discussed in this following section.

Trail (2016) reflected on the work by Trail, Fink and Anderson (2003) and discussed the various implications and suggestions surrounding the proposed model of sport spectatorship and consumption. One of the implications of the model, as described by Trail (2016), is that of constraints. Trail defines constraints as “factors that impede or inhibit an individual from attending a sport event (Kim & Trail, 2010, p. 191), but can also be applied to any type of consumption behaviour, including media and merchandise consumption” (Trail, 2016, p. 227). Trail (2016) discusses how some fans may have internal constraints (ex., significant others may not be interested in the sport or team) and/or external constraints (ex., cost, lack of transportation, lack of access) that deter them from consuming the sport product. For example, a hockey fan in the town of Fort Erie may find the lack of television access to the Buffalo Sabres games as a reason to not be a fan, or possibly the high cost inherent in attending a Toronto Maple Leafs game as a deterrent to supporting the team.

Wann (2006) discusses the challenges of being a fan of a distant team in an area where the majority of fans support the same, local team. Wann (2006) suggests that because there are no inherent social connections in supporting a distant team, the fandom itself is not expected to provide the significant well-being benefits that are fundamental in building team identification. For example, one social connection that could result from supporting the popular team in the area (often the local team) could be the casual conversations that take place in the workplace regarding the sport franchise. These ‘water-cooler’ conversations provide an opportunity for the fan to build relationships with other fans of the same team, eventually strengthening their ties to
the larger social group (Wann, 2006). Wann (2006) discusses how it would be difficult for a fan of a distant team to encounter these experiences, rather they are more likely to be surrounded by fans of the rival team or by fans who do not necessarily care about the distant team. Wann (2006) suggests that this lack of social connection could possibly result in a decrease in team fandom. Another study that investigates fans of distant teams is that of Hyatt and Andrijiw (2008).

Hyatt and Andrijiw (2008) investigated the process by which fans raised in the vicinity of a team reject the local option in favour of supporting a distant team. In order to achieve this, they interviewed 20 non-local NHL hockey fans from Ontario, Canada. Hyatt and Andrijiw (2008) uncovered various answers that explained what attracted fans to their favourite (distant) teams, such as a specific player on the team, the team’s colour or uniform or possibly meeting some of the team’s players in person. However, the researchers also investigated the factors that lead to some of the fans’ rejection of the local team (Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008). One of these reasons was the cheering preferences of a family member, that is where the child consciously rejected the family member’s favourite in favour of cheering for a team he could call their own (Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008). Hyatt and Andrijiw (2008) claim that understanding how fans compare and reject sporting options/teams will help in understanding the process of becoming or not becoming a fan. Another study that used NHL fans to explore the notion of constraints to fandom is that of Hyatt and Foster (2015).

Hyatt and Foster (2015) investigated how once highly identified sports fans could become nonfans of a specific team. They interviewed 23 former NHL fans and grouped their answers into seven main categories: disillusionment with certain aspects of sport, disillusionment with the sport of hockey, issues at the NHL level, team-related characteristics now perceived as off-putting, individual players, the media, and various other outside influences they call “life”.
(Hyatt & Foster, 2015). One example of an outside influence could be if an individual gets a job that forces them to relocate. If the fan now lives significantly further away from the home grounds of their favourite team, they are obviously going to have less access to the team due to the great distance between the two. Over time, the lack of exposure is anticipated to result in a waning of team identification for the fan. Hyatt and Foster (2015) cite these changes in peoples’ lives as “life”.

After completing the thorough review on sport fan literature and garnering a better understanding of how people do/do not become fans of specific teams, the focus of the literature review will shift to better understand people who live in borderlands. More specifically, the literature review will narrow down to better understand Canadian borderland residents and finish with literature on those who live in the Niagara Peninsula.

**People Who Live in Borderlands**

According to the International Encyclopedia of Human Geography (2009), borderlands are “peripheral regions of nation-states where the two (or more) political, economic, and social systems of the nation-states meet”. Anzaldua (1999) and Rosaldo (1993) suggested border areas as places of interpenetrating spaces and more complex, nonunitary identities (Kearney 1995). In the 1980s and 1990s, the focus of borderland studies was on the “de-bordering” between nations that happened at various times and places, such as: the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the European Union, and the North American Free Trade Agreements (Helleiner, 2016). After the tragedies of September 11, 2001 (9/11), the heightened U.S.-led border securitization prompted a new focus in border studies - “re-bordering” (Andreas & Biersteker, 2003).
With regards to borderland studies involving Canadians, much of the research has focussed on a Canadian national identity (Canadianness) forged to combat a hegemonic Americanness (Kymlicka, 2003; Mackey, 1999; Winter, 2007). To date, there is very little work on the border life in the Niagara region. The few Canadian communities that have been explored in depth are Stanstead, Quebec; Point Roberts, Washington (accessible only through Canada); and the Mohawk Nation at Ahkwesáhsne (Helleiner, 2016). The lone scholar who has given attention to the Niagara region and its people is Jane Helleiner, a sociology researcher from Brock University. Helleiner’s (2016) *Borderline Canadianness: Border Crossings and Everyday Nationalism in Niagara* uses “interviews with border residents and local press reporting…to understand Canadianness as manifested in the everyday life of Canadian Niagara residents” (pg. 9).

With regards to nationalism, Helleiner (2016) found that Niagara residents had varying views and opinions regarding “the ways in which Canadian border residents enact and imagine their relationship to Canadianness” vis-à-vis the American other side (pg. 10). Helleiner (2016) found four major themes: Pretty Much the Same (as Americans), “Americanized” Canadians, Non-Americans, and Anti-Americans.

Interviewees who viewed both sides of the river (Canadian and American) as indistinguishable mentioned that Canadians and Americans who live along the border were “Pretty Much the Same” (Helleiner, 2016). Some interviewees went as far as to say that Canadian border residents were Americanized. These participants showed notions of “Americanized” Canadians (Helleiner, 2016) through their dialect (accent, vocabulary, etc.), the media they subscribed to, and in the political values they held. Interviewees who cited evidence of the way in which Canadian border residents were distinct from Americans provided evidence
of “Non-Americans” (Helleiner, 2016). Lastly, some interviewees suggested that frequent exposure to Americans could intensify Anti-Americanism (Helleiner, 2016). The findings of this work provide a much deeper insight into people who live in the Niagara region. Other information garnered from the interviews conducted by Helleiner are that: young, predominantly white residents of the Niagara region criticized the “racial profiling” border practices, yet often believed non-whites were appropriately targeted for greater surveillance (Helleiner, 2012); that border-crossings were a significant part of Niagara border childhoods (Helleiner, 2007); and that post 9/11, Niagara residents’ experienced a more strict, secure and “smart” border life (Helleiner, 2010).

To this point, the literature review has provided a better understanding of hockey fans and those who live in borderlands; in turn, providing context with respect to the individuals who participated in this study. Now that there is an understanding of the participants, the focus of the literature review will shift once again to better understand what the sport of hockey means to the country of Canada and whether that may have any significance in the participants’ decisions.

**Hockey as Canada’s Game**

Rooney (1974) writes that every country has a sports geography which is representative of its overall socio-cultural geography and the value system of its people. One example that he gives is that ice hockey is the national game of Canada (Rooney, 1974, 1975). A multitude of literature has been written connecting the nation of Canada and the game of hockey (Beardsley, 1988; Dryden & MacGregor, 1989; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Holman, 2004, 2009; Jackson, 1994; Kidd & Macfarlane, 1972; Mason, 2002). Some Canadians would go as far as to consider hockey to be a Canadian religion (Kidd & Macfarlane, 1972) while some would even consider hockey to be the “real national anthem of Canada” (Beardsley, 1988). Dryden & MacGregor
(1989) tell a story about the efforts to build new hockey rinks in very ‘Canadian’ communities such as Radisson and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. They discuss how important hockey is to Canada, especially to those who reside in smaller communities (Dryden & MacGregor, 1989).

On CBC’s The Greatest Canadian television series, Wayne Gretzky and Don Cherry were voted as the tenth and seventh greatest Canadians of all time, respectively (Dixon, 2004). The reasoning for this is because of their mastery and wisdom of Canada’s national sport - hockey. Canadians value hockey so much that many were utterly devastated when Wayne Gretzky was traded from the Edmonton Oilers to the Los Angeles Kings (Jackson, 1994). Many Canadians viewed Gretzky’s move as a betrayal towards Canada by both Gretzky and the Edmonton Oilers franchise (Jackson, 1994).

Although not all Canadians consider hockey to be their favourite sport, it most definitely serves as part of Canadian culture and national identity. Nationalism and sport fandom have been examined in conjunction with one another in previous studies (Garcia, 2012; Heere & James, 2007; Kupfer, 2007; Mason, 2002). Kupfer (2007) wrote about the ‘invasion’ of the Baltimore Football Club into the Canadian Football League and discussed the implications of the team making it to the Grey Cup championship game. Kupfer (2007) discussed how the league was steeped in Canadian tradition and that when Baltimore played in the Grey Cup, Canadians saw it as a battle of nation (Canada) vs. nation (America).

Mason’s (2002) article on media transnationalism and hockey also examines fans and nationalism. Mason (2002) writes that hockey is a large part of Canadian national identity and that when powerful forces outside of Canada interfere with the traditions of the game, many Canadians will feel threatened. The article mentions the FoxTrax puck of 1996, an effort made by an American television network (FOX) in an attempt to increase television ratings in the
United States (Mason, 2002). The FoxTrax puck was a glowing puck that allowed spectators to track the puck as it moved across the rink. Mason (2002) discusses how there were many issues with the final product and that American engineers were ignorant to the fact that the hockey pucks were frozen prior to play, demonstrating their extreme lack of knowledge on the sport. Canadians saw this attempt to Americanize the sport as an invasion and a threat towards their national identity (Mason, 2002).

One article that views the impact nationalism has on sport fandom from an opposing view is Garcia’s (2012) article on Barcelona Football Club’s (FC) fans. Garcia (2012) writes that it is well known that Barcelona FC is associated with the Catalonia region of Spain and that most people perceive the team’s triumphs as morale-boosting to the Catalan minority group. Garcia (2012) suggests that the link between the team and the political issues have been a bit over-exaggerated, that most Spanish fans who cheer for Barcelona actually support the team because they are originally from the area or currently reside there now. The study discusses how soccer fans in the Catalonia region of Spain simply support the team closest in geographic proximity (Garcia, 2012). Most Spanish fans are simply supporting the hometown team or the team that their families and friends cheer for, rather than a team which represents a larger nationalistic movement (Garcia, 2012).

Both Kupfer (2007) and Mason’s (2002) articles demonstrate just how patriotic people can become with regards to their perceived national sports. They demonstrate how many Canadians felt a threat from the USA and became defensive/anti-American with regards to national identity and sport. On the contrary, Garcia’s (2012) article effectively demonstrates how sometimes nationalism and patriotism take a back seat in sport. I was interested to see if a salient
theme of nationalism and patriotism arose when discussing the importance of being a Leafs/Sabres fan in Fort Erie.

The purpose of this literature review was to recap all of the previous work that may be relevant to the two research questions of the study: how do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie, Ontario begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs?; and how do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie, Ontario begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres? By better understanding the relevant works to this research study, it allowed me to identify the gap in the research and provided me with valuable information that would help me better explain the findings.
Methodology

In this section, I will outline the methods I used to conduct my research. I will discuss my data collection and analysis strategies, and I will also attempt to proclaim any biases that I have to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of my research. The two main sources I will be using throughout this process are *Qualitative Research: The essential guide to theory and practice* (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) and *Qualitative Consumer & Marketing Research* (Belk, Fischer & Kozinets, 2013).

Paradigm

The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Fort Erie residents who have decided to support either the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Buffalo Sabres. Savin-Baden & Major (2013) write that the purpose of a paradigm is to help guide the methodology and to help decide which ways to best collect and analyze the data. For this study, I conducted the research through a qualitative, interpretive lens. In the qualitative, interpretive paradigm there is no single, objective truth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In interpretive research the focus is on an emic perspective in that it will describe the behaviours and beliefs that are meaningful to the participant (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The purpose of qualitative research is to understand individuals, cultures and phenomena (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In qualitative consumer research, the goal is to retrieve richly detailed, contextualized data in naturalized settings (Belk, Fischer & Kozinets, 2013).

The interesting phenomenon of this study is that of the international border and how it affects the decision-making process of sport fans. After conducting the literature review, it occurred to me that the residents of Fort Erie would have many different identities (e.g., Maple
Leaves/Sabres fan, resident of Fort Erie, Canadian, father/mother, etc.). Semi-structured interviews were utilized to address these different identities as I realized it was important to ask questions about and understand the different identities of the Fort Erie residents. Social identity theory influenced my interview guide as I continuously referred back to the literature and considered the suggestions that were made regarding individual behaviours as I constructed the interview questions. For example, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) suggests that the most salient out-group which poses the largest threat for the in-group and in-group members to make positive comparisons between the groups will likely be considered the rival-group (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Understanding this, certain questions were asked about rivalry and attitudes towards rival teams and fan-groups. Another example can be seen in the questions regarding team representation of the community, as social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) suggests individuals will select groups that they perceive to reflect positively on their self-concept.

Data Collection

Demographic questionnaires. Demographic questionnaires were used to gather insights into the participants’ age, gender, occupation, race, and marital status. It was relevant to collect some basic demographic information on the participants in case there appeared to be some patterns between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Sabres fans and their demographics. The data gathered from these questionnaires was analyzed in conjunction with the interview transcripts to see if there were any interesting connections between the participants’ demographics and the motivations they cited that lead to their team fandom. Another purpose of the demographic questionnaire was to ensure that the participant was indeed an adult lifelong resident of Fort Erie.
**Semi structured interviews.** In-depth interviews are designed to get a deeper understanding of a topic that the informant can speak about, usually something that is important to the informant’s life on which they can share a great deal (Belk, Fischer & Kozinets, 2013). According to Belk, Fischer and Kozinets (2013), in-depth interviews form the core data collection activities of qualitative consumer research. Interpretive, qualitative interviews have the power to capture the contextual complexities inherent in the processes that define phenomena (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Denzin, 1989). In a semi-structured interview the researcher follows preset questions and also asks follow-up questions in response to participant comments and reactions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Unlike a structured interview where the questions must be asked in a set order, a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to be flexible and ask questions out of order if need be. A semi-structured interview probes discussion and follows ideas (Savin Baden & Major, 2013).

Sport consumer behaviour researchers have often encouraged and used interpretive modes of inquiry such as semi-structured interviews to better understand the meanings attached to the participants’ lived experiences (Andrijiw & Hyatt, 2009; Burns, 2014; Funk, Mahony & Havitz, 2003; Hyatt, 2007; Kates, 1998). I believed that it was appropriate to select the semi-structured interview method as I believed it to be the best way to elicit the information that I was seeking from my participants. The semi-structured interview method provided me with a guide to follow while interviewing my participants but afforded me the freedom to follow-up on interesting thoughts and ideas that arose throughout the interviews.

The interviews lasted from 25 to 65 minutes with an average length of 50 minutes, similar to what is common practice in the academic field (Belk, Fischer & Kozinets, 2013; Hyatt, 2007; Andrijiw & Hyatt, 2009). The respondents were free to choose the setting of the interview,
as long as it was appropriate. It was important to me that the informants felt comfortable in a naturalistic setting of their choice while participating in the interview. I knew that the physical surrounding could shape and influence the informants’ thoughts and actions (Lefebvre, 1991; Olson, 1987; Valentine, 1992); therefore, I allowed them to choose a setting where they could be most open and free to discuss their lived experiences as sport fans. All interviews were conducted at the participants’ houses, with the exception of one interview which was conducted at a table in a quiet corner of a restaurant. Although not necessarily an inappropriate setting, the restaurant proved to be a less ideal place to conduct an interview as there was quite a bit of background noise that was picked up by the audio-recorders. It also may have prevented the participant from sharing truly authentic information as they may have been cautious of the surrounding people in the restaurant. The interviews were recorded by two audio-recorders and later transcribed verbatim via the NVivo software program. As suggested by previous interpretive researchers, I wrote jotted notes as I conducted the interviews. These notes consisted of things that I noticed throughout the interview process - such as things that could not be recorded via audio-technology (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For example, when interviewing Jamie I made mention in my jotted notes that the interview was being conducted in his “man-cave” which was full of Toronto Maple Leafs sports memorabilia and that he immediately changed his outfit for the interview (a signed Toronto Maple Leafs jersey and a Toronto Maple Leafs hat that he has had since he was a child). Jamie informed me that although he had never actually gone to see a Toronto Maple Leafs home game, he was indeed the biggest Toronto Maple Leafs fan I would ever meet. By referring to my jotted notes, I was able to discern that he was indeed a highly identified Toronto Maple Leafs fan, regardless of the fact that he had never gone to see them play at home. Most of my notes consisted of certain ideas that I wished to ask
about in follow-up questions. I did not want to interrupt the interviewee’s train of thought, so I would make a note about something interesting they may have said and then I referred back to it in a follow-up or probing question when it was appropriate. Other uses of the jotted notes were any emergent themes, how I was feeling at the time, any second guesses I may have had with regards to my methodological decisions and any interesting vibes or note-worthy moods given off by the informants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Essentially, anything that may have been of importance or of interest to myself as an interpretive researcher (that could not be recorded by the audio recorder) was written in my jotted notes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For example, many of the interviewees changed the tone of their voice and body language when discussing matters that appeared to be important to them. They would take time in answering their questions and use a more serious tone, sometimes even readjusting their posture to sit more upright or closer to the table. This demonstrated that the subject matter may have been a delicate topic, leading me to carefully choose the wording of my follow-up questions. I made mention of these changes in language in my jotted notes and referred back to them when analysing the data. In this way, the jotted notes complimented the transcripts as they were able to provide more context to the quotations. The transcripts were completed verbatim and were sent back to the informants to ensure accuracy.

Two digital audio recorders were brought on site (in case one failed) and both were recording the interview. The audio files were stored on a password-protected computer and a password-protected Universal Serial Bus (USB) key. I stored the transcribed interviews on the same password protected computer and USB key and I used the Sound Organizer program to playback the interviews when transcribing them.
The informants were responsible for signing an informed consent form that was approved by Brock University’s Research Ethics Board. I guaranteed confidentiality as only my supervisor and I had access to the real names of the informants. During the transcription process, I provided each informant with a pseudonym that would be the name assigned to them for the rest of the research process. The informants were never told the names of the other individuals involved in the study and never saw the transcripts of other participants.

**Sampling.** The sampling method for this study was purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is “selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 1999). Particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide the required information (Maxwell, 2005). Considering I was looking for specific criteria in my informants (life-long, adult residents of Fort Erie who are highly identified Toronto Maple Leafs or Buffalo Sabres fans) purposeful sampling was inherent in my research focus. The plan was to use recruitment posters to solicit participants for the study, then ask for these individuals to refer my contact information to other fans who fit the criteria of the study and would potentially be interested in participating.

The recruitment posters (*Appendix C*) were the main form of recruitment for this study. After permission was granted, posters were placed in logical areas in the town of Fort Erie (sport bars, hockey arena, laundromats, libraries, public bulletin boards). The posters had tear-away strips that the potential interviewees were to tear-away and take home. These strips contained the wording “Fort Erie Hockey Study” and my contact information. They were hung at eye level and placed in a way so that they would not get lost on the overly crowded bulletin boards. Many people approached me while I was hanging up the posters as they were curious in the premise of the study. These encounters lead to four interviews, either with the individual who approached
me or through a recommendation or referral by the individual. The remaining interviews were a result of word-of-mouth sampling.

As mentioned earlier, Fort Erie is a smaller town and word-of-mouth spreads very easily and quickly. This ‘snowball’ sampling method is a form of purposeful sampling and has been used in previous qualitative research studies (Hyatt, 2007; Swain, 1999; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Taylor & Toohey, 1999). After each interview, the informants were asked to make referrals to other highly identified fans who fit the study’s criteria. I provided my contact information to all of my informants and hoped that they relayed this information to any other potential participants who they felt would be good for the study. This proved to be extremely valuable as many participants were gathered through this sampling method. Thankfully, many people who heard about the study were interested in the topic and volunteered to participate.

Once the interviewee contacted me, I sent them the letter of invitation (Appendix D) with a note explaining that if they agreed to participate, I would e-mail them the informed consent (Appendix E) and demographic questionnaire (Appendix F). Once I received these two documents back, I would book a setting for the interview. After the setting had been confirmed with the interviewee, I proceeded to conduct the interview. I transcribed the interview and then proceeded to e-mail (Appendix G) the transcript back to the interviewee (member-check) to ensure accuracy. As suggested by Esterberg (2002), it is good practice for qualitative researchers to give a copy of the tape or transcript to the interviewees afterwards to let them make any corrections or additions. I requested that the transcript be sent back by a certain date with any needed revisions or comments. Once I received the revised transcript back, I thanked the interviewee and had no further contact with that person.
Originally, 21 individuals had volunteered to participate in the study, however two of the individuals did not demonstrate the necessary behaviours or attitudes to be considered highly-identified fans. A third fan, although a very highly-identified fan, did not fit the criteria to be considered a life-long, Fort Erie resident. As a result, 18 interviews were conducted with nine Toronto Maple Leafs fans and nine Buffalo Sabres fans (see Appendix H for a chart containing the pseudonyms and demographic information of the participants). The reason for this was to ensure that I reached theoretical saturation. Data saturation is when enough data have been collected that the researcher is no longer hearing or seeing much new information (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Theoretical saturation is the point at which there are no more emergent patterns in the data (Gaskell, 2000). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest most interview studies typically involve 15 +/- 10 interviews. Many qualitative, interpretive sport fan studies have samples that fall into this recommended range (Doyle, Lock, Funk, Filo, & McDonald, 2017; Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008; Hyatt, Kerwin, Hoeber, & Sveinson, 2018).

The participants were at least 18 years of age and were life-long, adult residents of Fort Erie. The reason for selecting the 18-year cut off was because these people would have built strong enough identities over their lifetime through their various life experiences. For an individual to be considered a life-long, adult resident Fort Erie, a substantial portion of their life had to be lived in Fort Erie. The purpose of this was to eliminate the possibility of any participants who may have just recently moved to Fort Erie after having spent almost all of their life in another town or city. The participants also had to demonstrate a behavioural and attitudinal loyalty to their respective team in order to be included in the study as this was the conceptualization of a highly-identified fan in sport-fan literature (Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Hyatt, 2007; Mahony et al., 2000). In question 4, the interviewees were asked
how big of a fan they were, and it was primarily the answer to this question that lead me to dictate whether the participants were indeed highly-identified fans or not. Individuals who self-identified as highly-identified fans were included in the study.

**The questions.** Although the informants were given freedom to take the conversation in whichever direction they wished, I had 10 main questions which I used to guide the interview. The purpose of these questions was to understand what it was like to be a Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fan in Fort Erie and why an individual may select one team over the other. As such, the following 10 open-ended questions were discussed with each informant:

1. One of the big reasons I’m interested in studying Fort Erie hockey fans is that Fort Erie is a border-town. Before I ask any questions about hockey, I thought I’d start by asking you what it’s like to be a Canadian living in Fort Erie with the American city of Buffalo directly across the river?

2. What place did hockey have in your life before you were a Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fan?

3. How did you originally become a Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fan?

4. How big a fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres are you?

5. Tell me a story about a time when you were proud to cheer for/be a Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fan.

6. Tell me about your team’s biggest rivalry.

7. What is it like to be a Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fan in Fort Erie?

8. Why aren’t you a Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fan?
9. How do you feel about the Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres and their fans?

10. If a new fan was born in Fort Erie, why should they support the Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres over the Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres?

Question 1 was designed to extract how the interviewee felt about living so close to the United States and if that proximity had any effect on their behaviours and attitudes. From this question, most interviewees discussed whether they had an affinity or an aversion towards the USA, and why. This question was inspired by Helleiner’s (2016) work on the Niagara borderlands and her themes on Niagara residents and their attitudes towards the American other side. Question 2 was designed to help understand what hockey meant to the individual prior to their relationship with their favourite team. This question brought out interesting themes such as the cultural importance of hockey to the small town of Fort Erie, aside from the preferred professional franchises. The aim was to better understand the connections that people in the town had with hockey beyond the professional sporting context. Question 3 was designed to help better understand how and why the informant originally became a fan of their respective team. The purpose here was to learn what attracted them to the team in the first place. Questions 4 and 5 were designed to help me learn about the behavioural and attitudinal loyalties of the informants to their favourite team. These questions were also designed to help me determine whether the interviewee was indeed a highly-identified fan or not. It was important that the interviewees were in fact highly-identified fans who demonstrated a stable, enduring, significant psychological connection to the team. Question 6 was designed to see which out-group the interviewees listed as their biggest rival, and whether the fans of the two teams had similar opinions on who the biggest rival was. This question was inspired by the work of Tyler and Cobbs (2015, 2017), Havard (2014) and Havard, Wann and Grieve (2018) with regards to their findings on highly-
salient outgroups and rivalries. Question 7, 8 and 9 were designed to help understand any benefits or challenges the fans felt living in Fort Erie, and if there were any interesting feelings or attitudes the informants had towards the opposing team and their fanbase. Social identity theory discusses the affinity toward the in-group and aversion toward the out-group (Tajfel, 1978). Questions 7, 8 and 9 were also written to see if there were any interesting responses with regards to the out-group that was the rival team and their fanbase. Question 10 acted as a summarizing question, with the purpose of getting the interviewee to justify their decisions as to why their team was the right decision.

**Data Analysis**

It has been suggested by Liamputtong (2009) and Miles and Huberman (1994) to listen to, transcribe verbatim, and thematically analyze the data of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Once the interviews had been conducted and audio-recorded, the Nvivo program helped me to analyze and organize the data into codes and themes. The coding was done by first creating labels, and then by exploring the links and meanings of the themes found in the original codes. Throughout the analysis process, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) was utilized as it helped explain some of the behaviours or quotes that the interviewees shared during the interviews. The jotted notes were also helpful throughout the analysis process, one example being the notes on body language and tone of voice. As I read through the transcripts, notes were made where I felt the participants demonstrated behaviours that were suggested by social identity theory. For example, these behaviours ranged from acts of BIRGing (Cialdini et al, 1976), CORFing (Snyder et al., 1986), and GORFing (Havard, 2014) to making positive comparisons between themselves, the town of Fort Erie and their favourite hockey team. The interviews were transcribed verbatim because I believed it was important not only to understand what the informants had said, but also
how they had said it. As suggested by previous qualitative researchers, it is important to reproduce the speech as faithfully as possible without “cleaning up” too much (ex., avoiding correcting grammar or transforming spoken language into standard written English) (Esterberg, 2002).

Nvivo aided me in organizing the data into codes as I went through the thematic analysis process. A thematic analysis is a technique which focusses on presenting the data in unifying or dominant ideas that continuously reappear in the informants’ responses (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the data was transcribed, initial and axial coding was done in order to break the data into codes and make the connections between them (Liamputtong, 2009).

The initial coding phase was the first pass through the data which opened it up to theoretical categorization (Charmaz, 2006). In the initial coding phase, I identified themes and patterns that appeared within each interview and created labels for each theme. Following the initial coding phase was the axial coding phase. This next layer of analysis held the purpose of uncovering the meanings of the themes. Axial coding “involves a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open (initial) coding, by making connections between categories” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Essentially, axial coding looks at the data at a more conceptual level (Liamputtong, 2009). When coding and analyzing, I looked for key patterns such as revelatory statements, phrases, or key words which repeatedly appeared in the data. The purpose of this was to reduce the data and represent it in ways that answered my research questions yet still stayed true to the informants of the study.

**Trustworthiness.** To ensure trustworthiness, I first analyzed the data vertically (within each interview). After the initial and axial coding phases had been completed, I had my first ideas as to what themes existed within the data for each separate informant. Second, I analyzed
the data horizontally (across the interviews). This was to compare and connect the different codes which had already appeared within each separate interview. The horizontal analysis is the step which connected all of the interviews together, bringing light to key patterns and themes found across the entire data set.

Most of the people who were interested in participating in the study fit the required criteria aside from three individuals. Two of these three individuals were life-long residents of Fort Erie, however did not demonstrate any behavioural or attitudinal loyalties to their favourite franchise therefore were not considered to be highly-identified fans. The third participant was rejected because they moved to Fort Erie at the age of nine and therefore was not considered to be a life-long resident of the town since they had spent a significant portion of their life in Toronto, Ontario.

Member checks were also conducted to ensure trustworthiness. After the interviews had been transcribed verbatim, each participant was sent a copy of their transcript and was afforded the opportunity to make any edits that they deemed necessary. Of the 18 participants, 15 answered these e-mails stating that they were okay with the transcripts and that they did not wish to make any edits. The other three simply did not answer the member check email, therefore it was assumed that they were pleased with the transcription.

Lastly, conversations that were held with my supervisor and with like-minded researchers at a similar stage of development helped build rigour and trustworthiness throughout the research process. I also took jotted notes throughout the interviews to help solidify any ideas I may have had that may not have been captured by the audio-recordings (e.g., Jamie insisted that his interview be conducted in his basement which was decorated in Toronto Maple Leafs memorabilia).
**Findings and Discussion**

The intention of this research study was to interpretively understand the lived experiences of highly identified hockey fans in the town of Fort Erie, Ontario. Understanding that the two preferred teams in the town were the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Buffalo Sabres, the aim was to better understand why someone would pick one team over the other when there were logical reasons to support either team. A secondary motivation for completing this study was to contribute to an underdeveloped area in sport consumer behaviour literature. While some work has been published on borderland areas and borderland residents, research on borderland sport fans is essentially nonexistent.

Additionally, this study was also meant to satisfy my intellectual curiosity and to hopefully shed light onto the ways that the values, attitudes, and beliefs of borderland residents affect their decisions and behaviours. With these intentions in mind, all participants had to be adult, life-long residents from the town of Fort Erie, Ontario who were highly identified hockey fans of either the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Buffalo Sabres. The answers and reasons provided by the interviewees hold great value when one considers how the decision-making motivations for this population are unique and that there are a multitude of borderland areas in the world who find themselves in similar situations.

To better understand these motivations, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to answer the following two research questions:

1. How do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs?
2. How do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres?
The previous chapter discussed the methodology that was used for this study, with specific attention given to the methods used to gather and analyze the data. This chapter will present the interesting discoveries made with regards to the previous two research questions. Before moving forward, it is important to mention the framework used to help structure this research. Tajfel’s (1978) social identity theory acted as a guiding framework for this study and helped to better understand the attitudes and behaviours of the participants involved. My previous life experiences as a Fort Erie resident and as a highly-identified sport fan also helped me understand the emic perspectives of the interviewees as I was the instrument that conducted the research (Appendix I).

As suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Liamputtong (2009), data analysis occurred in two steps of coding – initial and axial. With the guidance of this analysis method, I was able to discover two major categories with themes attached to each category:

1. Factors that lead to the inception of fandom
   a. Television accessibility as an antecedent to becoming a fan
   b. Dual-citizenship and exposure to Buffalo as an antecedent to fandom
   c. Career choice and the team as a representation of the community
   d. National pride as a precursor to team selection

2. Factors that allow for the maintenance of fandom
   a. Geographic proximity and affordability as a way of maintaining fandom
   b. Attitude towards the USA helping maintain fandom
c. Perceived fan culture helping maintain fandom

The categories and themes outlined above arose organically through the demographic questionnaires and interview discussion with the participants. I interpreted the data as the primary researcher and deemed any feelings, notions or ideas as a theme if it related to or helped answer my research questions. Throughout this chapter, an analysis of all of the collected and interpreted data will be presented and discussed. Before delving into the nuanced findings, I feel it is important to discuss the typical antecedents to sport fandom that had been found in previous literature and whether they applied to the hockey fans in Fort Erie.

Typical Antecedents to Fandom

Before elaborating on the findings in the data that demonstrate how hockey fans in Fort Erie are unique to other sport fans, I find it important to discuss the similarities in the motivations found in previous research on sport fans and the individuals who participated in this study. This section will demonstrate that there were indeed examples of the usual reasons that previous researchers have listed as antecedents to sport fandom. For example, previous literature suggests that through a socialization process, parents (especially dads) are typically a key reason why someone chooses a specific team as their favourite (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). In this study, eight of the 18 fans claimed that they originally became a fan of their favourite team because of their parents. Interesting enough, all of these fans were Toronto Maple Leafs fans with the exception of one Buffalo Sabres fan (this is probably due to the fact that the Sabres came into existence in 1970). The following is a quotation from Mitch, a 31-year old Leafs fan, who had this to say when asked how he originally became a fan of his favourite team.
I would say mostly parents, my dad and my mom were Leafs fans. So, that’s obviously the team that they’re going to watch, so it’s on in my house.

Another fan who discusses the origin of their fandom as being inherited from a parent is Jamie, a 27-year old Leafs fan.

From what I can remember, I would say that my father had a huge impact on that. My father was a huge fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs. We had Toronto Maple Leafs gear in our house. My dad watched every game. I watched games with my dad and I think I inherited the Maple Leafs team through him… Growing up you look up to your old man and I wanted to be just like my dad and he liked the Maple Leafs so I liked the Maple Leafs.

Another discovery in previous literature that also appeared in this study was the interest in key players (Ahn, Suh, Lee & Pedersen, 2013; Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008; Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996). Many fans mentioned their favourite players when telling stories about their favourite team. Sandy, a 57-year old Leafs fan, recapped his memory of Darryl Sittler, a former Toronto Maple Leafs player. In this quotation, Sandy alludes to the fact that Leafs fans got excited about the players on the team partially due to the lack of success by the franchise.

Seeing that they never did anything to cheer about when I was growing up, their last Cup was in the mid-60s and I was only four, five, six years old, so I didn’t really partake in any of the heyday that they had. However, when they brought a player in, his name was Darryl Sittler, he was a centre for the Leafs, and one night he got 10 points. And watching that game was just like nothing else. I mean, you’ve seen one of the greatest
Leaf players ever scoring 10 points in one night was something to cheer about because we never had a Cup to cheer about.

One fan who mentioned a player as the leading reason behind their sport fandom is Luke, a 29-year old Sabres fan, whose father was good friends with a former Buffalo Sabres player.

So, I became a Sabres fan - one of my dad’s best friends growing up was Randy Burridge. Randy Burridge played for the Sabres in the 90s… You know, Randy was at my house, he’d come over in the summer time to see my dad. He’d take me on team skates and stuff like that. So, it was a logical step for me.

Another fan who mentioned an attraction to a specific player from their favourite franchise is Jamie, a 27-year old Leafs fan. Jamie mentioned that the inception of his fandom originated from his desire to be like his father, however that his connection to the team was strengthened through his affinity for Doug Gilmour, a former Toronto Maple Leafs player.

I would say that I – you know you pick your favourite player out on a team or on the ice and my favourite player growing up was Doug Gilmour. Doug Gilmour played for the Maple Leafs, he was the captain for the Maple Leafs. And that’s when I learned to love the Maple Leafs.

Another factor influencing sport fandom for these participants was team success (End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick & Jacquemotte, 2002; Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996). Of the 18 participants, only one fan (Joe, a 61-year old Leafs fan) discussed the success of the team as a leading antecedent towards their sport fandom. This is probably due to the fact that neither team has won a championship since the Toronto Maple Leafs last won in 1967. This is what Joe had to say.
I was playing hockey when I was five/six years old, and my dad used to – cliché kind of answer – but my dad used to put the TV on and the Leafs came on because that was the only game in town, so I started watching the Leafs when I was five or six. When I was 10, they won the Cup, and I’ve been hooked ever since… I watched the last game, game six. They beat Montreal 4-2. I think Armstrong scored an empty net goal, I’m not 100% sure. But, yeah, I mean it was a long time ago, but I was watching.

As demonstrated in this section, many of the findings discovered by previous sport consumer behaviour researchers were relevant to the hockey fans in Fort Erie. While some antecedents were more commonly found than others (ex., parental figure vs. team success) there was still evidence of many motivations found in the literature. This not only helps justify the prior works completed in the field, but also draws comparison between the hockey fans in Fort Erie and the other fans studied in the past. The following sections will discuss the more nuanced, contextual findings.

**Factors That Lead to the Inception of Fandom**

When analyzing the data, it seemed appropriate to separate the research questions into two parts. Firstly, an analysis of anything regarding the inception of the interviewees’ fandom was identified. Then, anything that demonstrated the factors which allowed for the maintenance of fandom were further investigated. The factors that lead to the inception of fandom were broken down into the following four subcategories: television accessibility as an antecedent to becoming a fan, dual-citizenship and exposure to Buffalo as an antecedent to fandom, career choice and the team as a representation of the community, and national pride as a precursor to team selection. To begin, I will discuss the interplay between age, television accessibility, and the inception of fandom.
Television accessibility as an antecedent to becoming a fan. As previously noted in the literature review section, sometimes there are patterns between the demographics of a sport fan and their team selection or fan motivations (Garcia, 2012; Heere & James, 2007; James & Riding, 2002; Lang, 2018; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2015, 2016; Theodorakis et al., 2017; Wann, Schrader & Wilson, 1999). While these studies have focused on demographics such as gender, age, race, and class, the use of a demographic questionnaire in this study was to see if there were any patterns in the data with regards to the demographics of the fans and their corresponding fan groups. The most interesting demographic difference between the two sets of fans was that of age. While it may seem obvious now, it never occurred in the beginning that age would be a factor when comparing the two groups. Of the Buffalo Sabres fans, the oldest was 42 and the average age was 30. The oldest Toronto Maple Leafs fan was 61, with an average age of 40 for the group. It is most definitely interesting that on average the Toronto Maple Leafs fans were 10 years older than Buffalo Sabres fans. One would attribute this to the fact that the Buffalo Sabres did not come into existence until 1970, while the Toronto Maple Leafs had been in the NHL since the league’s inception. This may be because the older hockey fans typically only had television access to Toronto Maple Leafs content.

Considering Fort Erie is a Canadian town, standard television units typically only received Canadian content (prior to the digital television era, few people may have been able to receive over-the-air broadcast signals from Buffalo, New York to watch Sabres games). Therefore, it would be relatively difficult for a Sabres fan to watch their team on television without some sort of additional sports package. Therefore, it made sense as to why there was an age discrepancy between the two sets of fans. The older fans discussed how being able to watch Maple Leafs games on television played a major role in their decision to support the team,
further supporting the work by previous researchers on this topic. James (2001) discovered that children form preferences towards sports team at a relatively young age, and that they are capable of forming a commitment to a specific team as early as age five. Many participants in this study discussed how they often watched sports on television with their dad, which helped build the fandom towards their favourite team (James, 2001). Wann, Tucker and Schrader (1996) discuss how fans are likely to support a team that receives a substantial amount of media coverage (radio, television, newspaper media). Wann (2006) discusses the benefits of supporting a local team, mentioning that access to the team through local media outlets helps strengthen the connection a fan has to both the team itself and other fans of the team. Many researchers discuss the affect of various socializing agents (parents, siblings, friends) on younger fans and how they can positively or negatively influence a young individual’s decision to support one team over another (James, 2001; Kenyon & McPherson, 1973; Kolbe & James, 2000). Pu and James (2017) suggest that for distant, ‘non-local’ fans, an early socializing agent could in fact be media. As the literature suggests, having media access to a specific sport franchise can significantly help create and/or maintain one’s fandom with the team.

Joe, a 61-year old Leafs fan, discussed how the Toronto Maple Leafs were the only team that was televised when he was growing up as a child.

So, I was playing hockey when I was five/six years old, and my dad used to – cliché kind of answer – but my dad used to put the TV on and the Leafs came on because that was the only game in town, so I started watching the Leafs when I was five or six. When I was 10, they won the Cup, and I’ve been hooked ever since.
Joe also went on to discuss how many of the hockey fans in Fort Erie who were above a certain age had already created a connection to the Maple Leafs franchise, and the new expansion team of the Sabres was not going to alter that.

I mean people that were, say born in ’65/’70 and up, they got to experience a new NHL franchise in Buffalo. So, that would have influenced them big time you’d think. It’s just people that are, I would say 55/60 and up, wouldn’t have had any exposure to the Sabres until they came in, and we would have already had our allegiance to probably one of the big – you know the original six. Some people have changed. I mean, I’d like to see the Sabres do good too, but I’ve just been a Leaf fan all my life, so.

Another important factor with regards to television broadcasts was that of Hockey Night in Canada. Hockey Night in Canada had a large influence on youth around the country as they often only broadcasted Toronto Maple Leafs games (Williams, 2013). Therefore, many of the hockey fans in the town, especially those above a certain age, would have only been able to watch the Toronto Maple Leafs on television. Sandy, a 56-year old Leafs fan, discussed this phenomenon.

Well, when TVs were not abundant, it was a Saturday night and Wednesday night phenomenon that we would sit in front of the TV and watch the Leafs play Hockey Night in Canada on Saturdays and Hockey Night in Canada on Wednesdays. If it wasn’t for Hockey Night in Canada I wouldn’t have ever seen a game. First of all, our centre back then, we didn’t have the Sabres here. So, going to Toronto was just a pipe-dream. So you never - it was just too far away. Transportation wasn’t what it is today. You know, the infrastructure wasn’t there. And not only wasn’t it there, it was very expensive. You
know, being a son of an immigrant labourer, it was difficult to partake in any kind of sports viewing. So, the TV offered that to young boys and girls around the nation.

Similar to Sandy, Mitch, a 31-year old Leafs fan, had positive experiences with Hockey Night in Canada. He explained how the Leafs were the only accessible team to the region.

You have Hockey Night in Canada. It’s a Saturday night thing, you’re into Don Cherry, you’re into the whole thing as a hockey fan, and your most accessible thing is the Leafs. It’s on Saturday, it’s on national television, so even if you only had antenna at that time, didn’t have cable, you’re getting that Saturday night game… You’re guaranteed every Saturday that you’re getting the Leafs, you’re not guaranteed every Saturday that you’re getting Edmonton, or every Saturday you’re getting Calgary. So, being from Ontario, that’s accessible… it would have been tough back in those days to watch a Buffalo Sabres game. You wouldn’t have the channels. You know, satellites were kind of out there but, so unless you really had that you couldn’t watch them unless they were playing the Leafs.

Brad, a 39-year old Leafs fan, discussed how he only had access to the Toronto Maple Leafs as a child. When asked how he used to access the Leafs, this is what he had to say.

Hockey Night in Canada. Or, like I said, my uncle who was a hockey player himself, lived two doors down from me on a dead-end street in Fort Erie. I was close with all my family, so I would walk down and sit in the kitchen and listen to the game on the radio. Right, because it was always about the stories and it was always on. We grew up just before cable or right around cable, so you either catch what you can catch on rabbit ears
or listen on the radio. And then when we got cable, you know what I mean, CBC always had the Leafs games on Saturday nights.

These previous quotations demonstrate how the older fans in Fort Erie cite being able to watch the Toronto Maple Leafs on television as a key factor in their decision to supporting the team. Understandably, this provides context into the difference in age between the two fan groups of this study. This discrepancy may simply be because the Buffalo Sabres did not exist until 1970. Previous literature suggests that fans of an existing team may not necessarily switch their allegiance to a new, closer expansion team because of the team-fan bond that may have already materialised between the fan and the already existing team (Harada, & Matsuoka 1999). Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) suggests that when an individual becomes a member of an in-group, all other groups automatically become out-groups. According to this notion, Toronto Maple Leafs fans would have viewed the Buffalo Sabres organisation and their new fans as an out-group, preventing them from accepting the team as a favourite. Furthermore, it can be assumed that once the team did come into existence many of the older, highly identified fans had already built their allegiances to the Maple Leafs and were reluctant to switch over to the new expansion team in the Buffalo Sabres. Although television accessibility is not imperative to sport fandom, it can serve as a potential catalyst in helping create fans of specific teams.

Moving beyond the relationship between television accessibility and team selection, the next subcategory will focus on the fans in Fort Erie who are dual-citizens and how having more of an exposure to Buffalo may have been a motivating factor in their decision to support the Sabres.

**Dual-citizenship and exposure to Buffalo as an antecedent to fandom.** While it was originally assumed that all of the participants would be Canadian, it turned out that many of the
Buffalo Sabres fans were actually dual-citizens of Canada and the United States. In fact, six of the nine Buffalo Sabres fans were dual-citizen, while only one of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans was a dual-citizen. An individual with dual-citizenship cannot be denied access to either country (Canada or the USA), which could mean that they may be more likely to spend more time in Buffalo. Much of this information was revealed when the interviewees were asked about what it was like living directly across the border from Buffalo, New York. Luke, a 29-year old Sabres fan, discussed what life is like as a dual-citizen in Fort Erie.

So, I’m dual-citizen, so I hold citizenship in both countries. So, I’m entitled to live, study, work, anything I want to do in the States, so it’s a big benefit to be able to have those opportunities as well as those interactions with the different way of living, different ideologies… I view Buffalo more as an opportunity for growth, or employment, or when I was in school – education. Where most people don’t get to see it as that opportunity. I don’t have to apply for visas to go to school there, so I definitely view it differently. For me it’s another extension or another avenue for living. Where most people, it’s a harder process to get over there and live. They have to go through a lot of government paper work that I can just walk across and pick up and start my life there without any questions. So, it’s definitely different for me.

Luke also mentioned that he still has family in the United States, and because of that he still frequently travels across the border to spend time with relatives.

It’s definitely easier for me in the sense that I can’t be denied access into their country just like I can’t be denied access into Canada. The biggest reason I spend more time over there is I still have family there. Right? So, being a dual-citizen, my mom’s American,
born in the States, I have a family in the States still to this day in Buffalo. Tonawanda (a city in metropolitan Buffalo), so I definitely spend more time there because of it.

Another participant who discussed their lived experiences as a dual-citizen was Gunner, a 28-year old Sabres fan. When asked if he ventures across the border more frequently because of his dual-citizenship, Gunner answered with the following.

Oh yeah, I mean I’ve driven down from Hamilton just to go get pizza. But, I get groceries, and I’ll get other things. I’ll visit my family, but you know what I mean. I spend a lot of time over there. The food, the wings, the pizza, you know. You go to the border and they’re like “hey, what are you coming over for?” “I’m just going to get wings.” They’re like, “they don’t have wings in Canada?” I’m like “No, not like down here.” It’s so much different, and people don’t realize it.

These quotations demonstrate the likelihood of dual-citizens to cross the international border. While this is not to suggest that Canadian citizens would have a difficult time crossing, it was agreed upon by all the dual-citizens that they felt crossing over to the American side was easier for them because they could not be denied entry. If these folks (dual-citizens) spent more time in the city, it can be assumed that they had more of an exposure to the city itself and were able to develop a deeper appreciation for all things “Buffalo”. A manifestation of an affinity towards the city could very well have began through spending more time in the city itself, therefore resulting in the inception of fandom towards the city’s sports teams.

Previous literature on Niagara residents demonstrates that people who live amongst the border view citizenship differently. Hellener (2016) discovered that some Niagara residents feel they are “Americanized” Canadians or pretty much the same as Americans, while others
identified as non-American or anti-American. Those who felt as though they were Americanized Canadians or pretty much the same as Americans may not align with the individuals involved in other Canadian borderland research which typically focussed on Canadians often attempting to combat a strong, hegemonic Americanness (Kymlicka, 2003; Mackey, 1999; Winter, 2007). Rather, these people were welcoming of the United States and its people and culture (Helleiner, 2016), resulting in their ability to remove the “otherness” feel that many other borderland Canadians may experience. In this study, the Buffalo Sabres fans seem to have experienced this in one way or another (primarily by having dual-citizenship). Many fans discussed how they frequently crossed the border and spent much time in Buffalo. As a result, they may have developed an identification with the city of Buffalo, preventing them from perceiving any such hegemonic Americanness as previously noted by other Canadian borderland residents (Kymlicka, 2003; Mackey, 1999; Winter, 2007).

The border itself is also a very interesting factor that may have had an impact on the identities of the borderland residents and their team selection. Prior to the attacks of September 11th, 2001, when there were less restrictions and requirements for those crossing the border, there was a greater flow of border residents who would regularly cross back and forth (Helleiner 2007; 2010). It is possible that during that time, fewer Niagara residents would have perceived the United States or Buffalo as an out-group (Tajfel, 1978) because of how frequently they would have visited the city. In fact, there may have been more who aligned with Helleiner´s (2016) groups of Niagara residents who perceived their national identity as “Americanized” Canadians or pretty much the same as Americans. By creating more restrictions and regulations for those crossing the border, a resulting segregation of the two border-communities developed as fewer residents crossed on the same regular basis (Helleiner, 2007; 2010). This inadvertent
separation of the two countries’ residents may have created more of a disparity between the two groups (Canadians and Americans) (Tajfel, 1978). While many may have been able to perceive the two groups as a single in-group before September 11th, 2001, it is easy to understand if fewer people feel this way now that less residents travel across the border on a regular basis. It appears that the Fort Erie hockey fans who are dual-citizens are able to have two “in-groups” when it comes to their identity from a nationalism perspective. They identify as both Canadians and Americans, possibly removing the national identity factor with regards to team selection.

As demonstrated in the previous quotations and through the team preference of those who identified as dual-citizens, there is a clear pattern between the national identities of the Fort Erie hockey fans and their team selection. Almost all of those who identified as having dual-citizenship were Buffalo Sabres fans, suggesting that their life experiences may have lead them to support their team over the Toronto Maple Leafs in ways that the Canadian citizens never experienced. The next interesting finding revolves around the difference in career choice of the fans and whether they perceived their favourite teams as a representation of the Fort Erie community.

**Career choice and the team as a representation of the community.** The last interesting demographic when comparing the two fan groups was the career choice and occupations of the fans. Of the nine Toronto Maple Leafs fans, only one had a blue-collar occupation, while three of the nine Buffalo Sabres fans held blue-collar positions. Some of the blue-collar occupations for the Buffalo Sabres fans were a train conductor, a crane operator, and an engineer. The only blue-collar position held by one of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans was by the oldest fan in the group, Joe, who was 61 and was a retired maintenance mechanic. It is important to discuss the career paths of the fans with respect to their team selection because often fans will support teams that
they see as a representation of their community (Clopton & Finch, 2011; Heere, 2016).

According to Luke, a 29-year old Sabres fan, Fort Erie was traditionally an industrial town with blue-collar workers. He felt as if the city of Buffalo and the Buffalo Sabres actually represented that workman-like mentality of the town.

Yeah, you know what, Fort Erie again was a small town built on industry. The industry’s left, so-to-speak now, it’s changed. But, when Buffalo (Sabres) came into existence in the 1970s Fort Erie was definitely still an industry town…. Fort Erie was a small, workingman’s town, it wasn’t you know, high-rises and corporate offices. It was small, local mom-and-pop businesses. Family community, everybody knows each other. Walk down the street, say hi to a dozen people. So, they definitely follow a workman-like town much like Buffalo….And, [the Sabres] have always felt like they’ve had something to prove. Because, being in the area they’re in, they’re in Toronto’s shadow much like Toronto was Montreal for the longest time. And, I think the city bought into that, because Buffalo’s always tried to market themselves as a workman, you know a blue-collar city. They work hard, you know they’re good home-bodied people… And they embrace it so-to-speak in that they were happy to be our blue-collar, hard-working team that was amongst the community, played for the community. And they were proud of that, and the fans were really proud of that too.

When asked if the Buffalo Sabres represented Fort Erie, Franklin, a 27-year old Sabres fan agreed that they indeed did. However, Franklin discussed how the team represented the hard-working, “scrappy” nature of the town rather than referring to its working-class status.

I think they represent Fort Erie a lot more than people like to think. I think they represent Fort Erie a lot more than I think. Here’s this scrappy, little team that continues to fight
and dig and stay relevant, and I think Fort Erie’s the same way. Whether it’s trying for the last five years to put in a NASCAR racetrack, or trying to keep the horse racetrack afloat, or trying to bring the slots back in, trying to beg the Ontario government to leave the hospital as it was. I think Buffalo is the same way, where (the) Buffalo (Sabres) were thinking about moving somewhere else and the team was just decimated, but they seemed to continue to claw back and scrape and continue to stay relevant in a world that, unless you’re big and bad, you’re not going to get noticed. So, I think Fort Erie is a lot like that.

Another fan who felt a comparison between the town of Fort Erie and their favourite team was Tom, a 31-year old crane operator who is a Sabres fan. When asked if the Sabres represent the town of Fort Erie, Tom discussed the struggling economic nature of the town.

Maybe they do. Because, you gotta think about it. Buffalo’s been a bad city for a long time, right? And, Fort Erie’s kind of taken that trend. Fort Erie’s not doing so good. There’s not a lot of work, there’s not a lot of future for the young generation, right? It’s hard because you want people to stick around and you want them to see the long-term goal, and it’s relatable because the Sabres are the exact same way. If you told me three years ago that we’d have some real big up-and-comers that were kind of nobody’s right now, but they were going to make the team, not playoff contention but definitely a lot more wins than losses, you know it’s kind of like Fort Erie. Whereas they keep promising a lot of things and maybe if we stick around it will work but, you just gotta have people that believe in the cause. It’s kind of like we’re the same thing, whereas one day it will be a big, thriving industry or a big, thriving team with a lot of believers and a lot of supporters and a lot of people in the community that want to be there.
YOU’RE ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER

Referring back to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), individuals will often choose to be members of groups that they perceive to reflect positively on their self-concept (Lock & Heere, 2017; Tajfel, 1969). All of the interviewees, regardless of team selection, had favourable opinions of their hometown and were proud to be from Fort Erie. When analyzing the answers of these fans after they were asked if their team represented the Fort Erie community, it was interesting to discover that many of those with traditional blue-collar career paths (who were mostly Buffalo Sabres fans) agreed that their team did indeed embody the characteristics of Fort Erie. The characteristics differed from interview to interview, however it was interesting to note that while most of the Buffalo Sabres fans agreed their team represented Fort Erie well, the Toronto Maple Leafs fans rejected the idea of their team being a good representation of their community. In fact, some Maple Leafs fans went as far as to say that the Buffalo Sabres were a better representation of Fort Erie when considering the economic state of the city and town.

Keeping with a social identity theory lens (Tajfel, 1978), those fans who made favourable comparisons between their hometown and their favourite hockey team would be effectively fostering their positive self-concept through their group association. For example, those Sabres fans who identified as “blue-collar” and also identified the team as “blue-collar” would have created a match between the two compatible identities, effectively strengthening the relationship they have with the team. It does not appear that the Toronto Maple Leafs fans ever made that connection between occupational identity and team identity, perhaps suggesting that “white-collar” identities and fan identities do not align as readily for these participants.

The last factor that was found to lead to the inception of fandom was the national pride of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans. While the Buffalo Sabres fans may very well have been patriotic,
the Toronto Maple Leafs fans often cited their national identity as a precursor to their decision to support English-Canada’s team.

**National pride as a precursor to team selection.** One of the ongoing arguments made by many of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans in the town of Fort Erie was that it was their civic duty to support a Canadian team over an American team. While not all of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans agreed with this notion, it most definitely appeared as a major theme. The Buffalo Sabres fans seemed to mock this idea, claiming that many American teams are made up of Canadian players and that it was not the Canadian national team that was in question. As mentioned in the literature review, hockey is a very salient sport to Canadian culture, especially within smaller Canadian communities such as Fort Erie (Beardsley, 1988; Dryden & MacGregor, 1989; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Holman, 2004, 2009; Kidd & Macfarlane, 1972; Mason, 2002). Understanding the importance of hockey to Canada and the ways in which Canadians can feel ‘threatened’ by American culture (Helleiner, 2016; Mason, 2002), it was very easy to understand the stance many Toronto Maple Leafs fans took when citing their national identity as a reason to support their favourite hockey team. Romeo, a 31-year old Leafs fan, had this to say when asked why he was not a Sabres fan.

Before falling in love with the Leafs, I’d much rather cheer for a Canadian team even if it was the Vancouver Grizzlies, than I would for the Sabres or Bills. I’d much rather cheer for a Canadian team regardless of their skill level or numbers in the standings than I would an American team…period.

Clearly, Romeo felt a strong patriotic sense to support a Canadian team over an American team, regardless of the sport. Another Leafs fan who had a similar opinion on the matter was Sandy, 56-years old, who had this to say when asked why he was not a Sabres fan.
Yes, you’re right, Buffalo is closer, but that’s another country… you’re a Canadian. I’m a Canadian. So, I would like to think that I would support Canadian sports phenomenon before I leave my roots to go support a US team… I support the Leafs for many different reasons, as I have mentioned earlier. But, certainly national pride is one of the reasons I do so. I’m a proud Canadian.

At the end of the interview, Sandy was asked why a new fan in Fort Erie should support the Toronto Maple Leafs over the Buffalo Sabres. His answer was very concise and to the point.

National pride. I said it earlier, and I’ll say it again. We have something to be proud of in this country. Sports is one of them.

Mitch, a 31-year old Leafs fan, discussed the importance of the Hockey Night in Canada television broadcast to young Canadian children across the country. He spoke about how he remembered Don Cherry (a Canadian ice-hockey commentator, former player and coach) and the “Canadian” values that were instilled in him as a young boy.

I think that also helps you become more patriotic as a young kid too. I think Don Cherry did a good job of, it’s hockey and back then he had the Rock’Em Sock’Em videos, and so those were a big thing. So, he was a big celebrity, but at the same time he’s always pushed the military and always pumped out, you know this soldier’s passed away and brings not just a hockey sense to it, it’s a Hockey Night in Canada, “in Canada” is a major thing to that. So, the Hockey Night in Canada and the Canadian and especially Ontario’s always been a big powerhouse in hockey, so you get a lot of sense of national pride and stuff. Whereas, in the States you might be into the army, you might be into
these other things and that’s what patriotism is to you. I find I identify my patriotism with hockey.

Mitch went on to connect his national pride as a main antecedent for choosing the Toronto Maple Leafs.

So, proximity-wise, you should like the Sabres as your default team. But accessibility-wise, and nationality-wise, you would pick Toronto at a default. Because, they’re the closest Canadian team… So, you would default as a Canadian, or at least me and my friends would, default to the Canadian team. So, you didn’t even think about being a Sabres fan… You couldn’t watch a game unless they were playing a Canadian team. And then that national pride in hockey. Taking national pride from hockey, “this is an American team – I’m not supporting them” type thing.

Jamie, a 27 year-old Leafs fan, explained how he supports Canadian teams in every sport, not just hockey.

I would say they are a Canadian team and I was born in Canada and I like to support my Canadian teams as in any other sport, if you pick the MLB, I like the Blue Jays, if you pick the NBA, I like the Raptors, and that is because those are the only Canadian teams that support those leagues, so that’s why I go for them. For the Maple Leafs, like I said they are my dad’s favourite team so I do cheer for them, but I also cheer for them because they are a Canadian team and I like to support the country that I live in.

As demonstrated in the previous quotations, national identity has a major role in the inception of these fans’ team selection and fandom. Keeping with a social identity theory lens (Tajfel, 1978), these fans all clearly identify as proud Canadians who feel an importance to
support Canada and its sports teams. As noted earlier in the literature review section, hockey is
very salient to Canadian culture and often Canadians can become protective of the sport and its
significance to Canada (Beardsley, 1988; Dryden & MacGregor, 1989; Gruneau & Whitson,
to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), the Canadian fans who intentionally support a sports team
simply because of its Canadian roots are behaving in ways to enhance their self-concept as
Canadians by associating with the group that best reflects their (national) identity. In other
words, these hockey fans bolster their Canadian identities by supporting a Canadian team over an
American team. Contrary to this concept, Sonny, a 42-year old Sabres fan, dismissed the idea
that a Canadian has to support a Canadian team. He brought up the fact that many NHL teams
are in fact made up of Canadian players.

I always used to get, and I still get it today, “how do you cheer for an American team?
We live in Canada, why do you cheer for an American team?” And, my response is
always “well, let’s look at the rosters. There’s probably more Canadians that play on the
Sabres than there are on the Leafs!” Like, why doesn’t that matter? Right? I don’t feel
like I have to cheer for a Canadian team. You know, even in the playoffs, if the Leafs
were the only team – if it was a Stanley Cup final between the Leafs and anybody else, I
would not cheer for the Leafs just because they’re Canadian. I would just cheer for
whoever else (laughter).

Although Sonny doesn’t share the same opinions as some other fans with regards to
supporting a Canadian team, he does exhibit actions of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978)
through his jokes of supporting anybody but his team’s biggest rival (Toronto Maple Leafs). This
behaviour is known as GORFing (Glory Out of Reflected Failure) (Havard, 2014), a way for
individuals to feel good about themselves and their in-group through the failures of the out-groups. Franklin, a 27-year old Sabres fan, had similar opinions on the matter as Sonny, claiming that simply supporting the sport of hockey was supporting Canada.

I think for the most part there are more Leafs fans in Canada and in our area than there would be Buffalo fans because I think that they really hold onto those Canadian roots. I think they say “Well, Toronto’s in Canada, I’m Canadian, that’s going to be my team”…some of it has to do with family and how the family’s fandom works, but for the most part I think it’s the Canadian roots that kind of push you towards what side you’re on…I can’t say I disagree with it, but I don’t necessarily think that it’s all agreeable. Because, I think if you support hockey in general, you’re supporting Canada. You know, we always talk about how it’s Canada’s game…I think for the most part if you support hockey and you’ve played hockey you’re supporting Canada. So, I don’t necessarily believe that argument is valid.

It is clear that some of these Leafs fans felt their national identity encouraged them to support a Canadian team, or rather prevented them from supporting an American one. This notion, although not accepted by all Toronto Maple Leafs fans, was by far one of the more interesting themes in the data. As mentioned in previous literature, many Canadians often feel the need to combat a strong, hegemonic Americanness (Kymlicka, 2003; Mackey, 1999; Winter, 2007). Interpreting these Toronto Maple Leafs fans through a social identity lens, it appears they have a strong national identity and view the USA as an extreme “out-group” (Tajfel, 1978). It also seems that they are inadvertently combatting an American identity by intentionally selecting a Canadian team over an American team. It is also interesting to note that this idea of supporting a Canadian hockey team by default was rejected by all of Buffalo Sabres fans. For those Sabres
fans who are dual-citizens, this may be because they identify as both Canadian and American. Keeping with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), the dual-citizens would identify with both groups (Canadian and American), rendering the national identity argument made by Leafs fans irrational. Moving on from the factors that lead to the inception of fandom, the analysis of the data brought me to identify themes which related to the second part of the research questions that focusses on the maintenance of fandom.

Factors That Allow for the Maintenance of Fandom

Although there may be some cross-play between those reasons that lead to the inception of fandom and the factors that allow for its maintenance, I believed that in many cases the cited antecedents to fandom did not always remain the strongest factors that kept the fans loyalty to the team. In this category, the factors that were found to be significant in the maintenance of team fandom will be discussed. The category is broken up into three sub-categories: geographic proximity and affordability as a way of maintaining fandom, attitude towards USA helping maintain fandom, and perceived fan culture helping maintain fandom.

Geographic proximity and affordability as a way of maintaining fandom. As mentioned earlier in the factors that lead to the inception of fandom, many Fort Erie hockey fans cited television accessibility as a leading antecedent to their decision to support the Toronto Maple Leafs. Interestingly enough, the Buffalo Sabres fans also discussed the importance of accessibility, however their ideas of accessibility were significantly different when compared to those of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans. To the Toronto Maple Leafs fans, accessibility referred to being able to watch their team on television and read about them in newspapers. To the Buffalo Sabres fans, accessibility referred to the ability of being able to go watch games in person with ease. These fans discussed the geographic proximity of Fort Erie to Buffalo and the affordability
of Sabres games as factors which allow them to easily remain fans of their favourite hockey team. It was by no surprise that the Buffalo Sabres fans criticized the Toronto Maple Leafs organization for the relatively high price point of their game tickets, to then discuss how affordable Sabres games are. Again, if we approach this through a social identity theory lens (Tajfel, 1978), we can see how the fans use the negative traits of the opposing team (out-group) to justify their own team’s (in-group) superiority. Luke, a 29-year old Sabres fan, discussed the difference between attending a Leafs game and a Sabres game.

The other thing is Buffalo made it cost affordable to go to a game. So, a family of four could go to a game and have all amenities. The popcorn, the pop, get the jersey for the kid, you know whatever you had to do. Toronto wasn’t like that. You had to drive to Toronto, pay for parking in the city which was astronomical, the tickets were more expensive… in Toronto if you go and the game’s terrible, you feel like “Oh what did I just spend all that money for?”. Where Buffalo, like I said a family of four can go to a game and still probably pay less than a Leafs fan going to a game in Toronto. And that’s four people versus one, right?

Another Sabres fan who discussed the financial accessibility of the Sabres was 27-year old Franklin. Franklin felt that the Buffalo Sabres owner, Terry Pegula, had done a good job making Sabres games relatively affordable.

It’s a little bit more affordable in the smaller markets. The ownership group, the Pegulas, have come out and said, in regards to hockey, they’re not here to make money. So, I think that’s why they’re trying to keep it as affordable as possible. Which, I guess can be hard with maintenance and all that. But, they’re trying their hardest.
It is clear that the Buffalo Sabres fans identify the affordability of attending Sabres games as an important factor when asked why they support their team over the Toronto Maple Leafs. Many of the Sabres fans immediately compared the two markets (Toronto versus Buffalo), claiming that attending events in the Toronto sports scene just wasn’t financially friendly or feasible. Sabres fans were not the only ones to agree that Sabres games were financially more accessible and attainable. Romeo, a 31-year old Leafs fan, discussed how he had a difficult time supporting his team financially. When asked to elaborate, Romeo discussed the price of tickets and merchandise and continued to explain how many Leafs fans from Toronto drive down to watch hockey games in Buffalo because it is more affordable.

When you look at it from a financial standpoint, buying Leafs tickets are an afterthought because of their cost… When you go to a Sabres game when they play the Leafs, I would say 80 to 90 percent of the fans are actually Leafs fans.

Sandy, another Leafs fan, also discussed how many Toronto Maple Leafs fans would rather attend Buffalo Sabres games with regards to cost, especially when the Maple Leafs are visiting.

Toronto is a big supporting centre for the Toronto Maple Leafs, or any of their sports teams, and ticket prices are far out of reach for a normal person to obtain. So, when the Leafs come into Buffalo, there’s more Leaf fans than there are Sabre fans because of the mere fact that even if you had to pay double the face-value, you were still better off buying a Sabres ticket than trying to get to a Leaf game.

These quotations, both by Maple Leafs and Sabres fans, demonstrate that the affordability of attending a Sabres game can be a key incentive to attracting fans from Fort Erie. For those
fans in Fort Erie who may be of a mid-to-low economic social class, it is easy to understand why they may choose the Buffalo Sabres over the Toronto Maple Leafs. As previously mentioned, many of the Buffalo Sabres fans identified as “blue-collar”. Although not always the case, blue-collar identities can sometimes be associated with mid-to-low income. Therefore, it makes sense that the affordability of games is a key factor with regards to the maintenance of fandom for Buffalo Sabres fans.

As discussed in the literature review, Mills and Rosentraub (2014) found that 15% of Buffalo Sabres season ticket holders are from Canada, and that when the Leafs visit the Sabres, 33% of those in attendance travel from across the border. Although this study does not specifically identify which towns and cities the travelling fans are visiting from, it would be interesting to know the percentage of Fort Erie fans that were part of Mills and Rosentraub’s (2014) observation. Complimentary to the comments made regarding the financial feasibility of attending Sabres games, many fans discussed the importance of geographic proximity and being able to frequently attend live home games.

Rooney (1974) discusses geographic proximity and explains that a community is more likely to have a larger population (and percentage) of fans for that team if it is closer to the team’s home playing area. Due to the extreme proximity of Fort Erie to Buffalo, it is understandable why many fans in the town would choose to support the Sabres over the Leafs. Sonny, a 42-year old Sabres fan, was asked why a new fan in Fort Erie should support the Buffalo Sabres over the Toronto Maple Leafs. In his answer, he mentions the geographic accessibility of the team.

I guess if they want the experiences I wanted, which is the enjoyment of being able to go to games that are right there, then I think that’s probably a good reason… Yeah, I guess I
would go with they’re a more accessible team for a fan living there as opposed to going
to Toronto for a game and that whole, aside from the cost, the time spent and all that stuff.

Luke, a 29-year old Sabres fan, discussed the benefits of living so close to the Buffalo Sabres’ home arena. Earlier in the interview, Luke mentioned that he got the opportunity to meet the Buffalo Sabres players because they would sometimes come to Fort Erie and hold practices in order to meet fans and youth.

We’re close to Buffalo. It’s just a skip across the Niagara river. And when you say “Oh, I met him!”, you know you get to tell all your friends at school, “Oh, I met him! I skated with him! I shook Dominic Hašek’s hand! I met Alexei Zhitnik!” It’s like all these guys, you see them on TV, and your friends now are going “Oh, that’s so cool! That’s so cool!”…When kids are young like that it’s an easy way to see why they’d become fans, right. We’re close to Buffalo. It’s just a skip across the Niagara river… It’s the closest team to us. Toronto, obviously being about an hour and a half, two hours away. Buffalo’s five minutes on a good day, if you don’t hit any traffic on the bridge, right? So, that was definitely something I think affected kids a lot.

Ned, a 38-year old Sabres fan, spoke about how the supports the Buffalo Sabres because they are the closest team in proximity.

One of the things I’ve always said to people is that the closest team to me is kind of where my heart is. And, so the closest team to Fort Erie is Buffalo. It’s the team that I can easily access. That’s one of the reasons why I think I never really gravitated to Toronto, because this is my home and the closest team is Buffalo…I think the idea of being close
to Buffalo and being able to go over there and see the games, I think that’s a key reason why I would encourage somebody to cheer for Buffalo. Because, it’s so easy to connect with the team.

Analyzing the answers through a social identity theory lens (Tajfel, 1978) will bring forth some connections between team selection and geographic proximity that may not be so obvious on the surface. According to the theory (Tajfel, 1978), individuals will associate with groups that they perceive to reflect positively on their self-concept and that align with their self-identities. In the previous quotations, Sonny, Luke and Ned all discussed the importance of being so close to their favourite hockey team. Interestingly enough, all three of these interviewees also felt that Fort Erie felt like a suburb of the American city of Buffalo, closely aligning with Helleiner’s (2016) categories of Pretty Much the Same or Americanized Canadians. With the three interviewees claiming that they felt close to Buffalo in general, it is understandable why they would choose to support the team that best represents their in-group (the Buffalo community). Living close to the home arena of the Buffalo Sabres is convenient for these fans, however it appears that there is more of a connection between their identities and the team than what is initially perceived.

Interestingly enough, many Leafs fans argued that although the Buffalo Sabres are indeed the closer team to Fort Erie, Toronto is not that far of a drive. Also, many Toronto Maple Leafs fans, especially those with a strong sense of national identity, argued that the Maple Leafs were the closest Canadian team. Romeo, a 31-year old, explained that he chose the Maple Leafs because they were the closest Canadian team to Fort Erie.

I think, for whatever reason, without sounding barbaric, you support your own. You know? You cheer for your hometown team. I think for Fort Erie, it’s obviously Toronto. I
mean, we could obviously be in Vancouver and it would be the Canucks, so on and so forth, across the border. But I think here it’s especially that, that Toronto is so close, I think that’s exactly why.

Sandy, a 56-year old Leafs fan, discussed how many of the Leafs fans in the Niagara region would agree that they support the closest Canadian team. He claimed “I think that all of the Niagara region Leaf fans feel the same way because of the proximity to them, it’s not that far”. While the Buffalo Sabres are indeed the closer team to Fort Erie, Toronto Maple Leafs fans often argue that their team is not as far away as the competition would like to believe. The Leafs fans seem to justify the drive through their other reasons for supporting the team such as national identity and television accessibility. When it comes to geographic proximity, both sets of fans cite the relatively close distance to their team as something that enables their fandom. Another theme that was discovered with regards to the identity of the fans was that of their attitudes towards the USA.

**Attitude towards USA helping maintain fandom.** While it has already been found by Helleiner (2016) that folks who live in the Niagara region have varying opinions of their American counterparts, this was the first time anyone has investigated these ideas with regards to team selection and sport fandom. Helleiner (2016) discussed how Niagara residents who live alongside the international border had varying views on the USA, especially with regards to how they compare their “Canadianness” vis-à-vis the American other side. The main themes that were found were that these folks felt Pretty Much the Same (as Americans), that they were “Americanized” Canadians, that they were Non-American and then that they were Anti-American. Many of the Fort Erie fans coincidentally brought up such a notion when asked about living directly across the border from Buffalo, New York. It appeared that all Buffalo Sabres
fans in Fort Erie were grateful to live so close to an American city, while some of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans had less favourable things to say about the country. While these views and opinions cannot be generalized across the town, let alone the entire nation, it is interesting to see how living in such close proximity to the international border has had an affect on these peoples’ ideas of the USA.

In this study of Fort Erie hockey fans, all Buffalo Sabres fans and mostly the older Toronto Maple Leafs fans had similar, positive views of living so close to the Buffalo. Gunner, a 28-year old Sabres fan who is a dual-citizen, had this to say about the matter.

It just feels like we’re on the outskirts of a big city. That’s all. And, it’s literally two minutes away. So, it’s different. We’re so Americanized here. I think Fort Erie is just like a suburb of Buffalo. It doesn’t even feel like anything’s different.

Gunner’s quotation clearly demonstrates his positioning on his views of the USA and would most definitely fit in Helleiner’s (2016) categories of pretty much the same or “Americanized” Canadians. Through the social identity theory lens (Tajfel, 1978), we can see that Gunner (a dual-citizen) has a strong tie to Buffalo and considers the city to be a big part of his identity. Therefore, his decision to support the team that represents Buffalo is typical behaviour of an individual associating with groups that positively reflect their self-concept (Tajfel, 1978). Sonny, a 41-year old Sabres fan, discussed how people in Fort Erie were strongly influenced by Buffalo and the proximity to the USA.

I think it gives you the American influence, right? So, living there, working there, as I did when I was in my teens, probably through and into my twenties, you just get a little bit of that American culture. So, you have friends you went to school with that celebrated two
Thanksgivings and went to the States for holidays. We always had the American TV influence. So, we got the American commercials, we got the American slant on things, right? Which is a little bit different than Canadian. So, it gives you a little bit of an insight to that side of things. Even though it’s right across the border, it is a little bit different.

Sonny also fits into Helleiner’s (2016) finding that some Niagara residents feel as if they are “Americanized” Canadians. Another fan who discussed Fort Erie’s relationship with Buffalo in a similar manner is Ellie. A 51-year old Leafs fan who grew up crossing the border regularly, Ellie shared similar views with regards to Fort Erie and Buffalo. She discussed how folks who live more inland may not understand how Canadian borderland residents can have such relationships with Americans.

No, I don’t think they get the relationship between the US and Canada, personally. We’re in Fort Erie, so people are marrying each other, people are dating each other, like we are - it’s just so close. It’s like we’re like a little suburb off of Buffalo. Like, but we’re Canadian. So, we’re Canadian, you’re American, you guys do you, we do us, but we’re awfully good friends. To me, anyways, that’s how I was raised.

It would appear that Ellie would fit somewhere in between Helleiner’s (2016) categories of pretty much the same and non-American. Sandy, another older Leafs fan (56), fell in Helleiner’s (2016) non-American theme as he discussed the advantages of living so close to the border yet still being able to carry “Canadian” values.

We share the advantages, or position, of being able to live in a country that we believe in their morals and beliefs, in the States, only 10 minutes away and we can go share, for a
day, their values and if we’re not in agreement we can come right back into our own country.

On the other end of the spectrum, some fans responded as Anti-American when discussing their southern neighbours (Helleiner, 2016). Unsurprisingly, none of these individuals were Buffalo Sabres fans. Brad, a 39-year old Leafs fan, had this to say.

The stereotypical Americans embellish everything and they tend to want to think that they’re greater, better than everybody else. So, it kind of gives you an appreciation of what real homelife is I guess, living on the border... My opinions of certain Americans are that they are egotistical, bigger, better, louder. Louder, they have to be the loudest ones in the room. They have to be that way, and then my other thoughts are, in the back of my mind, is how dumb they sound when they actually talk. Right, when they say something or their opinions, it actually doesn’t make sense. It sounds like they’re talking in a silo or in a tunnel, that their opinions have been told to them and then that’s what they do.

When I asked Brad to elaborate on this comment and describe the stereotypical American, this is what he followed with.

Donald Trump. Bigger, better than everybody. Since he’s been in, it is that way. Here’s the example, this is what my kid said. So, he becomes president, he’s building a wall in Mexico, this is two and a half/three years ago. He becomes president, and my youngest son goes to the window the next day to see if they would be putting a fence up in the middle of the river because that would be separating Canada from the United States. So, that is – they feel and they believe that that’s exactly what is going to happen. Is that
they’re bigger and better and want to be segregated and that’s what they do, and we just want to love and, you know, apologize and do whatever we want to do just because that’s the type of people we are. Grateful for what we have going forward.

Clearly Brad’s views on Buffalo are very different from those of Gunner, Sonny and Ellie. Brad’s fandom for the Leafs is likely maintained through his subconscious aversion towards Buffalo and the USA. He clearly does not identify with Buffalo and quickly makes a positive comparison between the USA and Canada, demonstrating how his in-group (Canada) is superior to the out-group (USA) (Tajfel, 1978). This behaviour is what Tajfel (1978) considers to be typical of those attempting to maintain positive self-concepts through the social identity theory. Supporting Brad’s comments, Romeo, a 31-year old Leafs fan, discussed how living in Fort Erie has had a positive affect on his sense of patriotism. He also had choice words regarding the American political situation.

I find myself, [long pause] privately, being more patriotic. Well I find myself, in a private setting, being more patriotic than I think one would be if they lived in say Toronto…I think patriotism is, is in the limelight more now in today’s political environment, across both countries and the world. So, I think when you look at what’s going on in the States, people are incredibly proud to be Canadian, and incredibly disgusted and disappointed with what’s going on in the States.

Similar to Romeo, Mitch, a 31-year old Leafs fan, discussed patriotism as a Canadian. He also had a less favourable view on the American political environment and compared what he thought was the typical patriotic identities of Americans and Canadians.
You see different things, like when Bush’s administration was going in there, they’re war-hungry, and they have that patriotism with 9/11 and that kind of stuff. They’re patriotic about their things, but we’re patriotic from the sense that, or at least I am, that we don’t have to experience war. Like, we don’t have to go to war. Like we might go there as a peacekeeper, but no one is attacking us to make a statement. So, you start to kind of appreciate your country.

Mitch went on to discuss his experience with Buffalo residents coming across the border into Fort Erie. He finished by mentioning that these poor opinions of Buffalo residents acted as a deterrent from supporting the Sabres.

In my household, Buffalo, they were seen as bad drivers over here or rude. Like if they were customers in our stores, they were seen as rude - Buffalo-specific people coming into Canada. Their dollar was worth more than ours, they kind of had this appearance to me as a kid and slightly influenced by my family that they were rude people. They would cut you off while you were driving because they were city drivers and we’re small town, so they feel like they have to cut you off to get to where they would go. So, you kind of had that negative feel about Buffalo and people from Buffalo in your town. So, that also would kind of help curb me to not like the Sabres at that point.

Brad, Romeo and Mitch would all fit into Helleiner’s (2016) categories of non-American or anti-American. These three wasted no time in discussing their negative perceptions of the USA and quickly made comparisons between the American other side and Canada. By making these comparisons, they demonstrate how individuals compare their in-groups to other out-groups in an effort to elevate their in-groups status through positive comparison (Tajfel, 1978). By comparing the different answers of the interviewees, it is interesting to note that all of the
Buffalo Sabres fans had favourable opinions of living so close to the border and fell into either the Pretty Much the Same (as Americans) or Americanized Canadians categories created by Helleiner (2016). Many of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans (especially the younger) felt somewhat of an aversion towards their southern counterparts and would have fallen in the Non-American or Anti-American categories (Helleiner, 2016). The last theme of this category that will be discussed is the way in which the fan bases maintained their fandom based on the perceptions of the opposing team’s fan culture.

**Perceived fan culture helping maintain fandom.** One question that elicited participants’ responses with regards to fan culture was when they were asked how they felt about the opposite team and their fanbase. Discussing the perceived differences in organizational culture between the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Buffalo Sabres and their fanbases is important to better understand the participants’ viewpoints and opinions. For this study, perceived fan culture refers to the attitudes and behaviours of a fanbase as perceived by the opposing team’s fanbase. For example, the experiences a Sabres fan has with Toronto Maple Leafs fans (whether that be encountering Maple Leafs fans at home games in the Scotiabank Arena, encountering Maple Leafs fans away at other arenas, encountering Maple Leafs fans in other aspects of life, etc.) will shape the Sabres fan’s perception of the Toronto Maple Leafs fan culture. To begin, we will investigate the different critiques of the Toronto Maple Leafs fan culture as perceived by the Buffalo Sabres fans.

As mentioned by many of the participants in the study, the Toronto Maple Leafs have a culture that has a more corporate feel to it, especially when compared to the Buffalo Sabres’. The following were some popular criticisms by the Buffalo Sabres fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs’ culture: the majority of the fanbase attending the Maple Leafs home games are not really hockey
fans but are rather corporate employees who wear suits to the games, Toronto Maple Leafs fans often (incorrectly) discuss how they are only a short period of time away from winning their next Stanley Cup, and Toronto Maple Leafs fans can often be obnoxious. The following criticisms were all given by Buffalo Sabres fans, which supports the concept in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) that suggests individuals will compare their in-group with out-groups to make their in-group appear more favourable. Through these comparisons, the Buffalo Sabres fans effectively maintain their fandom of their team by identifying all of the negative aspects of the rival group (Toronto Maple Leafs) and by making the positive comparison between the two.

Luke, a 29-year old Sabres fan, compared the two teams’ organizational cultures of the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Buffalo Sabres. Luke discussed the markets of the two teams and how the Sabres organization did a good job of welcoming fans from Fort Erie and the Niagara region.

Toronto was more of a corporate market, so-to-speak. It was a lot of businesses from Toronto bringing clients to the game trying to secure business, where Buffalo never really took off as a corporate market. It was more actual fans from Buffalo. You know, everything growing up as a fan and hearing everything and being involved in the organization in terms of meeting the players and stuff, they were people that were proud of the fact that they weren’t corporate people. They were just blue-collar hockey fans. And it was predominantly Canadian, too. I mean, Buffalo’s one of the only arenas that no matter what, even if a Canadian team’s not playing, will still sing the Canadian national anthem because there’s so many fans that are Canadian from Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, Southern Ontario. So, they’ve embraced the Canadian fans, the Canadian culture that came with this wave of fans from just across the river.
In this quotation, Luke effectively compares the Buffalo and Toronto markets and elaborates on why the Sabres market is the better of the two. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), Luke is comparing his in-group to the out-group of the Leafs and elevating his group by making favourable comparisons. Luke cites the respect that the Buffalo Sabres have towards their Canadian fanbase as an attractive factor, explaining that the team genuinely appreciates its fans. Luke maintains his fandom for the Sabres by reflecting on the way they treat their consumer base. Franklin, a 27-year old Sabres fan, had this to say when asked how he felt about the Toronto Maple Leafs and their fans.

I don’t agree with what they do financially and how they really shoot up ticket prices so it’s all corporate. I think that’s changed a little bit. In recent years, it seems like more hockey fans are going. I think that has to do with the team actually being a little bit better than they were. But, in previous years it was all people in suits and there wasn’t any chatter in the arena…Because I’m a Sabres fan, and I go there (Toronto) and I see how the fans are, and they’re passionate, and they might not know what they’re talking about, but they’re passionate…They have this common misconception that their team is going to be good. And then the team is not good, and then they curse and they swear…I love hearing the “we’re going to win the Cup in the next three years”. That’s my favourite because they’ve been saying that for 10 years and three years is long gone.

Further discussing the fan cultures of the Maple Leafs and the Sabres, Luke elaborated on what he expects to see at home games of either team.

Buffalo people are there to watch hockey. And it’s been something that people have said for a while. I mean, you look at an arena in Toronto in the 90s and it was people in suits. You look at people in Buffalo, it was people in jerseys. And I think that’s a lot of the
reason why the Toronto fans come to Buffalo in such good numbers when they’re playing, is because they get to see their team in a hockey environment for a price that hockey people want to pay, as opposed to corporate people.

Sonny, a 42-year old Sabres fan, discusses how he often gets annoyed by Maple Leafs fans. He mentions that some Sabres fans may also be brash, however his overall experience with rowdy fan behaviour mostly stems from the Toronto fanbase.

I hope they never win a game ever again. I cannot deal with it. Like, it’s just, yeah. It’s brutal. It’s brutal. It’s like, you go to a bar and you’ve got some buddies there or some people you know and there’s a Leaf game on and they are just like – as soon as they Leafs score it’s like “alright, they’re the best team in the world”. Like, they’re so, just brash about it. And, maybe that happens in Buffalo with Sabre fans. I don’t know. Maybe if I go to a bar in Buffalo and there’s Sabres fans around, maybe they’re the same. But, my experience has always been around the Leafs fans, right. So, then you get this sort of “here come the Leaf fans again”, right? Like, come on guys, you haven’t won anything since the 60s, like relax (laughter).

In this quotation, we can see Sonny maintaining his fandom through his distaste of the Toronto Maple Leafs fan base. Sonny explains the difference between his in-group (Buffalo Sabres fans) and the rival-group (Toronto Maple Leafs fans) and clearly makes favourable comparisons that reflect positively on his group (Tajfel, 1978; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Sonny went on to discuss his experiences with Toronto Maple Leafs fans travelling down to Buffalo to watch their team play live, something that is very common amongst Leafs fans.
I’ve stopped going to Buffalo/Toronto games in Buffalo. Because, the atmosphere is very interesting in that it’s got to be 70/80% Leaf fans. So, there’s a lot of buzz, right? Because, they’re there and they’re going to cheer on their team, it’s almost a home game for them, right? But, it just seems to be there’s always a fight, there’s just nastiness, like I just stopped going because I’m like “I can’t deal with these fans. Like, what are you doing here? Why can’t you just”. And, we’ve gone to games in Toronto with our Sabres jerseys on, and it’s been fine. We’re just like, we’re just cheering for our team. We’re not being jerks about it. But, they go to games there and like, they’re literally just brutal. Like, why are you starting fights, you know? It’s just a hockey game.

As demonstrated through the previous quotations, many Buffalo Sabres fans have a negative perception of the Toronto Maple Leafs fan culture for various reasons. The main recurring criticism was that of the corporate fanbase and how home games have too much of a spurious environment. Buffalo Sabres fans claimed that they felt that their culture has a more “authentic” feel with regards to the fans in attendance. These criticisms help the Sabres fans maintain their fandom as they act as constant reminders why their preferred team is superior.

Many Toronto Maple Leafs fans also had a negative perception of the Buffalo Sabres’ fan culture, especially with regards to the Buffalo sports media. Some of the more common criticisms of the Buffalo Sabres’ fan culture given by the Toronto Maple Leafs fans are: their fans do not really understand the sport of hockey (they just want to see Buffalo win), the Buffalo media neglects hockey discussion when the team is doing poorly yet raves about them when they are playing well, Buffalo fans can often be unreasonably loud and/or obnoxious. Romeo, a 31-year old Leafs fan, claimed that the Sabres fans were relatively obnoxious as a result of their cultural setting.
I think the Sabres fans are... I mean I shouldn’t say ‘are’, ‘some’ are obnoxious and their love for the Sabres spills over, manifesting itself into hatred for the Leafs or maybe Canadian teams in general... I think American teams have more obnoxious fans than Canadian teams in general. And I think that is simply a matter of, that’s just a cultural thing.

Sandy, a 56-year old Leafs fan, discussed his opinions on Sabres fans and compared them with other Leafs fans like himself. In the following quotation, Sandy compares the behaviours of Buffalo Sabres fans and Toronto Maple Leafs fans and explains how Toronto Maple Leafs fans carry themselves with more class. Similar to Luke, Sandy is demonstrating behaviours suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) by favourably comparing his in-group with the out-group. His suggestion that Maple Leafs fans are respectful fans would appear to be a positive reflection on his in-group and his self-concept.

Sabre fans always seem to want to have that last word... when I go to a game in Buffalo, they just, you know if they score a goal they’re really knockin’ their fist in your face saying “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!” because I’m wearing my Leafs jersey. Whereas Leaf fans will cheer, we don’t stick it in anybody’s face. That’s the difference between a Leafs fan and a Sabres fan in my opinion.

Sandy also discussed his dislike for Buffalo media, and how that acted as a deterrent to him becoming a fan of the team. He demonstrates how he maintains his fandom through his distaste of the Buffalo sports media.

You know they have this WGR 550 (a sports radio station in Buffalo, New York). It’s all about Buffalo sports, and they’re so bias that it just makes me become a Leaf fan even
more … It was easy for me to cheer for the Leafs. Not only were they a Canadian team, but we didn’t have the media throwing it in our face all the time. So that’s one of the real reasons I’m not a Sabres fan to be honest with you…. The media is so close to us and they try to jam it down my throat and I’ve been a Leaf fan too long that I don’t listen to the media anymore.

Another Leafs fan who became annoyed with Buffalo media was Mitch, a 31-year old fan who discussed his opinions on Buffalo Sabres fans. Mitch also exhibits behaviour that would help maintain his fandom through his distaste of the Buffalo sports media.

Early on, I always found it funny. I grew up listening to Kiss 98.5 (a Top 40 radio station in Buffalo, New York) a lot. You wouldn’t hear anything about hockey. You wouldn’t even know a hockey team existed in there if you just solely listened to that and had no clue what else was going on in the world. Like if you were from the other side of the world, didn’t know hockey was a thing, you would never hear a lick of it if you were listening to that one station. Then all of a sudden they went on a good run, I think they were first place. Daniel Briere was there, and they went to the Stanley Cup and lost that year. You couldn’t not hear about them. They were on the radio every five seconds. All of a sudden everyone’s this massive hockey fan and you’re like, I know that’s fake.

Mitch went on to explain how he felt about Buffalo hockey fans, claiming that they did not really understand the sport.

To me, people from Buffalo don’t actually play or like hockey. They just have a team. So, I didn’t really care for them as opposing fans from the people from Buffalo… And so, at least when you’ve got trash talk from a Fort Erie or a Canadian Buffalo fan, it was kind
of fun. Whereas it was like, you know “okay, you don’t even know about hockey I’m not even going to entertain this conversation”…I didn’t like their fanbase too for the longest time because I found them so fake. I found it was so convenient for them to talk about but I didn’t find that, like you could just tell from their opinions that they had no clue what was going on in hockey. Just, they were winning so Buffalo is awesome type feel to it.

Unsurprisingly, each fan base found no difficulty in explaining the other group’s downfalls. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) suggests that this is done in an effort to create a more positive self-concept. By describing the negative attributes and characteristics of the out-group and their fans, the participants may have created a more favourable comparison.

Summary of Categories

The 18 semi-structured interview discussions aided in answering this study’s two research questions.

1. How do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs?

2. How do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres?

Over the interviews, the participants provided in-depth answers on their lived experiences as Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie, Ontario. This allowed me to gather an emic perspective on the matter and helped me to better understand the antecedents to team selection and the motivations to remaining a fan. From these interviews, two overarching categories arose organically. As the themes in the first category would suggest, Toronto Maple Leafs fans were predominantly older, Canadian, and held white-collar positions, while Buffalo
Sabres fans were younger, mostly dual-citizens, and held white and blue-collar positions. Toronto Maple Leafs fans cite the ability to watch their team on television, as well as the importance of supporting a Canadian team, as leading antecedents to fandom. Buffalo Sabres fans seem to have had a greater exposure to the city of Buffalo, possibly leading to the inception of their fandom. The second category demonstrated how the values and experiences of the fan had an affect on the maintenance of their fandom. Both sets of fans disparaged the culture of their rivals, often in an attempt to make their own group appear more favourable. This allowed for the maintenance of their fandom through positive comparison between the two groups (Tajfel, 1978). Buffalo Sabres fans discussed the importance of geographic proximity and affordability, claiming that these factors allowed for more withstanding connection with the team. Both sets of fans also discussed their views of the USA and how they felt about the American other side. Many Toronto Maple Leafs fans had less than favourable things to say about their American counterparts, implicitly suggesting that it helps in their decision to support a Canadian team.
Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand the lived experiences of highly identified Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie, Ontario. Additionally, there is hope of drawing attention to an underdeveloped area in sport consumer behaviour research. In order to better understand these lived experiences of Fort Erie hockey fans, Tajfel’s (1978) social identity theory played a vital role in creating the data collection strategies and then in analyzing the data. In this section, a summary of the research along with implications and recommendations will be discussed. Furthermore, the limitations of the study will be examined followed by directions for future research and closing remarks.

Summary of Research

The inspiration for this research came from a phenomenon I experienced growing up in the bordertown of Fort Erie, Ontario. Fort Erie is a small Canadian town located alongside the Niagara River in Southern Ontario, directly across the border from the American city of Buffalo, New York. As I grew up in the town, I noticed that the two predominantly preferred NHL teams were the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Buffalo Sabres. This phenomenon was interesting because of the extreme proximity of Fort Erie to Buffalo. According to sport-fan literature, fans often support the team that is closest to them geographically (Rooney, 1974; 1975). Other fan literature suggested that fans supported teams that represented their country or region (Garcia, 2012; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; Heere & James, 2007). I occurred to me that if a new fan were to be hypothetically born in Fort Erie, there would be logical reasons to support both the Toronto Maple Leafs and/or the Buffalo Sabres. I wondered if living in a bordertown had any affect on the individuals’ decisions to support their favourite teams. The purpose of this study was to
investigate the motivations and antecedents that lead Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie to support their team.

In order to conduct such an in-depth study, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted along with the completion of a brief demographic questionnaire. Using an interpretive analysis technique to code and make meaning of the data, two main categories arose organically. The interviews consisted of 18 highly identified hockey fans (nine Toronto Maple Leafs fans and nine Buffalo Sabres fans) from the town of Fort Erie, Ontario. The participants who self-identified as highly-identified fans were included in the study.

The discussions helped in providing answers to the two research questions: how do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie, Ontario begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs?; and how do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie, Ontario begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres? The two categories and their themes provided possible reasons behind the inception and continuation of fandom for the two teams. The first category labeled Factors That Lead to the Inception of Fandom mostly investigated the relationships between some of the antecedents to team selection. The data supporting this theme was derived from both the semi-structured interviews and the demographic questionnaires.

The first theme of this category was that of television accessibility. According to the demographic questionnaires, the Toronto Maple Leafs fans were older by an average of 10 years. Many of the older Toronto Maple Leafs fans claimed in their interviews that when they first began watching hockey, the Buffalo Sabres simply did not exist. In fact, the Sabres did not come into existence until 1970, so any fans who had been Toronto Maple Leafs fans up until that point may have already built a strong allegiance to their team. This was mostly due to television accessibility. Toronto Maple Leafs fans who discussed having primarily received Canadian
content in the town of Fort Erie claimed that this was a leading antecedent to their fandom. In the past, Fort Erie usually only received Canadian television content; therefore, it would have been extremely difficult for one to watch Buffalo Sabres games on television regardless of the fact that they were less than 10 kilometers away. For example, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s television in Fort Erie would have been free and over-the-air with broadcast signals reaching from Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo. Most hockey fans would have had access to many Toronto Maple Leafs games through CBC’s Hockey Night in Canada, with a very limited schedule of Buffalo Sabres games available to them through the television stations in Western New York.

In the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, cable and satellite television became the prominent form of television in Fort Erie, where many residents most likely did not have access to the American stations that carried Buffalo Sabres games. Of course, Canadian cable and satellite television still carried CBC’s Hockey Night in Canada, therefore hockey fans in Fort Erie still had access to the Toronto Maple Leafs in this regard. This may have resulted in a much more limited access to Buffalo Sabres games than in prior decades. In the early 2000s through to today, hockey fans have various options available to them such as cable/satellite television, internet streaming services, and digital subscriptions services (ex. NHL Centre Ice). As always, Fort Erie hockey fans still have access to the Toronto Maple Leafs through The Sports Network (TSN), Sportsnet, and CBC’s Hockey Night in Canada, however they can now watch Buffalo Sabres games through the new innovations that provide access to the American networks that were typically inaccessible. The importance of Hockey Night in Canada also played a key role in their fan identification, as they grew up with this CBC broadcast (both on the radio and television) as children. Many Toronto Maple Leafs fans claimed that it was imperative that they were able to watch their favourite team play on live television, and that since Fort Erie traditionally had much
You're on one side or the other

Easier access to the Leafs on television compared to the Sabres, it had a significant impact on their team selection.

The second theme was that of dual citizenship and exposure to Buffalo. The data on this theme was solely derived from the semi-structured interviews. In order to participate in the study, the individual had to be an adult, life-long resident of Fort Erie, Ontario. There was no criteria with regards to citizenship. However, throughout the interviews it became clear that a majority of the Buffalo Sabres fans were dual-citizens, that is they had both Canadian and American citizenship. Having dual-citizenship allows the individual to enter both countries legally by right. Of the nine Buffalo Sabres fans, six were dual-citizens. These dual-citizens often had family and friends who resided in Buffalo or other American towns/cities, and they all seemed to spend a significant portion of their days on the other side of the Niagara river. These dual-citizens would have had ample opportunities to develop positive relationships and experiences with the city of Buffalo, allowing the opportunity to become a Sabres fan. Although this theme likely has a direct link to some of the other themes of other categories (such as attitude towards the USA) it was interesting to note that the only Toronto Maple Leafs fan who was technically a dual-citizen chose to identify as a Canadian citizen and had negative viewpoints of the American other side. Also, the three Buffalo Sabres fans who were not dual-citizen had a significant exposure to Buffalo through their parents and/or other relationships (parent’s work, personal relationships, sport participation).

The third theme of the first category was that of career choice and the team as a representation of the community. Interestingly enough, all of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans held what would be traditionally considered white-collar occupations, aside from the lone retired maintenance mechanic. Three of the nine Buffalo Sabres fans held what would traditionally be
blue-collar occupations. With regards to occupation and socio-economic class, many of the fans agreed that Toronto Maple Leafs fans were viewed as business-class professionals while Buffalo Sabres fans were viewed as more everyday, working-class people. This theory was further supported by the fans’ discussion on the fan cultures of the two teams; this will be discussed more in-depth in the next category. The Buffalo Sabres fans elaborated on ideas regarding their favourite team representing the Fort Erie community. Many Toronto Maple Leafs fans agreed that the Buffalo Sabres in fact represent Fort Erie more than the Maple Leafs.

The fourth and final theme regarding possible factors that lead to the inception of fandom is that of national pride. National pride was a value that had a significant impact on the Toronto Maple Leafs fans’ decisions to support their team. Many Toronto Maple Leafs fans felt it was paramount that a Canadian hockey fan supports a Canadian hockey team. Living in Fort Erie, there is a clear (and logical) alternative in the Buffalo Sabres, however the idea of supporting an American hockey team was viewed as sacrilegious.

The second category that emerged from the data was the different factors that allowed for the maintenance of fandom. In this category, a further reflection of the different values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of the fans was discussed with consideration of their chosen teams. The first theme under this category was that of geographic proximity and affordability. All of the fans agreed that the Buffalo Sabres games were more affordable, and some of the Buffalo Sabres fans cited this as one of the reasons for choosing/continuing to support their team. The Buffalo Sabres fans discussed the importance of being able to attend games without spending large sums of money, not only so that a family can attend a game together, but also so that the lower-to-middle class fans can afford tickets as well. Sabres fans also discussed the importance of being able to
attend games in person, however Maple Leafs fans argued that aside from the cost, it was still relatively easy to attend Maple Leafs games (Toronto is only 150 kilometers from Fort Erie).

The second theme in this category is that of the fans attitudes towards the USA, and how that helped the fans maintain their fandom. Helleiner (2016) discovered that Niagara residents had varying views and opinions of their “Canadianness” vis-à-vis the American other side. They claimed that they felt pretty much the same (as Americans), that they were Americanized Canadians, that they were non-American, or that they were anti-American (Helleiner, 2016). When interpreting the values and attitudes of some of the interviewees, it is possible to see where they would hypothetically fall with regards to Helleiner’s (2016) four categories. The data helped create the theme attitude towards the USA.

In this theme, the majority of the data was derived from the fans’ responses to a question regarding living so close to the American city of Buffalo, New York. Other supporting data came from stories the fans provided regarding certain experiences they had with Buffalo residents or Americans in general. All of the Buffalo Sabres fans responded favourably to Buffalo and the USA, claiming that they enjoyed the proximity and the borderland lifestyle (crossing over often, having relationships on both sides of the border, experiencing the best of both countries and communities, etc.). On the contrary, many of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans discussed how they had less favourable experiences and opinions of Buffalo residents and Americans in general.

After analyzing the data, it was interesting to find that the Buffalo Sabres fans felt as if they were pretty much the same (as Americans) or Americanized Canadians, while some of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans were non-American or anti-American (Helleiner, 2016). To link some of the themes to this point, many of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans who had a negative attitude towards the USA derived a greater sense of national pride from their experiences or opinions, in-
turn leading to their decision to support the Leafs. The older Toronto Maple Leafs fans all had favourable attitudes towards the USA, and all discussed how crossing the border was a major part of their lives until the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Unsurprisingly, all of the dual-citizen Buffalo Sabres fans spoke highly of their experiences with Buffalo, also supporting their decision to select the Sabres. The final theme with regards to fandom maintenance is that of perceived fan culture.

Most of the data on fan culture came from the opposing fan group’s responses. While some fans described their own team’s organizational and fan culture, all were afforded the opportunity to criticize their counterpart’s through direct questioning. Many of the Buffalo Sabres fans criticized the Toronto Maple Leafs organization for catering to the higher, business-class. Critiques such as ridiculously-high ticket prices and the lower-bowl brimming with suit-wearing fans were the two most common responses and were cited as reasons the Sabres fans preferred Buffalo. Interestingly enough, some Toronto Maple Leafs fans agreed with these notions. The Toronto Maple Leafs fans did not have much of an issue with the Buffalo Sabres organization, but more so with its fan base. Many Maple Leafs fans claimed that the Sabres fans were rowdy, obnoxious, and knew very little about the sport of hockey, in-turn deterring them from Buffalo.

Interestingly enough, both sets of fans cited the opposite team as a major rival of their favourite team. Many fans discussed how this rivalry was a friendly rivalry that mainly existed within the fan groups in Fort Erie and not so much between the teams themselves. When asked to identify their favourite team’s biggest rival, some fans discussed how the rivalry that existed between the Maple Leafs and Sabres fan groups in Fort Erie was probably not shared by other fans who lived in Toronto or Buffalo. Tyler and Cobbs (2015; 2017) have researched sport fan
rivalry through a social identity theory lens and collect mass amounts of data to better understand the phenomenon. In this study, it is clear that the idea of rivalry changes with the location of the fans, adding contextual findings that help supplement Tyler and Cobbs’ (2015; 2017) work. In total, seven themes were created with the effort of providing insight into the lived experiences of the participants in an attempt to answer the two research questions guiding this study.

Implications and Recommendations

A number of implications and recommendations could be derived from both the methodology and the findings of the study. Firstly, a reflection on the use of recruitment posters will be completed. Following said reflection, conclusions will be drawn on the affect that borderlands have on sport fandom with further evidence of the importance of hockey as a culturally salient sport to the Canadian culture is provided.

Recruitment posters. As discussed in the methodology section, posters played a role in the recruitment process of this research. These types of posters are often used in academia to solicit participants for a study. When conducting research using a purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1999; Maxwell, 2005), it is important to create and distribute the recruitment posters appropriately to ensure the targeted population has the right exposure and access to them. For this study, the recruitment posters were modeled after previous templates of recruitment posters that had been effective in other academic studies (Hyatt et al., 2018). After it was determined that all of the necessary information was included on the posters and that the placement sites were appropriate with regards to my targeted population, I proceeded to place the posters in specific areas at the pre-determined sites that would make them most visible.
Interestingly enough, many of the tear-away strips on most of the posters were often ripped away, however no participants reached out as a result of these strips. As stated earlier, many of the participants approached while the posters were being hung and inquired about the study. These interactions and conversations lead to four interviewees. The rest of the interviews resulted from interviewee references and word-of-mouth. In retrospect, there was no obvious reason as to why so many slips were torn away without any attempt of further contact.

Reflecting on the use of the recruitment posters segued into a larger, more philosophical ponder of the current technological state of our society. In a world where technology is rapidly evolving and replacing traditional methods of living, can the same be expected of the recruitment methods in academic research? Essentially, is there still a place for recruitment posters in a world where every aspect of life is driven by the most innovative technological advances? After all, recruitment posters do seem to be outdated. Once the study was completed, it became evident that the effectiveness of traditional recruitment posters has diminished severely. As social media is ever so prevalent in today’s society, could applications such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram be more effective avenues for soliciting participation in academic research? One could also consider websites such as Kijiji or Craigslist as potential sites for recruitment.

**Borderlands and sport fandom.** A major finding from this study was the impact borderlands have on sport fandom. Understanding that borderland residents carry unique values, attitudes and behaviours compared to other citizens (Anzaldua, 1999; Kearney, 1995; Rosaldo, 1993) and that Canadians who live in borderlands often create a Canadian national identity forged to combat a hegemonic Americanness (Kymlicka, 2003; Mackey, 1999; Winter, 2007), this study aimed to discover whether the antecedents for team selection for borderland sport-fans were congruent with traditional fan motivations. Sport consumer behaviour researchers have
long examined team fandom creation, with common reasons including parental figures (Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010), team success (Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996) specific players (Ahn, Suh, Lee & Pedersen, 2013), team colours and logo (Hyatt & Andrijiw, 2008) and geography (Rooney, 1974, 1975; Harada & Matsuoka, 1999; Kolbe & James, 2003). Geography has sometimes been conceptualized as cheering for either the closest team (Rooney, 1974; 1975), a team representing a region (Harada & Matsuoka, 1999), or a team representing a country (Garcia, 2012; Heere & James, 2007). The results from this study show that there are many similarities in the motivations and antecedents to sport fandom for Toronto Maple Leafs fans and Buffalo Sabres fans from Fort Erie as has been found in previous sport literature. However, the results from this study also allowed me to elicit a deeper understanding of these unique contexts behind the traditional reasons found in the literature. For example, while existing sport consumer behaviour literature acknowledges that geography is a leading factor towards team identification, it does not investigate the underlying social, cultural or political contexts that shape attitude towards geography and what geography truly means to a borderland resident. Many terms that are thought to be straightforward (such as local, hometown, and accessibility) were found to be contested between the two groups of fans as their definitions were often incongruent with one another.

Living within such close proximity to the United States, many Fort Erie residents happen to be dual-citizens of both Canada and the USA. This phenomenon proved to be one of the more interesting findings, as it occurred that most of the Buffalo Sabres fans indeed had dual-citizenship. Based on the interviews, it seemed as if the dual-citizens spent more time in Buffalo and had more of an exposure to the city of Buffalo - learning its qualities and positive characteristics. Most of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans were only citizens of Canada, possibly
meaning less of an exposure towards Buffalo. By spending more time in the city, Sabres fans were able to develop an affinity towards the city at a young age which acted as an antecedent to their team selection.

The most interesting finding was with regards to the national pride of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans. Many of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans who participated in the study had a strong sense of Canadian patriotism and felt the need to support a Canadian team versus the American alternative of the Buffalo Sabres, almost as if it was a civic duty. When juxtaposed with their opinions of the American other side, it could be argued that these borderland hockey fans helped foster their Canadian identity through their team selection of the Toronto Maple Leafs. This idea manifested from other works on international borderlands, Canadian borderlands, and the Niagara region (Anzaldua, 1999; Helleiner, 2016; Kearney, 1995; Kymlicka, 2003; Mackey, 1999; Rosaldo, 1993; Winter, 2007). These findings support the idea that borderlands are places that carry unique values, beliefs and attitudes compared to other areas inland (Kearney, 1995).

Parental figures (Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010) are often cited as a leading antecedent to sport fandom. Often children go through a process of socialization (Heere & James, 2007; Hyatt et al., 2018) that leads to them supporting the same team as their parents. Interestingly enough, most of the Toronto Maple Leafs fans cited this as the leading factor towards the inception of their fandom while very few of the Sabres fans had a parent who paved the way.
Limitations

While there was a strong attempt to effectively answer the research questions to the best of my ability, like any other research study there were limitations to my work. The limitations that will be spoken about and discussed in the chapter are gender, age and inexperience.

Of the 18 hockey fans who participated in the study, only three were female. While the purpose of this research was not to understand the differences between male and female responses, it would most definitely be interesting to see if there was in fact a difference between the two, or any other genders for that matter. Having only three female respondents means that the female gender was not effectively represented, limiting me from making any conclusions with regards to gender. It is important to note that the three females who did participate had relatively similar stories to share as the males that participated. While I cannot make any conclusions with regards to gender, I am not necessarily certain that gender was indeed a factor. An interesting direction for future research would be to interview female hockey fans in the Fort Erie area and compare their answers with the males in this study.

Age is another demographic that posed as a bit of a limitation for the research. While there were various age groups represented in the data, the youngest fan that participated was 24-years old. Considering the study was limited only to adults, the youngest fan technically could have been 18. That leaves a six-year age gap of potential fans who did not participate. Also, there is an entire generation of fans who are younger than 18 that may have different answers compared to the adults who participated in this study. Therefore, there is still very little known about young adults and minors who happen to be fans of either team in question. As mentioned earlier, many of the fans who participated claimed that they felt the study would look quite different had I completed it 10 years in the future. It would have been beneficial to have answers
from those of a younger demographic to see if there are other reasons that lead to their support of the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Buffalo Sabres.

Although there were many limitations to the study, the final limitation that will be discussed was the inexperience of myself as an interviewer. Although I had received some practice in qualitative research courses on how to conduct semi-structured interviews, there was most definitely much left for me to learn. While I gathered an abundance of valuable experience from these few interviews, there is still much to be learned with regards to the interview process and how to effectively elicit good data through probing questions. As is everything in life, the best way to continue to learn is for me to continue to practice.

**Directions for Future Research**

Understanding the motivations and antecedents to team selection has been a primary focus for sport consumer behaviour researchers for quite some time. To do a comprehensive literature review of all the sport management studies conducted with the purpose of understanding the thoughts, values, behaviours and attitudes of sport fans, one would have to go back decades. Similarly, sociologists and human geographers have been researching unique areas such as borderlands since the early 1990s as well. However, there appears to be a gap in the literature with regards to sport fan research and borderland research. To date, there is no research involving sport fans in borderlands in any capacity. To go a step further, there is no research concerning sport fans in Canadian borderlands. This study is the first of its kind to begin filling this gap. Hopefully, the findings will shed light on an underdeveloped area of interest, as borderlands exist in many places of the world and there are most-likely sport fans who live within these areas.
With regards to directions for future research, first we will discuss this particular study and then other potential studies to consider. This study was done through a qualitative, interpretive paradigm. While this allowed me to better understand the lived experiences of the participants, it truly only provides a thorough understanding of the 18 interviewees and their motivations. In order to have a more generalized outlook on the population in question, a quantitative study is recommended to compliment the qualitative study completed in this work. Also, this study is a one-off study where the answers to the research questions may change as time proceeds. Many fans claimed that the answers to the questions would be different had the study been completed a decade into the future. A longitudinal study is recommended with a similar approach with the purpose of comparing the answers over time.

Future sport research is also encouraged in other borderland areas, especially in Canadian borderlands. Another example of a Canadian borderland with similar characteristics as Fort Erie would be Windsor, Ontario. Windsor is a Canadian city directly across the Detroit river from the American city of Detroit, Michigan (Detroit also has major professional sporting franchises). Some differences between the scenarios is that the Detroit Red Wings have been in the National Hockey League as long as the Toronto Maple Leafs, and that the Toronto Maple Leafs are more than double the distance from Windsor (369 km) than they are from Fort Erie (152 km). A study investigating the reasons Windsor residents support the Red Wings or the Leafs compared with the findings of this study would provide a great understanding of the Ontario-borderland sport-fan landscape. Another interesting notion brought up by one of the interviewees (Luke) was that the Buffalo Sabres played the Canadian national anthem at every home game even if there are no Canadian teams playing in the game. The Buffalo Bisons, a professional Minor League Baseball (MiLB) team who are the Triple-A affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays and play in the International
League (IL), also play the Canadian national anthem at each home game. It would be interesting to investigate if the Detroit Red Wings conduct any similar behaviours with the purpose of connecting with the Canadian fanbase. Other possible directions for future research could be to investigate Toronto Blue Jays vs New York Yankees fans from Western New York, NHL fans in Bellingham, Washington (Vancouver Canucks vs Seattle expansion team), or MLB fans in Vancouver, British Columbia (Toronto Blue Jays vs Seattle Mariners). It would also be interesting to investigate other borderland teams and whether/how they invest in or recognize fans who cross the border.

The final direction for future research is to investigate sport fans who do not necessarily fit into traditional theories of sport fandom. As a qualitative researcher, it brings me pleasure in understanding the outliers, the unique cases, the exceptions to the rule. Understanding that not all individuals are represented by generalized theories and large-population works means that it is our duty as qualitative academics to serve these underrepresented populations. Having the ability to recognize the disparity that exists between the generalizable findings and the truths of smaller, real world populations means researchers should attempt to understand these populations.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research study was to answer the following two research questions: How do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs? and How do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres? A secondary purpose was to address the dearth of literature in the academic fields pertaining to the topics of borderlands and sport consumer behaviour. Through semi-structured interviews, demographic questionnaires and an interpretivist approach, these goals were achieved.
It was found that Fort Erie Toronto Maple Leafs fans often referred to a strong national identity and pride as the primary reason behind their decision to support their team. Fort Erie Buffalo Sabres fans mostly had dual-citizenship and an overall affinity towards the city of Buffalo, New York. Other interesting findings were the differences in definition of accessibility, difference of opinion towards the USA, and the difference of demographics between the two fan groups. While many Canadians may never understand the benefits and challenges of living alongside the international border, it was a pleasure being invited into the lives of these 18 participants to help understand the emic perspectives on what it means to be a Leafs/Sabres fan from the bordertown of Fort Erie.

Through the data collected, it was learnt that selecting a favourite NHL franchise represented more to many borderland fans than just simply picking a team to cheer on. Although many of the antecedents to sport fandom that were mentioned in this study were congruent with existing literature, it was the semi-structured interviews that allowed me to better understand the underlying contexts that helped shape the intricate meanings of these traditionally straightforward notions. Terms such as local and hometown proved to represent something completely different amongst the two fanbases, with neither version necessarily being better than the other. Toronto Maple Leafs fans referred to the hometown team as the closest Canadian team, while Buffalo Sabres fans suggested the team closest in geographic proximity was deserving of that title.

The results of the study shed light onto the population of Fort Erie, Ontario and could possibly provide more of an understanding on other Canadian bordertowns. Due to the interesting findings, the variation of responses, and the potential directions for future research, it would appear that this study was a worthwhile pursuit and something to build from. The study
not only contributed to the sport consumer behaviour literature, but also to the works of borderland research. Findings from this research provide implications for those looking to understand Canadian borderland sport fans, the relationship between the borderlands of Canada and the USA, and fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs and/or the Buffalo Sabres.
References


Constitution of the National Hockey League (An Unincorporated Association Not For Profit).

   Article IV. Section 4.1(c).


YOU’RE ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER


Appendix A

50-mile (80-kilometre) radius of Toronto Maple Leafs and Buffalo Sabres
Appendix B
Maple Leafs Fan Attitudes at Different Psychological Continuum Model Stages

Awareness
• I am aware of the Toronto Maple Leafs

Attraction
• I like the Toronto Maple Leafs

Attachment
• I am a Toronto Maple Leafs Fan

Allegiance
• I live for the Toronto Maple Leafs
Appendix C
Recruitment Poster

Hockey Fans from Fort Erie Wanted for Research Study

Who: Must be 18 or older, from Fort Erie and a highly-identified (big) fan of either the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Buffalo Sabres.

What: Participants will complete a demographic questionnaire and then be interviewed (in person) for approximately 30–60 minutes about their lives as Toronto Maple Leafs/Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie, Ontario.

Research Questions:

1) Why do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs?

2) Why do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres?

Brock University
1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way,
St. Catharines, Ontario
L2S 3A1
Principal Investigator:
Eddy Sidari, BSM
MA, Sport Management Candidate
Phone: 905-481-8187
Email: eddy.sidari@brocku.ca

This study has received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board of Brock University (REB 18-093—HYATT)
Appendix D
Letter of Invitation

Title of Study: An Interpretive Study of Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs Fans in Fort Erie, Ontario

Principal Investigator: Eddy Sidani, Graduate Student, Department of Sport Management, Brock University

Co-Investigators: Dr. Craig Hyatt, Associate Professor, Department of Sport Management, Brock University; Dr. Chris Chard, Associate Professor, Department of Sport Management, Brock University; Dr. Shannon Kerwin, Associate Professor, Department of Sport Management, Brock University

I, Eddy Sidani, Graduate Student from the Department of Sport Management at Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled “An Interpretive Study of Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs Fans in Fort Erie, Ontario.” In this study, I wish for hockey fans from Fort Erie to help me answer the following research questions: How do Toronto Maple Leafs fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Toronto Maple Leafs? and How do Buffalo Sabres fans in Fort Erie begin and continue to support the Buffalo Sabres? We seek approximately 10 participants who support either team (20 in total) who are considered to be life-long, adult Fort Erie residents to discuss their lived experiences as a Maple Leafs or Sabres fan. Study participants will be asked to participate in semi-structured interviews that will last approximately 30-60 minutes in length. We ask that each participant is 18 years of age or older in addition to filling out an informed consent and demographic form.

This research should benefit sport consumer behaviour scholars who are trying to better understand the behaviours, thoughts, and feelings of sport fans.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905-688-5550 ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca).

If you have any other questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Eddy Sidani
Graduate Student, Department of Sport Management
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario
905-401-9387
es10ge@brocku.ca
Appendix E
Informed Consent

Date: October 30th, 2018
Project Title: An Interpretive Study of Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs Fans in Fort Erie, Ontario

Principal Investigator (PI):
Eddy Sidani, Masters of Arts candidate
Department of Sport Management
Brock University
[905-401-9387; es10ge@brocku.ca]

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Craig Hyatt
Associate Professor
Department of Sport Management
Brock University
(905) 688-5550 Ext. 4382; chyatt@brocku.ca

INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding as to why hockey fans from Fort Erie become fans of either the Buffalo Sabres or the Toronto Maple Leafs and how they maintain that fandom.

WHAT’S INVOLVED

As a participant (who is 18 years of age or older) you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. You will be expected to partake in answering questions that have been posed by the researcher and be actively involved in discussion. All interviews will be audio recorded, which the researcher will use to transcribe the data collected from the interview at a later date. Participation will take approximately 30-60 minutes, depending on the level of discussion generated.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

The benefit(s) of participation includes the opportunity to contribute to the overall body of knowledge within the field of sport management, specifically as it pertains to understanding the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of hockey fans. There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study.
CONFIDENTIALITY

To ensure confidentiality, interviews will be conducted in a comfortable setting agreed upon by both the researcher and the interviewee. Preferably, the setting is to be private in order to eliminate any potential background noise that could be picked up by the audio recorder. It is not imperative that the interview setting be completely private, however a more quiet setting would be preferred. The information you provide will be kept confidential through the use of assigned code names or aliases, rather than your given name. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send a copy of your interview transcript for you to read. This will help confirm the accuracy of our conversation and add or clarify any points that you wish to be edited.

Interviews will be recorded using a digital voice recorder to ensure accurate reporting of participant responses. Interview recordings will be permanently deleted after being transcribed by the researcher. Data collected during this study will be stored on the researcher’s personal computer and a USB device, which will both be password protected. Data will be kept for three years, after which time all electronic copies will be deleted and any hard copies will be shredded and disposed of.

Access to this data will be restricted to the researcher, Eddy Sidani, as well as Dr. Craig Hyatt, my faculty research supervisor, and Dr. Chris Chard and Dr. Shannon Kerwin, the thesis advisory committee members.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty. Should you wish to withdraw from this study, contact Eddy Sidani and he will ensure your interview transcript, corresponding audio file, and any other records that contain your identity are destroyed.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in professional and/ or academic journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available from Eddy Sidani via e-mail by March, 2019. Individual participants will not be identified in the possible publication from this research.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor (where applicable) using the contact information provided above. This study has been approved by Research Ethics Board at Brock University (REB 18-093 – HYATT). If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca. Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.
CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name:___________________________________

Signature:______________________________ Date:______________________________
Appendix F
Demographic Questionnaire

The following is a short demographic questionnaire created by the researcher to ensure that each interviewee is above the age of 18 years and is indeed life-long, adult resident of Fort Erie. The remaining questions are designed to help the researcher better understand the interviewees in an attempt to uncover possible patterns and connections between the interviewees’ demographics and their hockey fandom.

1) What is your gender? __ Male __ Female

2) What is your age? _____

3) What is your ethnicity?
   __ Caucasian
   __ Asian
   __ Hispanic
   __ African
   __ British
   __ Other (please specify) ____________

4) What is your marital status?
   __ Married
   __ Widowed
   __ Single
   __ Other
   __ Divorced

5) What is your level of education?
   __ Some high-school/secondary-school
   __ High-school/secondary-school graduate
   __ Some college/university
   __ College/university graduate
   __ Advanced degree holder (Master’s/PhD)

6) What is your current occupation? _______________________________________

7) Are you born and raised in Fort Erie, Ontario?: ___ Yes ___ No

7b) If NO, briefly explain how you consider yourself a life-long, adult resident of Fort Erie:
YOU’RE ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER

Appendix G
Thank You Letter and Member Check

Hello [Name]:

Firstly, I’d like to take this time to sincerely thank you for participating in my study. Without your participation, I would have no data! Next, I’d like to let you know that I have transcribed my interview with you and that it is attached to this email. You’ll notice that I did not use your real name, instead I assigned you the pseudonym [pseudonym]. This is to ensure confidentiality. Please read the transcript thoroughly to ensure that it is accurate and that I understood the messages you were trying to convey. (By “accurate”, I’m referring to any factual errors I may have made. For example, maybe I heard a 15 when you really said 50. I’m striving to avoid such inaccuracies in the data.) If you find any inaccuracies, please note them, correct them, and send them back to me. If everything looks fine to you, please note that as well when you send me back the transcript. Please return the transcript with your comments to this e-mail address within two weeks of receiving it. If I have not received your feedback after two weeks, I will assume that you find the transcript to be accurate.

Thank you once again and I look forward to hearing from you soon,
Eddy
Appendix H  
Participant Pseudonym and Demographics

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<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
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<td>Senior Designer</td>
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<td>College/University Graduate</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>Accountant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luke (S)</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
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*: These names are the pseudonyms of the participants and not their real names. (L): Indicates a Toronto Maple Leafs fan. (S): Indicates a Buffalo Sabres fan.
Appendix I

To finish this thesis, I think it is important to discuss who I am as an individual and how I came to be interested in my research topic. In academia, a lot of emphasis is placed on a researcher’s biases and the limitations that they pose. However, I believe that a researcher’s background and prior experiences rather act as stimulants and create opportunities to develop questions about the world that surrounds them. My research questions and ideas did not appear to me out of thin air; they were developed through my intellectual curiosity about the world that surrounds me.

Since the day I was born I have lived in the town of Fort Erie, Ontario. I grew up playing many sports as a young child; however, my focus has always been on soccer and football. Although I never played ice hockey growing up, I was constantly surrounded by it. It was on television, it was in the media, and it was what we spoke about at school on the playground. Most of my friends played the sport at one level or another and it was the most popular topic of conversation throughout the town. Even if I wanted to, there was no escaping the sport of hockey.

Growing up in Fort Erie, it was always clear to me that I lived in a hockey town. The sport was a major part of the town’s identity and it was a big part of many residents’ lives. I can remember feeling like a bit of an outcast as I was one of the very few kids who grew up in Fort Erie who was not enrolled in an ice hockey league. Because of this, I would often play ball-hockey with my friends on the streets that surrounded our neighbourhoods to make me feel more like a “Fort Erie” kid.

Since I never played ice hockey, I also never took much of an interest in professional hockey. This meant that I never necessarily had a favourite National Hockey League (NHL)
team or actively followed any of the franchises, yet I had no choice but to be aware of current events as it was the main topic of conversation in my social circles. The two most prominent teams that I would constantly hear and read about were the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Buffalo Sabres. I would often witness long-lasting arguments between both sets of fans regarding the state and quality of the teams in question and how one team was superior to the other. The rivalry between the two teams and their fans was ever so prominent in Fort Erie that it almost felt as if the town were divided into two: Toronto Maple Leafs fans and Buffalo Sabres fans.

Although I never thought about it at the time, this phenomenon would eventually become the focus of my Master’s thesis. For my study, I intended to interview both Toronto Maple Leafs fans and Buffalo Sabres fans from the town of Fort Erie to better understand how they came to cheer for the team and how they maintained this fandom.

I never identified as a fan of any particular hockey team as I never built a connection with any of the teams in the NHL; however, I did build strong connections with two other sporting franchises: A.C. Milan of the Italian Serie A and the Denver Broncos of the National Football League. I think it is important to understand this because it had an impact on the way I interpreted sport fandom and the connections my participants built with their favourite franchises. If I were not a highly identified sport fan myself, I would only have understood what the sport management literature had told me regarding the connections and motivations an individual creates with their team. However, being a highly identified sport fan means that I could empathize with other fans and understand their experiences as I had also gone through similar experiences and emotions. Understanding what it means to be a highly identified fan helped me to build a rapport with my participants during my interviews as we had a common ground to start from.
I think it is important to discuss my origins in Fort Erie and my passion for sport as a fan because it allows the reader to better understand why this topic is of any interest to me while illuminating some of my biases and assumptions. Kerwin and Hoeber (2015) suggested that using personal reflection when doing sport research is important as it can strengthen the methodological approach being used. They encourage sport management researchers to acknowledge and reflect on their previous experiences as sport fans, athletes, coaches, or volunteers in their research (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). One of the reasons I decided to look at highly identified sport fans in Fort Erie is because the town represents an underrepresented population in the sport consumer behaviour literature. To date, there is no literature that examines the different attitudes and behaviours of sport fans who reside along an international border. I hoped to fill this gap and draw attention to those folks who live in borderlands such as Fort Erie.

In 1987, Morris Holbrook wrote an article that served two main purposes: to create an adequate definition of consumer research and to list and explain the various disciplines which have contributed to the field of consumer behaviour (Holbrook, 1987). According to Holbrook (1987) consumer behaviour researchers should not solely focus on conducting applied research – i.e. research designed primarily to aid marketing managers and industry practitioners. Rather, Holbrook (1987) discusses how consumer behaviour researchers could take a theoretical approach and conduct basic research to advance the knowledge base of the academic field. This is not to suggest that the findings of basic research cannot be transferred to become applicable to practitioners in the industry, but rather that the focus should be on the consumers for the sake of learning about the consumers themselves. I strongly agree with Holbrook in this regard. With this research project, I strived to satisfy my intellectual curiosity about hockey fans who live in
Fort Erie, Ontario. While there is potential to apply the findings of this thesis to the industry, it was by no means the primary focus. The focus here was on Fort Erie, its hockey fans, and their two favourite teams…