"Hockey is for Everyone": A Semiotic Analysis of NHL Instagram Posts to Define Success for

EDI-Focused Sports Marketing

By

Cambree Lovesy

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Abstract

In North America, the National Hockey League (NHL) is an example of an influential organization that not only acts as a home for some of the world's greatest athletes, but also fosters a strong community of hockey fans, who primarily engage with the organization and its teams online. The NHL "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign is a marketing initiative activated throughout the NHL and its clubs, focusing on the expression of the league's commitment to EDI values. Through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of ten Instagram posts made by NHL teams advertising a "Hockey is for Everyone" initiative, this study aims to define success for an EDI-focused professional sports marketing campaign through the use of Instagram as a means of advertising. This research employs Roland Barthes' "connotation procedures" as a guide to a visual semiotic analysis of Instagram photos, based on traditional EDI principles. Overall, the study concludes that based on a set of best practices that acknowledge a negative correlation between online engagement and EDI expression, it is possible to achieve both commercial and sociocultural success through the advertisement of a "Hockey is for Everyone" event or initiative on Instagram.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The role that professional sport plays in modern society is a topic highly debated by sports communications professionals. Not only do North American professional leagues house some of the world's best athletes, but they are also important parts of everyday social and cultural life. It is rare to find someone who does not have a childhood memory relating to professional sports, whether that be cheering on a hometown team from our living rooms, knowing someone who made it to the professional level in their sport, or simply just hearing chatter about a recent win or loss. It is this trait that motivates professional sports teams to understand the significant marketing value in creating meaningful connections with their communities (Stone, 2018), and therefore, professional sports teams often join the sphere of social justice discourse through EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion)-focused events and initiatives. In the twenty-first century, business operations have seen an "emphasis on social responsibility" and "its dramatic growth over the past two decades within sport" (Babiak and Wolfe, p. 738), which has resulted in professional sports leagues expanding their business goals to include being focused on influencing positive social change and justice.

The National Hockey League was founded in 1917 and began to expand extremely quickly, from six teams, to thirty-two as of 2023 (NHL). The league is one of four main professional sports leagues in North America, alongside the NFL, NBA, and MLB. In comparison to these leagues, NHL fans are reported to be more affluent, though the league receives the least amount of sponsorship funding, and the fan base is significantly smaller

(Markus, 2004). Because of this, the league relies heavily on its dedicated fans, who "contribute to the community" (Mastromartino et al., p. 16) once they identify as members of a fanbase.

The sport of hockey is enjoyed by people from all different walks of life, but its function in society has been "designed around whiteness, [and] traditional masculinity" (Pardy, 2021, p.117), creating an exclusionary environment for traditionally marginalized communities to participate. The NHL responded to this discourse through a marketing campaign entitled "Hockey is for Everyone", which aims to promote the league's EDI values. This campaign is often activated through individual NHL clubs hosting "Hockey is for Everyone" theme nights, as well as other events and initiatives. This campaign involves the participation of team personnel including players, fans, community groups, and more, and is often promoted on social media as a marketing strategy.

This study will analyze ten Instagram posts that were made by official NHL team accounts advertising a "Hockey is for Everyone" event or initiative. Through a qualitative and quantitative visual content analysis, I will apply Roland Barthes' approach to semiotics, specifically his "connotation procedures" (1961) to understand which posts are performing well in two specific areas. I will divide my exploration of success into two categories: commercial, and sociocultural, in order to consider potential relationships or correlations between the posts that receive high user engagement, and the posts that apply EDI principles in meaningful ways. Since Instagram is used as a tool that helps businesses connect with potential customers, and in the NHL's case, fans (Çelik, 2021), it is the prime environment to investigate this complete communication process. This research aims to provide professional sports marketers further

insight into how to successfully approach EDI-focused marketing campaigns, and seeks to outline a set of best practices to consider when visually advertising such material.

I will begin this study with a review of relevant literature, to provide theoretical context to my inquiry. The sector of the communications field that is sports communications scholarship is a relatively new, and small area of study. There is limited research available surrounding the relationship between professional sports and EDI, so my literature review will cover the topics of semiotics, The National Hockey League and its role in society, EDI traditions and principles, and professional sports marketing through social media and brand management. Through this review, I am able to connect the fundamental ideas of each sphere, in order to create a criteria to assess my data, then draw conclusions and implications from the results of my study.

Due to the lack of research on the relationship between EDI and professional sports communications and marketing, my research will aim to fill the gap by responding to a need to understand what role hockey plays in adding to social justice discourse, and how it impacts not only an organization, but society, and hockey culture as a whole.

RQ1: How can a comparative analysis of the EDI content of Instagram post images and likes and comments indicate the success of advertising photographs for NHL "Hockey is for Everyone" events?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

In order to start my literature review, I did a review of the relevant communication theory literature from my previous communications courses at the University of Alberta. Then, I started to search for scholarly articles on the University of Alberta's library website. I used Academic Search Complete, the University of Alberta library catalogue, Business Source Complete, and SAGE Business Cases. I created a spreadsheet to track the resources I found, and assess which ones would be most suitable for my research purposes.

I selected only peer reviewed journal articles as sources for my review, and started off with searching the terms *professional sports*, *social media*, and *EDI*. This primary search resulted in some applicable articles, but I had to expand my search in order to find studies that were related, but not entirely in my field. I decided to add the following terms in a variety of combinations to my search: *semiotics*, *semiotic theory*, *visual sociology*, *Instagram*, *NHL*, *professional hockey*, *inclusivity*, *equity*, *diversity*, *brand management*, and *branding*. From this secondary search, I was able to exhaust all avenues until the information became saturated.

Semiotics

Because my study is looking at communication artifacts and their meanings, a semiotics approach was theoretically appropriate. Semiotics is a concept that spans across multiple disciplines, but in communications studies, scholars look specifically at "signs and their meanings" (Ungvarsky). Although there are many scholars worth recognizing in this overview

such as John Locke, Henry Stubbes, Louis Althusser, and Ferdinand de Saussure, who all

contributed to the field of semiotics as we know it today, I am going to discuss the findings of

Charles S. Peirce, and Roland Barthes in more depth, as they present the most relevance to this

study.

Eighteenth century American philosopher Charles S. Peirce quickly became known for

his influence on the concept of pragmatism, but he also is responsible for the creation of "the

semiotic triad" (Figure 1), which defines some of these ideas more concretely.
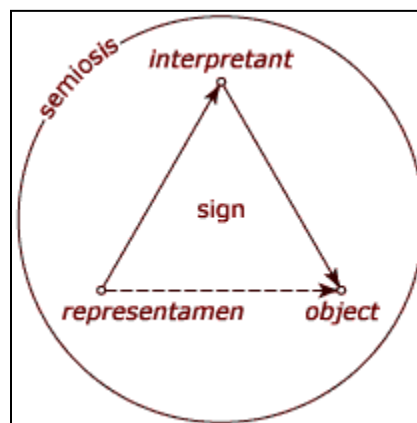
Figure 1: The Semiotic Triad

Note. Adapted from Dahlstrom, D., & Somayaji, V. (2003, June 11). *Semiotics and UID:*

Peircian Semiotics. University of California San Diego.

https://cseweb.ucsd.edu/~ddahlstr/cse271/peirce.php

Peirce introduces terminology to classify signs such as "icon", "index", and "symbol",

which are defined by their relationship between their "object" and "representamen". The

"representamen" is defined as the "(not necessarily physical) form of the sign" (Dahlstrom et al.,

2003), which signals the reaction from one who interacts with it (the "interpretant"), and

therefore creates an inferred "object". Peirce's ideas apply to both textual language and imagery,

and create opportunities to better understand how communication through these types of

mediums holds a complex system of understanding within it.

In 1961, French theorist Roland Barthes published "The Photographic Message", an

essay that presents a focused reflection on the semiotics of photography. Barthes proposes a

process of interpreting and understanding photographs that recognizes both the "denotative" and

"connotative" meanings within them. Barthes refers to this co-existence of meanings as the

"photographic paradox" (1961, p. 196). When a viewer sees an image, they encounter both what

they see literally and visually in front of them, as well as experience their own unique reading of

the photograph, based on the "extent [that society] communicates what it thinks of it" (p. 197).

In this sense, Barthes describes a photograph as "an object endowed with a structural autonomy"

(p. 195). Images have the ability to contain complex messages that require a certain level of

cultural competency to fully understand.

In order to understand the "coding of the photographic analogue" (Barthes, p. 199), or the

manner in which photographs are infused with meaning along their production and publication

journey, Barthes describes six "connotation procedures" that frame this conversation. The

following are Barthes' procedures that I will use to structure my analysis of Instagram posts.

1. *Trick effects*: the use of deception by the photographer to alter the perception of
   the image.

2. *Pose*: the way objects are posed and positioned within a photograph has an effect on how they are perceived.

3. *Objects*: the objects that are chosen to appear in the photograph, and their arrangement have a cultural context that affects the connotative meaning of the image.

4. *Photogenia*: the use of visual effects such as lighting, exposure, etc. that add to the connoted presentation of the photograph.

5. *Aestheticism*: the practice of making a photograph emulate a culturally known image or artifact.

6. *Syntax*: when a photograph appears in a series, that together produces its connotative reading.

He also speaks on the addition of text in the presentation of a photograph, such as an Instagram caption, stating that the "two structures of the message each occupy their own defined spaces" (p. 195). Thus, the image itself and the text that accompanies it must first be analyzed separately, and then one can assess how they coexist with the other. Barthes' ideas about the process of understanding the significance of signs within photographs and accompanying text will be the central theoretical basis for the creation of my methodology.

Semiotics is an approach that media communications scholars often apply towards investigating social marketing engagement. Sari and Ganiem (2021) use Barthes' ideology to analyze the representation of gender in soy sauce advertising. They conclude that the manners in which women are presented in these "advertisements contain values that can construct a reality"

(p. 233) which does not yet exist in Indonesian society. In this regard, they argue that applying semiotics to a social marketing analysis can help uncover the effects of product advertising on real social change. If more women see their gender depicted as equal to men in photographs and video advertisements focused on the domestic sphere, they are more likely to respond positively to the product, and the product will gain positive attention for contributing to "changes in socio-cultural values" (Sari and Ganiem, p. 233).

UK communications scholar Virpi Ylanne expands on this notion in her content analysis of magazine articles that feature photographs of older adults. Through a semiotic analysis of images from 1999 to 2004 compared to images from 2011 to 2016, she emphasizes the "role of advertising media in constructing and contributing to specific social 'imaginary'" (2021, p. 7). Due to the limited depiction of "real" stories and actions that represent older life, Ylanne argues that this media contributes to the "marginalisation of older adults" (p. 7), or the current status quo in social discourse on this topic. These studies prove that the coexistence of denotative and connotative meanings within advertising photographs has the ability to both comment on, and even contribute to changing the way that society thinks about a person, object, or phenomenon. Semiotics has the ability to evaluate business goals, by acting as a lens to evaluate reception of an idea. With this theoretical background established, semiotics will provide the context for which I will explore the NHL and their marketing strategies.

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The National Hockey League and Marketing Strategies

The National Hockey League has a well defined history and marketing strategy. It is the
"world's premier professional ice hockey organization" (Dewey, 2022) located in North America
and consisting of thirty-one teams between Canada and the United States. The league grew out of
Canadian organized hockey during World War One in 1917, and continued to expand
exponentially into present day. Dewey notes that out of the professional sports leagues in North
America, it has been the hardest for the NHL to "find its cultural niche", having the smallest fan
base and player salaries compared to the NFL, MLB, or NBA. One of the ways in which the
NHL has tried to counteract this imbalance is through the globalization of hockey and business
operations. Many teams are "now multidimensional economic activities operating on a global
scale" (Norcliffe, 2022), with players coming from around the world, and therefore, fan bases
spreading to these areas. In response to the increasingly neoliberal sports climate, the NHL is
"commodifying, privatizing, globalizing, growing in scale, [and] aggressively branding"
(Norcliffe), using players as the selling product.

Kennedy (2021) studies this increase in "aggressive" neoliberal tactics within the NHL in
relation to player behaviour, specifically pertaining to incidents of violence. They find that
"increasing social pressure on people to exercise self-restraint" correlates directly with the
increase of bureaucracy and globalization in the professional hockey industry. As the business
expands, the more pressure is placed on players and other representatives of the brand to behave
in a "socially accepted" manner on and off the ice.

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Through my research of the NHL, I began to notice a trend of the league being a representation of something else for people who interact with it. This trend of commodity fetishism appears to translate directly into Canadian nationalism for many Canadian NHL fans. Wong notes in their study of Vancouver's initial attempt to join the NHL that hockey "helps to forge a sense of shared Canadian identity" (2019). Whether people watch or enjoy hockey or not, it is something that has become internationally recognized as a symbol for being Canadian. Brett Pardy (2022) discusses the problematic nature of this marketing phenomenon, as he explains this widespread belief only fills "the need for Canada to have an origin myth" instead of taking accountability for the complex reality of colonial Canada. Pardy has done a number of studies on Rogers Hometown Hockey, a tour that took street hockey and famous Canadian figures within the sport around to various cities to promote the sport across the country.

To others, the NHL represents a dream or a final destination of success for the hardworking young athlete. In their 2019 study, Lefebvre interviews eight NHL professional development coaches in order to understand the role that the NHL plays in developing players as athletes, but also as community citizens. He recognizes that many people work their whole life to get to the NHL, but what happens when they get there? His findings conclude that the NHL emphasizes "pro-social behaviors" in their players, directly identifying good players as having "good" personal characteristics alongside their ice skills. It is evident that the NHL, while being a representation of something ideological for many people around the world, is also a complex business model that relies heavily on multi-faceted athletes to maintain their relationships with fans and partners on a global scale. One way in which the NHL seeks to achieve these positive

responses from their fans is through the advertisement of NHL social justice campaigns and events. I am specifically interested in looking at the "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign as a case study to examine the ways in which NHL clubs use photographs to advertise their efforts towards social change.

Hockey is for Everyone

The "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign was launched by the NHL in 2017. The campaign's intention is to "promote diversity and inclusion among those of all sexual orientations, genders, ethnicities, abilities and socioeconomic statuses" (Comitor, 2017) by declaring every February "Hockey is for Everyone Month". The campaign runs annually in February, but the league mentions that they work all year round to implement equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) practices into the league. Some of the tactics in which this campaign is executed include a "Hockey is for Everyone ambassador" on each NHL team, who is responsible for creating an inclusive environment within the team. Another tactic that is implemented league-wide is encouraging teams to host a "Hockey is for Everyone Night" at a home game, where in-game and promotional player content center around inclusion and the sport of hockey.

The NHL, as an institution, has a commitment to promoting and adhering to social values. The dominant forces behind why social values are tied so closely to business objectives in professional sports leagues, are "external pressures (context, content, constituents, control, and cause)" (Babiak and Wolfe, p. 737). The primary way in which the NHL expresses these values is through marketing.

Considering this campaign and its focus on delivering complex, emotional messages to

the general public, I seek to focus on "Hockey is for Everyone" as an artifact(s) that represents the commitment of the NHL to the social ideals of EDI. As the weight of this initiative is considerable, it is important to assess how the marketing photographs used by teams are being received by Instagram users. NHL teams represent this initiative through the likes of events, merchandise, images, video content, press releases, branding elements, and more, but Instagram provides a streamlined opportunity to assess many of the above components in one study. The criteria that will shape the definition of "good" and "bad" expressions of social values and commitment to authentic social change will come from a review of EDI literature.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

There is very limited research in the field of sports media and communications that focuses on the organizational applications of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles. Interrogating EDI as an institutional approach to business communications became increasingly discussed in the twenty-first century. As EDI trends as a topic in social discourse, it has also been "embraced as a core value and fundamental priority" (Tan, 2019, p. 30) by many businesses in a variety of fields. While many studies focus on the relationship between internal business strategies and EDI, I instead will review the use of EDI principles in successful marketing efforts, specifically in relation to the sphere of photographic and textual advertisement. Throughout my review of EDI traditions, as well as a variety of EDI applications within the communications field, I found three trends that emerged as core ingredients in the success of a campaign that communicates EDI values.

Action-based strategies

The first of these trends is the use of *action-based strategies*. EDI initiatives must contain a message that signals to the receiver that the individual or organization sending the message is taking action towards promoting real positive change. El-Amin (2022) discusses this in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) theory, arguing that it is essential for corporate entities to effectively craft their communications in order to "address diversity and inclusion issues before they arise" (p. 210). This proactive approach speaks to the careful consideration that must be taken by companies to ensure that their business model prioritizes EDI actions and solutions. The trend of companies focusing on EDI as a means to address their social responsibility is increasing, and professional sports teams are actively engaged in this discourse.

One of the defining characteristics of CSR theory includes companies holding themselves "socially accountable" (Fernando, 2021 as cited in Erbschloe, 2021) in order to maintain relationships with the public and relevant stakeholders. This has resulted in CSR showing up prominently in public relations and marketing campaigns (Erbschloe). In his 2016 thesis, Robertson explores the perception of CSR within various types of sports organizations, including the professional sphere. He finds that only organizations in which society expects social involvement from need to prioritize CSR, which includes the NHL. However, these organizations cannot get away with simply "doing no harm", as they have a responsibility to fulfill certain social responsibilities within their organizations in order to promote meaningful change in the real world. If they do not, this can affect brand image and stakeholder relationships. Robertson expands on the argument that CSR programs and goals are

outcome-focused. Stakeholders and businesses alike are all motivated by what their work looks like to their audience and community, and what it does directly for the groups they are affecting, as well as their own organizations. CSR theory requires professional sports teams to communicate an intent to provide a positive outcome to their stakeholders, which in terms of EDI campaigns, looks like authentic social justice and change.

Representation

The second trend that arose from this review is *representation*. Especially in terms of EDI marketing, the way that EDI values are displayed, are integral to the way they are received. Phillips et al. (2022) did a study on the manner in which female-identifying professionals in the field of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) were portrayed on Instagram, and how that affected social discourse around their identity within the field. They found there to be higher engagement statistics associated with posts that featured "Women of Color, multiple languages, and posts that challenge stereotypes" (p. 1). This demonstrates the power of visual positive representation to possess the "ability to inspire belonging" (Phillips et al., p. 14) amongst a particular audience. Authentic representation is important because it is an act of autonomous inclusion. Inclusion is a "commitment to access, success and representation of historically underserved, marginalized or excluded populations" (UBC, 2018, p. 20 as cited in Robinson, 2021, p. 19), which Robinson proves has an effect on how marketing materials are interpreted when they represent these populations authentically. Their content analysis of images and text used in EDI marketing materials from both the

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University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto frames inclusion and representation as being synonymous with each other.

Engagement

The third and final trend to highlight in this review of EDI principles is *engagement*. EDI marketing can represent the correct people and actions, but how can it effectively engage with both "marginalized or excluded populations", as well as populations with lower levels of engagement with the topic or issue? Bernstein et al. (2020) proposes that "engagement in positive interactions" (p. 395) is an essential component of encouraging meaningful interaction with organizational EDI efforts. To communications scholars, this engagement can take the shape of linguistic choices. Ralina L. Joseph (2017) notes that "words can reinforce, name, or resist power" (p. 3321) when we interact with them. Therefore, it is accurate to make the inference that when words and visual representations of EDI value expressions are crafted and communicated in a manner that challenges existing power-imbalances within the social discourse on that topic in a positive way, they have the ability to lead an organization towards their EDI goals. Leon (2014) suggests that the interactions with these materials should focus on "awareness, outreach, and relevance" (as cited in El-Amin, 2022, p. 217). These qualities will act as a guide towards my definition of the criteria that I will use to assess the EDI qualities of select Instagram posts.

Social Media and Brand Management

Technology is an essential component to discuss in the context of professional sports communications in the twenty-first century. Social media is a tool used prominently by

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professional sports teams to build and maintain fan relationships and manage their brand. In their 2021 study, Naraine et al. examine the #WeTheNorth hashtag campaign conducted by the Toronto Raptors NBA across various social media platforms. They took a sample of tweets that contained the hashtag on Twitter and analyzed them semiotically in order to uncover which groups of people were interacting, and how within this trend. Their results found that #WeTheNorth connected people far outside of just the Toronto Raptors fan base, geographically and socially. This is an example of how professional sports teams can use social media to fulfill business goals.

The NHL saw an instance of brand equity speaking for itself on social media when Seattle was announced to be receiving an NHL team. Davies et al. (2022) explore the fan perception of this team that did not yet exist at the time of research. They found that an online community was already extremely devoted to this team that would exist in the future, and felt very passionate about team "managers [working] to understand their publics and make decisions that are cognizant of local history and traditions" (p. 424). The tie between brand equity and social media engagement here shows the importance of authentic communication between a sports organization and their fans, as there are deep-rooted emotional sentiments that appear when people become fans of something. This is a unique type of consumer culture, as fan bases will remain largely loyal at their core for long periods of time if an organization is able to engage with them in a meaningful way.

Because NHL fans primarily use social media as a means to interact with their favourite teams, it is natural to study Instagram as a setting for engagement with organizational

communications. Not only are these people interacting with content online, but many of them are also customers who are providing a team with the financial capital to sustain their business goals. Instagram is a location where businesses can advance "promotion, customer relationship management, marketing, and communication activities for their current and potential target audiences" (Şahin et al., 2017, as cited in Çelik, 2021, p. 3830). Instagram users can like, comment, or repost a post to interactively respond to what they see from a team. The "popularity [...] and expert credibility" of an organization's account are "attributes that foster social influence" (Tafesse et al., 2023, p. 407), along with affecting levels of engagement from followers. Çelik et al. describes Instagram in their 2021 study as the "promotional face of businesses" (p. 3830), meaning that it directly represents the company's values and brand to consumers. Therefore, because of Instagram's ability to facilitate two-sided communication between a team and their current and target customers, it is the ideal environment to assess the reception of advertising photographs.

Summary

In sum, the above literature review provides the context for why professional sports teams use Instagram as a communication medium to express their EDI values, as well as how one can understand this communication semiotically. Roland Barthes' "connotation procedures" framework provided a theoretical basis for how this study can compare effective and ineffective visual communications of EDI principles. These procedures provide insight into how audiences make meaning out of Instagram posts that they interact with through the coexistence of denotative and connotative meanings. The studies that frame the NHL as a social institution

situate the artifacts I will be studying as cultural products, that reflect and absorb the greater

context in which they derive from. In looking towards the criteria that will guide my assessment

of these posts, the three fundamental EDI principles that emerged (action-based strategies,

representation, and engagement) will lead the creation of categories to determine the ways in

which these posts adhere, or do not adhere to accepted EDI standards. In recognizing through my

research that organizations such as the NHL and its clubs use Instagram as a means to

communicate their business goals and values to their fans and general audiences, I am able to

assess the implications of this study to the overall business model of these teams.

The field of sports communications in itself is relatively small, compared to other

avenues of the communications sphere. However, there is a scholarly foundation here that allows

for my study to expand on existing knowledge. I will be applying this review of theory and

relevant studies directly to my work, but I recognize that the scope and resources of this project

do not allow for an in depth analysis of all literature that is relevant to this field. Instead, I will

apply this comprehensive overview to my objective of assessing photographic advertisements

through an EDI lens, in order to conceivably propose a set of recommendations for EDI-focused

sports marketing initiatives.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Now that I have looked at theory showing that marketing artifacts can be analyzed by

looking at criteria based on social responsibility, my task is to structure this inquiry in a fashion

that allows for adequate measurement of how successful these artifacts are for a team. In order

to structure my research goals, I determined a content analysis would be the best fit for this

study. I analyzed ten Instagram posts made by NHL team accounts, promoting a "Hockey is for Everyone" initiative or event. The purpose of this process is to look at a post to "evaluate what it says and how it says it" (Ungvarsky, 2023), in the context of social advertising. Specifically, I am interested in looking at how these posts use photographs in order to convey a message to their audience. Do these photos reflect the EDI principles I examined, and what kind of response are they eliciting from Instagram users? The purpose of this study is to understand the correlation, or lack thereof, between professional sports teams' relationships with social justice work, and successful social media advertising of this work. This research addresses the gap in sports media studies that address the increasing trend of political and social activism from professional sports teams.

This study utilizes a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to assess the correlation between the visual sociology of EDI principles and the likes and comments that a post has. After selecting ten Instagram posts from five Canadian NHL clubs, and five American NHL clubs, I gathered data on the date and time they were posted, what their captions consisted of, how many likes and comments they received, and what the nature of those comments were. I then continued by creating a criteria in order to give each post an "EDI score", based on my literature review of EDI communications principles, as well as Barthes' "connotation procedures" (1961). This procedure was intended to answer the following question:

RQ1: How can a comparative analysis of the EDI content of Instagram post images and likes and comments indicate the success of advertising photographs for NHL "Hockey is for Everyone" events?

Qualitative and Quantitative Content Analysis

Content analysis is a focused examination of media in order to determine its broader implications. By applying this process to media studies that require a combination of data evidence and researcher inference, one can uncover new knowledge while remaining unintrusive to the matter being studied (Ungvarsky, 2023). Content analysis is useful in describing "attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications" (De Maret et al., 2005), which makes it a very suitable approach towards the analysis of response to Instagram posts. Although I will be focusing on visual content analysis, which is defined by "systematically analyzing [...] visual documentation (Wilson, 2011), I will also include the text within the Instagram caption and comment sections to provide further context to my analysis of the image.

My research question guides my process of exploring the qualities that are inherent to successful visual advertisements of "Hockey is for Everyone" initiatives. I will use a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis to provide me with my data set. The qualitative data will come from the messaging within the image and caption of the Instagram post. I will be collecting descriptive details on the visual and textual elements of the posts through a semiotic lens, then converting the qualitative data into quantitative data in my coding process. The direct quantitative data I collect will come from the date the post was published,

how many likes and comments it received, and how many followers the account has. All of this data will be combined into a spreadsheet that will collectively help me to create meaning out of these artifacts.

The coding process for the images theoretically derives from Barthes' six "connotation procedures": trick effects, pose, objects, photogenia, aestheticism, and syntax. These six constructs provide the framework to assess the expression of EDI values within the images. The categorical criteria then will be created based on the three fundamental trends pulled from EDI literature: action-based strategies, representation, and engagement. This, along with the quantitative data that is collected will be analyzed through a Corporate Social Responsibility lens, in order to determine the success or failure of the advertisements in the context of existent social change discourse.

Sample Criteria

The process in which Instagram posts will be selected will be based on a specific set of criteria. The criteria that will be used will be:

A. Posted by an NHL club official Instagram account

B. Promoting a "Hockey is for Everyone" event, campaign, or initiative

C. Five accounts will be selected from Canada, and five accounts will be selected from the United States

I chose to look specifically at photos that were posted by official NHL club accounts

because I aim to look at "Hockey is for Everyone" at a more micro level of execution, rather than the original league-authorized communication. The NHL puts out extensive communication around what the "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign aims to achieve, but the team-level marketing of the campaign's messages and actions provides more insight into the reality of the initiative. Because I am passionate about the success of events organized within the business operations of professional hockey, I am looking solely at measuring the success of corporate-initiated communications, and not including posts made by fans, or other organizations mentioning "Hockey is for Everyone". Due to the infancy of this campaign within the league, and the lack of action from some teams, there is limited marketing material available on Instagram. Because of this, I will open my criteria to include not only the promotion of "Hockey is for Everyone" events (usually themed game nights), but also related campaigns or initiatives executed by the team under the umbrella of the "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign. Lastly, I am curious about location as a variable in this study, because it may be able to provide me with more social context while interpreting the responses to these posts. Therefore, I am choosing to compare five geographically-diverse NHL clubs located in Canada with five geographically-diverse NHL clubs located in the United States. The socio-political context of these regions may contribute to certain trends that appear within my data.

 Population Selection

The exploration for which posts to analyze began with searching the hashtag #HockeyisforEveryone on Instagram. This led to a few relevant posts that began my collection. Afterwards, I began to search through NHL team official Instagram accounts to find their most

recent "Hockey is for Everyone" advertisement post. To assist with this search, I also Google

searched "Hockey is for Everyone" and found the most popular events and initiatives made by

clubs, along with the Instagram posts associated with advertising them. While I was completing

this investigation, I drew out a map of where the clubs I had chosen to study posts from were

located, and made sure that the others I selected would highlight new geographic locations. Once

all of the posts were selected, I downloaded the photos and uploaded them to a Google Sheets

spreadsheet to start tracking the data associated with them.

Data Set Description

The completed data set includes ten Instagram posts, each published by their own respective

NHL club. The posts were made between the time period of February 19, 2019 and March 5,

2022. Each of these Instagram accounts are the official, public, verified account for the NHL

team, and actively post to promote team activity to their fans. Below is the table of this data.

Table 1

Primary Data

Label	Photo	Location	Team Name
Business 1		Vancouver	Canucks

Business 2		Edmonton	Oilers
Business 3		Calgary	Flames
Business 4		Montreal	Canadiens
Business 5		Toronto	Maple Leafs
Business 6		Philadelphia	Flyers
Business 7		San Jose	Sharks
Business 8		Carolina	Hurricanes

Business 9		Columbus	Blue Jackets
Business 10		Chicago	Blackhawks

Note. A summary of the ten Instagram posts being analyzed as the data set for this study, and their primary details.

Methodology

Instagram Statistics

Once I had collected all ten Instagram posts, I found that I had hit a point of sample saturation, where I had enough examples to create a generalized inference about the topic. I concluded my selection of posts on January 20, 2023. The first step in gathering data on these posts was to collect and record numerical statistics from Instagram for each post. Instagram allows users to see many different statistics in order to "understand what subjects are interesting for [an] audience" (*Instagram Statistics and Analysis*, 2023). Some of these features are only accessible for the owner of the account, so this study makes use of public data discoverable on Instagram. With "advertisers reach[ing] 1.318 billion users on Instagram in January 2023" (Solomons, 2023), it is a common practice for many corporate entities to access statistics such as likes, follower count, comment count, and date statistics to monitor their success on the app. As the popularity of Instagram continues to increase, it is important to take into consideration the

date in which posts were published, as users have continued to join the platform each year that it

has been in existence since 2010. That is why it is more important to study these statistics in

relation to each other, as together they "affect the overall score [of the post] once processed

through the algorithm" ("How do likes", 2015) of the app. This algorithm boosts certain posts

higher in a user's newsfeed, depending on the existing engagement on the post.

For my data collection, I recorded the number of likes each post had at the time of

collection, as well as the number of comments. I then went to the account that published the post

and recorded the number of followers at the time of collection. I also recorded the date that the

post was published, and put all this information into my Google Sheets spreadsheet.

Textual Data Collection

After I recorded all of the available numerical data from Instagram statistics, I moved

towards recording important information about the caption section and comment section of each

post. I began with copying and pasting the caption of each post into the spreadsheet, which I then

selected and used the "word count" tool within Google Sheets to record the number of characters

within them. It is important to document this information because the length of a caption can

have an impact on how a user responds to the post (Market Splash).

I then opened up the comment section of each post and identified the five comments with

the most likes respectively. Since Instagram does not organize their comment section by the

amount of likes a comment gets, I resorted to determining this by hand. Once I had the five most

liked comments for each post, I copied and pasted them into the spreadsheet, ordered from first

to fifth most liked, and included the number of likes each comment got beside them.

Figure 2: Top five comments example

Visual Data Collection

Once all the quantitative data has been collected, I began to create my categories for assessing each image semiotically, in order to ultimately label each one with an "EDI score". This score would be an assessment of how successful the post was at communicating genuine EDI values. How I would create that criteria though would be based on Roland Barthes' six "connotation procedures" that would help me understand how the average Instagram user would interpret and create meaning from these images. I turned the procedures into variables that I could examine in each image, and from there, created twelve categories to score each post within.

Table 2

Measurement of Connotative Meaning

Connotation Procedure	Focus	Variables
Trick effect	Image has been edited to include something that was not originally there, or framed in a way that is intended to construe its reception	Forced perspective, addition or removal of object or person through editing
Pose	The way a subject or object is posed affects how the image is perceived	Relation to other objects, distance to camera, framing, cultural connotation of

		physicality
Object	What objects are included in the image and how they are represented affects how the image is perceived	Cultural indexes, persons of notoriety, persons of marginalized groups, quantity of object
Photogenia	The way lighting, exposure, and other photographic techniques can affect the way an image is perceived	Lighting, exposure, shadows, filters, print, camera quality
Aestheticism	The attempt to use an image to signify another cultural composition	Cultural indexes
Syntax	The presentation of an image within a series in order to have its meaning interpreted as one part of a whole	Quantity of photos posted at once

Note. This table demonstrates the description of each of Barthes' "connotative procedures", and how they can be assessed within an Instagram post.

The twelve categories I have identified will now pave the way for my visual semiotic analysis of this data. They are as follows:

Table 3

EDI Score Criteria

Criteria	Score
Objects/Aestheticism	
● Shows a person from a marginalized group	+ 1 per group
● Object representing EDI values are at forefront of image	+ 1 per object

● Object representing EDI values are not at forefront of image	- 1 per example
● Uses a stereotype	- 3 per example
● Uses tokenism	- 2 per example
Trick Effects/Photogenia	
● Uses a trick effect	- 1 per example
● Uses a trick effect intended to dilute message	- 3 per example
● Unambiguous	+ 1
Pose	
● Shows an unstaged pose	+ 1 per pose
● Shows an unstaged pose + showing action that adds context to message	+ 2 per pose
● Shows real interaction with team staff or players	+ 1 per interaction
● Shows real interaction with team staff or players engaging in activity	+ 2 per interaction
● Signals future action by organization	+ 1
Syntax	
● Is part of a series that adds to the expression of EDI values positively	+ 1

Note. Categories at the top of Google Sheets spreadsheet columns to score images.

In applying the numerical system I used the following guidelines. I gave numerical value to each category based on the EDI principles identified within my literature review. The three guiding principles that I applied were *representation*, *engagement*, and *action-based* strategies.

- *Representation*. The importance of representation was recognized through the featuring and forefronting of people from traditionally marginalized groups, as well as representing them in a manner that was authentic to their natural being, and not in a way that would contribute to harmful stereotyping or tokenism. I subtracted more points for stereotyping and the use of tokenism because these "types of exclusionary dynamics [...] must be eradicated" (El-Amin, p. 217) in order for EDI techniques to foster inclusion, and genuine positive social change to occur.

- *Engagement*. The importance of positive engagement being demonstrated within these images was acknowledged by highlighting positive, real interactions with team personnel, that do not include staged posing.

- *Action-based strategies.* To score action-based strategies, I observed the use of syntax, which looks like a photo "carousel" on Instagram, or through images that signalled further plans to continue EDI work within the organization.

By giving these posts a numerical EDI score, I am able to rank them from most to least successful in terms of presenting authentic EDI values through their advertisements. This will then be used to compare to my other data sets, in order to assess how this EDI score correlates with other factors.

Methods of Analysis

I made use of the correlation feature, as well as the mathematical equation features of Google Sheets in order to compare numerical columns to each other.

Reliability and Validity

Both reliability and validity are essential components of any research study. Reliability is the ability to "consistently measure a characteristic or attribute" (Wienclaw, 2021), and have the measuring instrument produce the same result. These instruments also need to be "actually measuring what they purport to measure" (Wienclaw, 2021) throughout the research process. In order to ensure that I maintain and prioritize reliability and validity within my project, I started by ensuring that my search for my data set was extensive, and covered a diverse range of NHL clubs and their different "Hockey is for Everyone" initiatives. I make sure throughout my study to acknowledge the date of data collection in order to contextualize my results, which do not include posts published after January 20, 2023. I also kept my criteria open to change as I continued along my research, as I uncovered new perspectives as I went through the process, and allowed that to reflect in my criteria. Lastly, I maintained a theoretical perspective throughout my research that allowed theory, as well as my knowledge of professional sports communications to guide my inquiries, and interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the public nature of the data that I am analyzing through this content analysis, and

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does not make use of human or animal subjects, this project is exempt from ethics review.
According to the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office, research that "relies exclusively
on publicly available information that is legally accessible to the public and protected by law"
("Research Exempt," n.d., para 4) is exempt from ethics review.

Chapter 4: Findings

In the previous chapter, I outlined the research design and methodology that would define
the parameters of this study, including my research question, criteria and data selection
processes, and methods of analysis. I explained how I would use a combination of quantitative
and qualitative content analysis in order to determine the success or failure of "Hockey is for
Everyone" Instagram advertisement posts. This next section will present the findings that
emerged from this study, and attempt to respond to my research question in providing the results
of analyzing these posts by EDI standards, as well as Instagram social metrics.

Instagram Statistics

After reviewing all of the data surrounding user engagement with each of the ten posts, I
identified the post with the most likes, which was Business 10, the Chicago Blackhawks who
received 31,211 likes. The Chicago Blackhawks also have the most followers out of any of the
businesses, with 1,651,608 followers as of January 20, 2023, so this correlation was expected. I
then identified the post that received the least amount of likes, which was Business 3, the
Calgary Flames. They have the second lowest number of followers out of these accounts, right in

front of the Columbus Blue Jackets, so this result was also predictable due to less users engaging
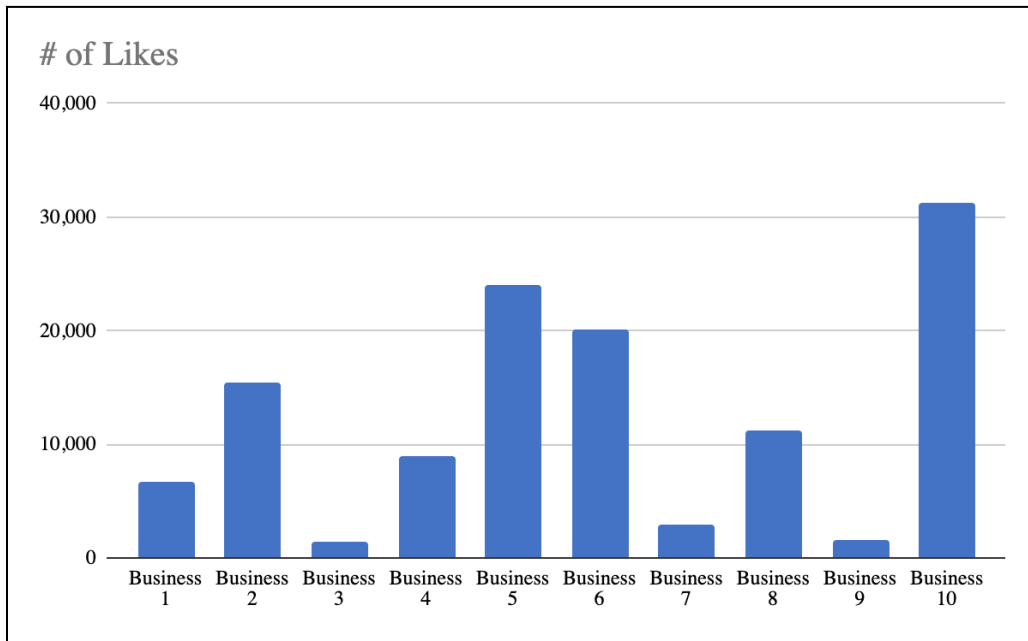
with their content on their newsfeeds.

Figure 3: Chart showing the ten businesses and the number of likes their post received

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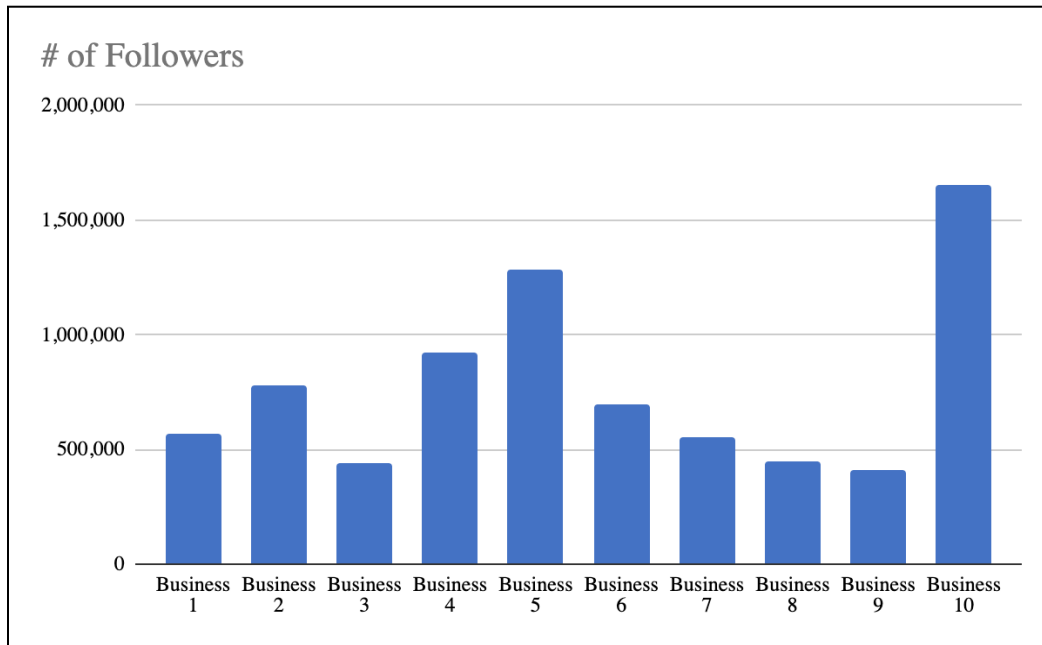
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Figure 4: Chart showing the ten businesses and the number of followers their account has.

Because I wanted a more accurate measurement of the individual posts' respective responses in comparison to each account's regular engagement levels, I decided to calculate a likes to followers ratio for each business. I used Google Sheets to create an equation that would divide each business's number of likes on the post by their number of followers, in order to give me an engagement rate for the post. Business 6, the Philadelphia Flyers received the highest user engagement score, and Business 3, the Calgary Flames, received the lowest user engagement score. The post made by Business 6 was a photo of three Flyers players wearing t-shirts that featured the Flyers logo in rainbow colours large on the front of the shirt. They are posed, smiling together. Business 3 posted a graphic which is mostly text information about their "Hockey is for Everyone" programs, and it includes five small photos of people from traditionally marginalized groups edited together in a photo collage.
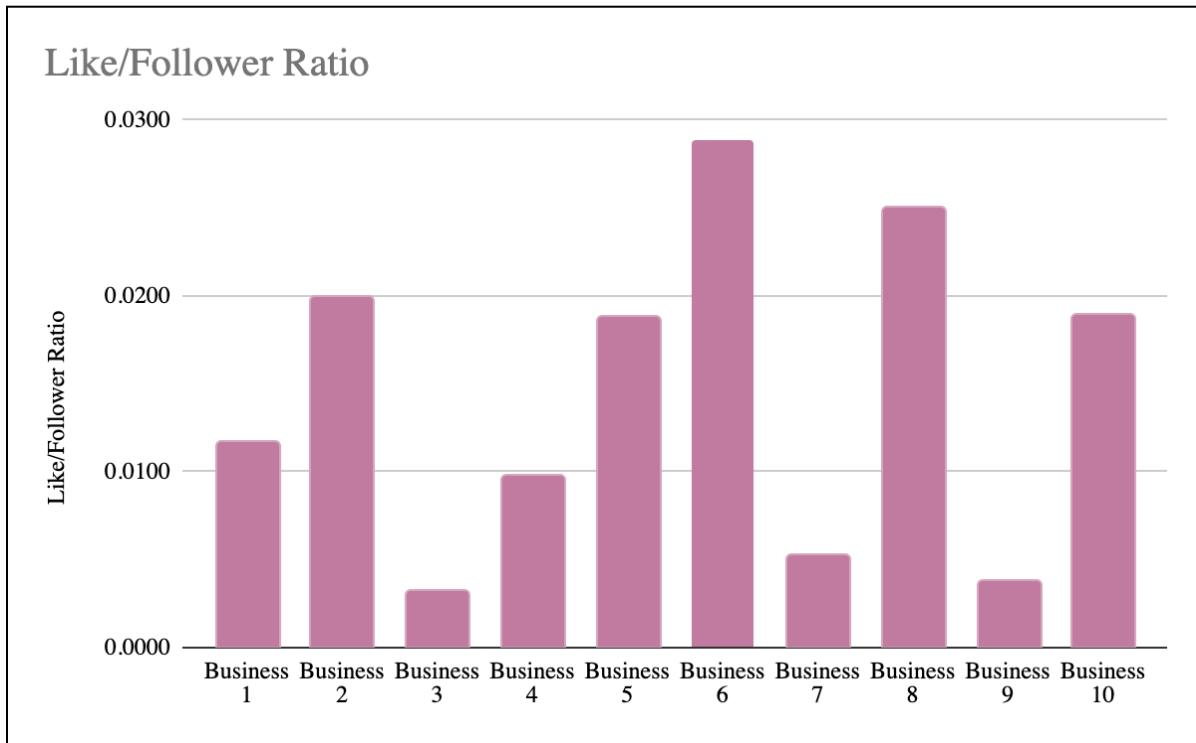
Figure 5: Chart showing the likes to followers ratio for each business, which equates to their user engagement score.

In addition to likes and followers, the number of comments for each post are worth reviewing. Business 6 also had the highest number of comments, with 800 comments on their post, and Business 9, the Columbus Blue Jackets, who had only ten comments on their post. It is worth noting that Business 9 also had the least amount of followers, which can contribute to the emptier comment section. The average amount of comments for a post was 265.2, but the posts were split between approximately half having under one hundred comments, and the other half having multiple hundred comments.

The characters within each caption under the posts ranged from twenty to 203 characters,

with the average caption being 75.5 characters long. The caption with the most characters was

from Business 3, who also received the lowest user engagement score. The caption with the least

characters was Business 5, the Toronto Maple Leafs, who received a relatively high user

engagement score of 0.0188.

EDI Evaluation

After my initial analysis of user engagement through Instagram statistics, I moved on

towards calculating an EDI score for each business. I started with Business 1 and moved my way

down to Business 10, moving horizontally through the columns of criteria I had created during

my research design process. I gave each post a numerical score in each category, until I had filled

in all twelve columns, and then used Google Sheets to calculate the total EDI score for each

individual business. The post that had the highest EDI score was made by Business 7, the San

Jose Sharks, with a score of 6. The lowest score was given to Business 4, the Montreal

Canadiens with a score of -4. The average EDI score of the data set was 1.4, with more than half
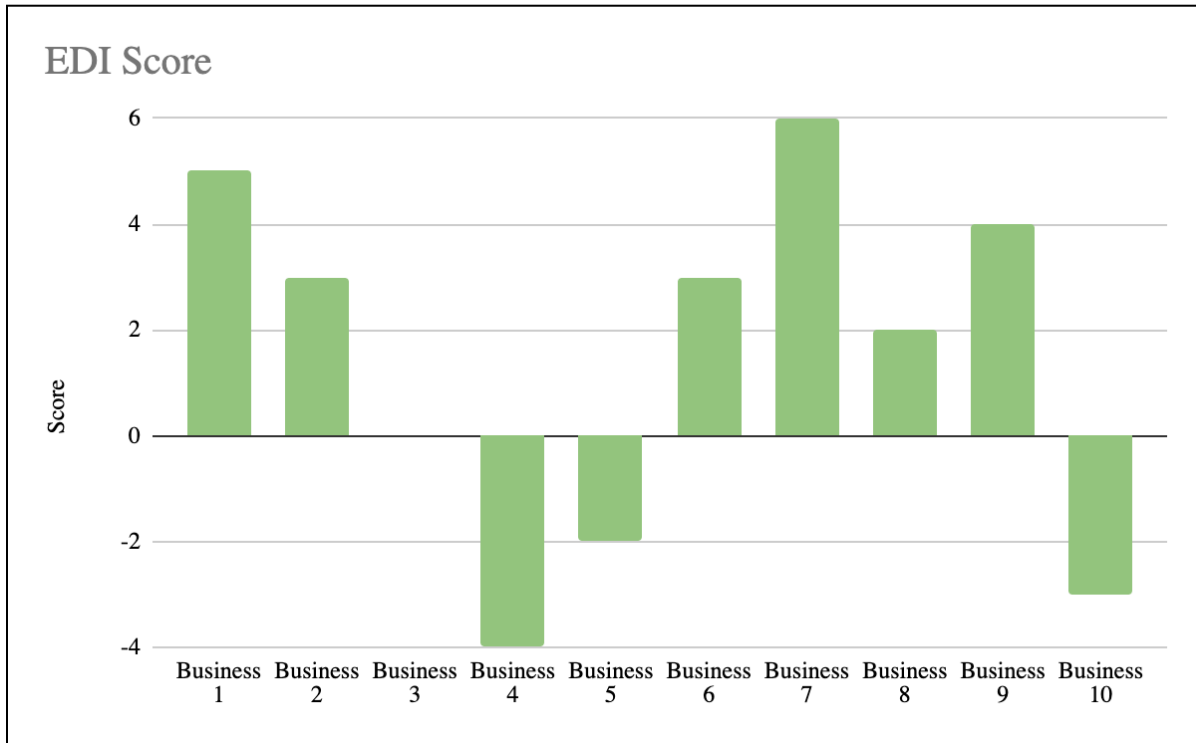
of the posts scoring above a zero.

Figure 6: Chart showing the EDI score of each of the posts made by the ten businesses.

Business 7 with the highest score posted a picture of someone using sign language to sign the national anthem on the ice during their 2022 "Hockey is for Everyone" game. They are pictured wearing a special edition of the Sharks jersey, with a rainbow version of the Sharks logo on it. Business 4 with the lowest score posted a photo of the ice surface from what looks to be the players' benches, with a small hockey puck in the bottom right corner. The hockey puck says both team names playing on the 2019 "Hockey is for Everyone" event night, as well as both their logos in rainbow colours, the date, and "le hockey est pour tout le monde", which is French for "Hockey is for Everyone".

Only four of the images included a person from a marginalized group in the photo, and

Business 7 was the only post that had that person in the forefront of the image. The rest of the posts that featured an individual or group of people who are from an underrepresented population showed them as a physically very small part of the photograph. Five out of ten of the businesses showed interaction between team staff or players and objects that represented their EDI values, and of those, only two showed real engagement through their pose with these objects.

Three of the posts included a stereotype of a marginalized individual or group, which docked each post three points. The three businesses that used a stereotype were Business 3, Business 5, and Business 10. Business 5 and Business 9 also used tokenism within their respective images, and were each docked two points for this. Five out of ten of the posts used a trick effect in their image. While most of them were only used to edit on text or colouring that added to their expression of their message, the only one who used framing to trick the receptive eye was Business 4, which ended up with the lowest EDI score.

Lastly, the use of syntax to add to the communication of EDI values was only used within two posts. One was by Business 4, which added a bit more context to the first photo by including a photo of a player in a rainbow jersey, and the other was Business 8, the Carolina Hurricanes, who expanded on their plain rainbow logo with additional resources and information on the following slides.

After assessing the range of EDI scores and user engagement scores that existed within this data set, I wanted to know if there was a correlation, positive or negative, between the two scores. I used the Google Sheets correlation function to calculate a -0.516 correlation for these data. According to Mindrila and Balentyne (n.d.), a correlation between two sets of data is

considered strong if their "value is larger than 0.7" (p. 9). Because of this, the correlation -0.516

is a moderately strong negative correlation. Thai means that it is somewhat common for the posts

that receive the higher amounts of engagement to receive the lower EDI scores in comparison to

the rest of the data set. By looking at Figure 9 below, it is noticeable that the trend lines for each

set of data collide with each other in the center of the data. This speaks to a trend of the posts that

are receiving average EDI scores, are often also receiving an average amount of engagement.

The data on the high and low ends of both data sets then are where this negative correlation

really becomes apparent. For example, the business with the highest EDI score, Business 7

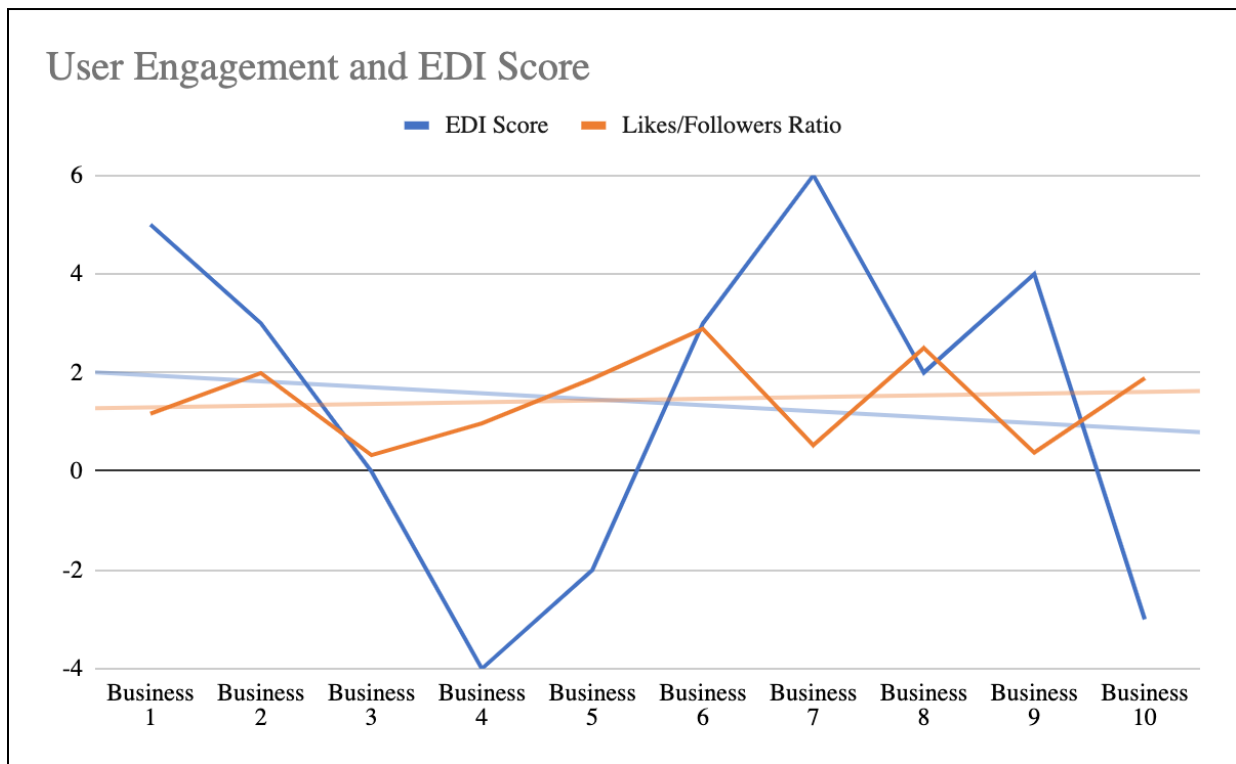received the second lowest engagement score.

Figure 7: A chart comparing the ten businesses' user engagement scores and EDI scores.

After discovering this significant correlation, I wanted to see if there was a correlation between EDI scores and the country of the business that made the post. I used a scatter plot to map the EDI scores of all ten businesses, based on their location, and found that Canada had a total of two EDI points, whereas the United States had a total of twelve EDI points. This surprised me, as my sociocultural understanding led me to hypothesize that Canadian sports were farther ahead and more frequent in communicating EDI values compared to United States teams.
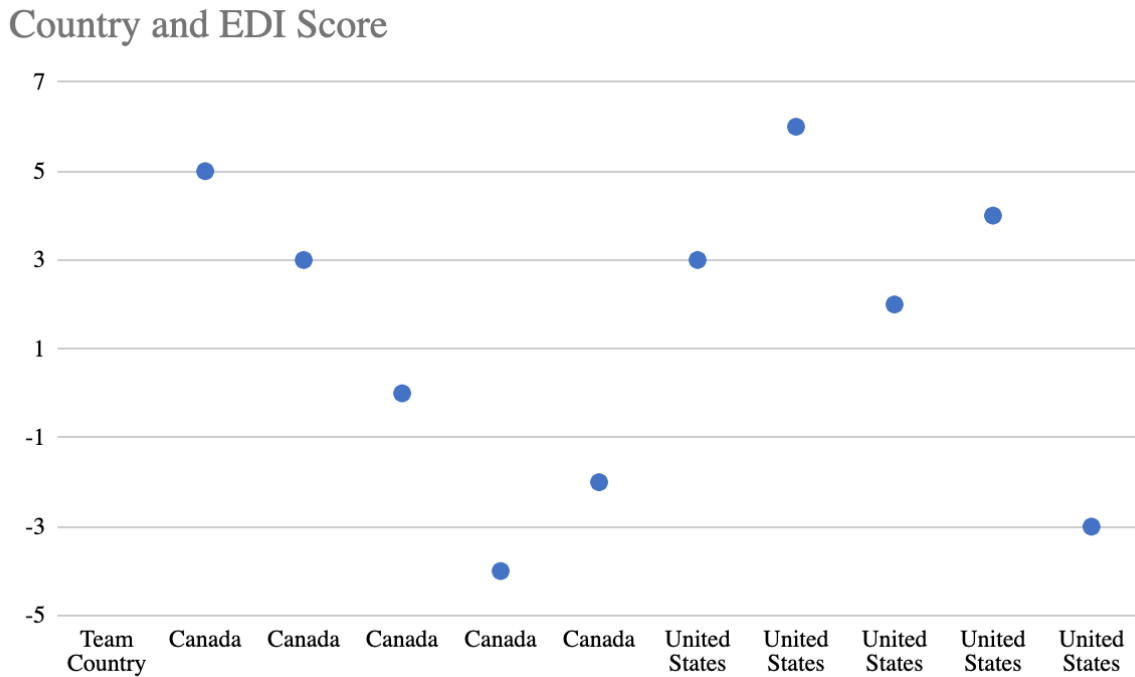

Figure 8: Scatter plot comparing the EDI score and country of origin for each of the ten businesses.

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Textual Analysis

So far I have deciphered the data that originates from the social metrics of Instagram, as well as the visual communication through the images posted. I have not yet looked at the textual communication that occurs simultaneously within these posts. I chose not to assess the captions of each post individually, as I wanted to focus this study on the visual representation of EDI values. However, in order to fully understand the reception that these posts received from users who engaged with them, I determined it to be useful to conduct a textual analysis of the comment sections.

After identifying the top five comments on each post, I originally attempted to put the text into a few different online sentiment analysis platforms, including Daniel Soper, Text2Data, and MonkeyLearn. The purpose of these tools is to analyze the tone of responses to a message, usually used for feedback from customers, or online engagement. I found that after reviewing the results of the first few textual data I submitted, the softwares were having a difficult time picking up on things like sarcasm, emojis, or slang words being used in commenters' speech.

To combat this, I decided to adapt the way I measured positive or negative response to the expression of EDI values from these businesses. Instead, I gave each business a score of zero to five, depending on how many of the top five comments on their posts were in support of their expression of EDI values. Comments that expressed positive emotions in response to the message being communicated through the post were given a point each, using word choice, emoji indexes, and overall tone to signify positivity to me. This score was then labelled the "comment positivity score", and added to my spreadsheet.

In Figure 9, it is noticeable that the comparison between EDI score and comment positivity score shows two trend lines that run parallel to each other in a downwards slant. The correlation I calculated for these two data sets was a -0.162 correlation, meaning that there was only a moderate negative correlation occurring here. It is still worth noting that in some instances, a high EDI score predicts a low comment positivity score. For example, the business with the highest EDI score, Business 7, received only one of five points available for a comment positivity score. Also, the business with the lowest EDI score, Business 4 scored all five points available for a comment positivity score. Some posts did not have enough comments to accurately portray a strong response one way or the other, which must be taken into account before making any assumptions about these data sets.
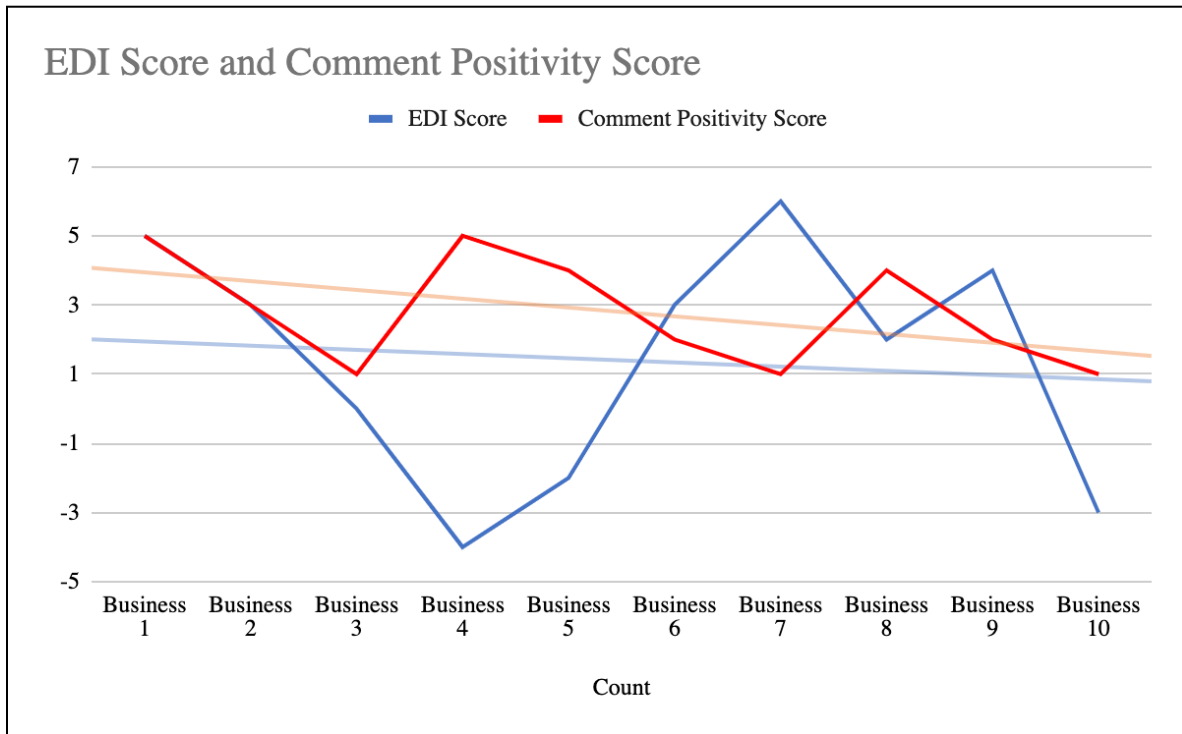
Figure 9: A chart comparing the EDI score and comment positivity score for each of the ten businesses.

Lastly, I decided to compare this comment positivity score with the user engagement score I calculated earlier. In Figure 12, it is apparent that there are two trend lines that start far apart and converge as they move along the x-axis. The correlation for this set of data is -0.0105, the weakest of the correlations I calculated for this study. It is realistic to assume that there is almost no correlation between how much engagement a post is getting, and the tone of the reception from users in the comment section.
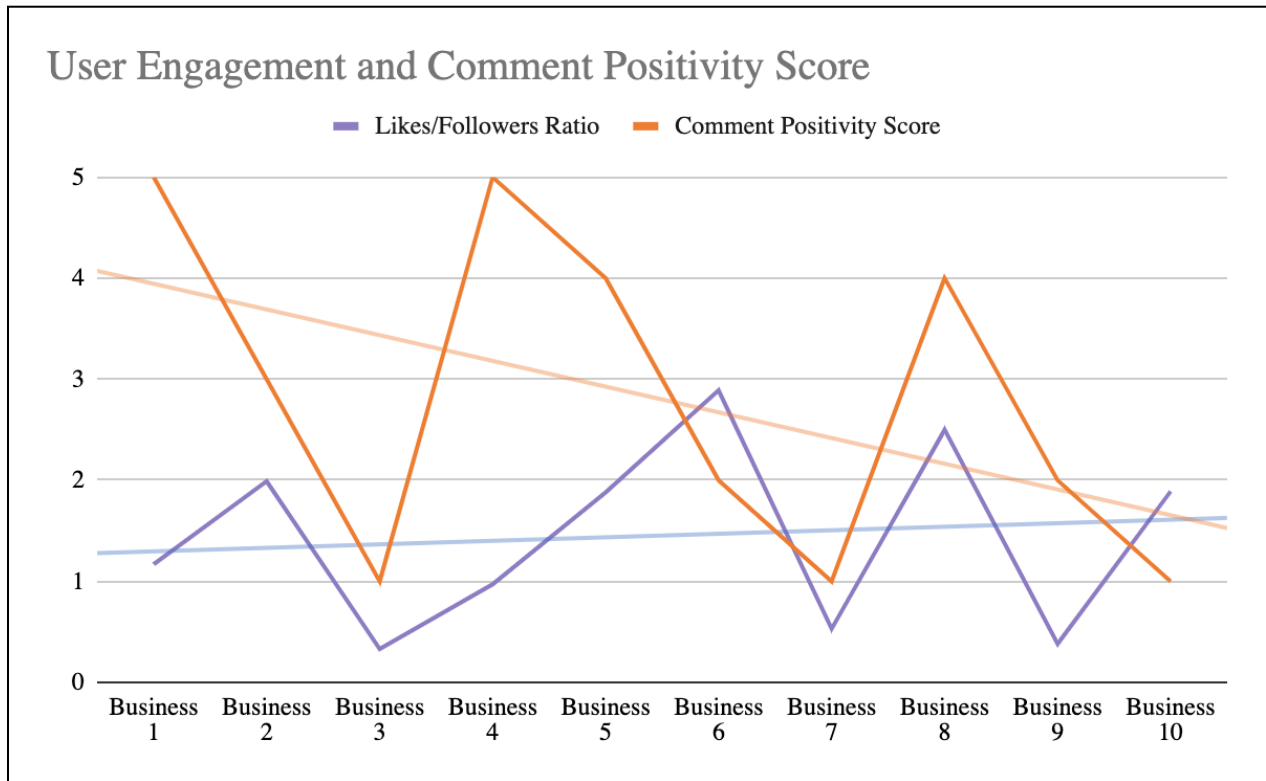
Figure 10: A chart showing the correlation between user engagement score and comment

positivity score for the ten businesses.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In the literature review for this study, it was determined that Instagram is an important

tool for NHL teams to be able to communicate with their fans. One message that these teams

often communicate through this platform is the expression of their EDI values. For the NHL, the

"Hockey is for Everyone" campaign acts as a catalyst for social justice work and verbalization of

EDI principles at a micro level, as this is coming from individual clubs. We also recognized the

value of studying the connotative meaning within visual communication through a semiotic lens,

and how this can help understand the organizational success of an Instagram advertisement post.

With this literature review as a foundation, this research aims to assess what success looks like for the marketing of a "Hockey is for Everyone" event or initiative, both commercially, as well as morally. In the previous chapters, I outlined my research question, design, and methodology, as well as the key findings that came from my analysis of ten Instagram posts made by official NHL club accounts, advertising "Hockey is for Everyone" events or initiatives. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis, this study explores both visual and textual semiotic analysis, as well as applies information provided from Instagram's social metrics features to the overall research inquiry.

In order to organize my results in a manner that aims to answer my research question, I will focus this discussion on defining success for a "Hockey is for Everyone" Instagram advertisement post. To restate my research question, I am interested in answering the following:

RQ1: How can a comparative analysis of the EDI content of Instagram post images and likes and comments indicate the success of advertising photographs for NHL "Hockey is for Everyone" events?

Since we have determined that the NHL is experiencing an "increase of bureaucracy and globalization" (Kennedy, 2021) in the twenty-first century, it is important to first look at the NHL and its teams as a capitalist institution, operating within a larger, increasingly neoliberal professional sports climate. With this, it is essential to examine the commercial viability of marketing campaigns like "Hockey is for Everyone". On the other hand, we have also

determined that the NHL and its teams play an active role in contributing to social discourse, and

often get involved in community outreach in order to "build good-will among salient

stakeholders" (Babiak and Wolfe, p. 720). This is why this discussion will also focus on the

sociocultural definition of success for this marketing campaign. This two-part definition of

success will collectively propose a set of best practices for NHL clubs looking to successfully

plan and market an EDI-focused initiative.

Defining Commercial Success

Highest user engagement score
Business 6

Lowest user engagement score
Business 3

Figure 11: High vs. low user engagement score
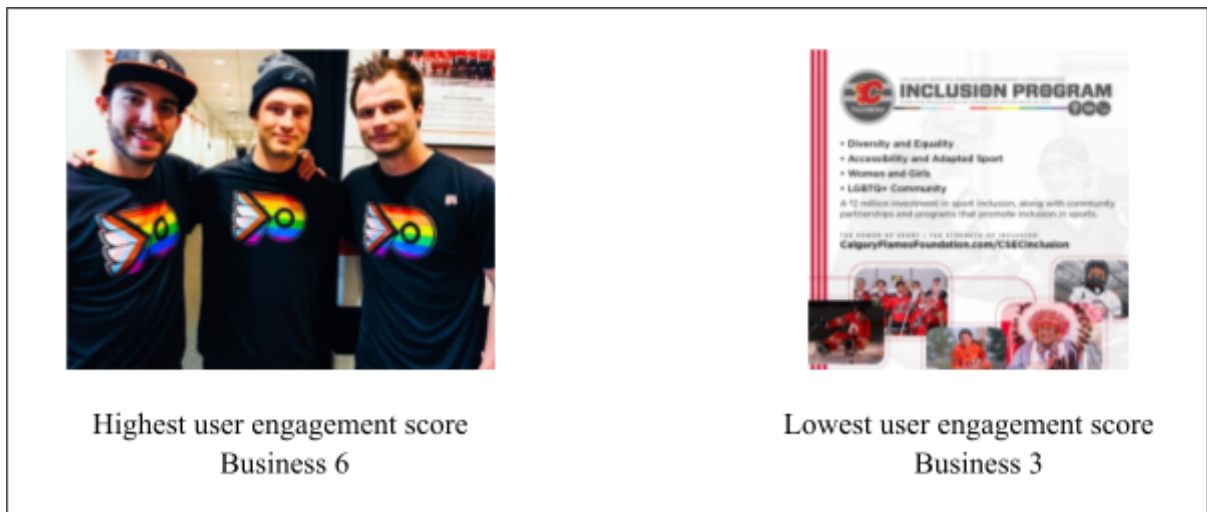
The literature review of social media as a tool for brand management signals that

Instagram behaves as the "promotional face of businesses" (Çelik et al., p. 3830). Because of the

inherent capitalist nature of the sharing of content on this platform, commercial success for an

organization can be measured through likes, followers, comments, and other statistics provided

to an account by Instagram. Through my research, I examined likes, followers, and number of comments as a measurement to determine the level of user engagement with a specific post.

I found that the businesses that had the highest user engagement score (likes on the post divided by followers of the account) were Business 6 (2.89%), Business 8 (2.5%), Business 2 (1.99%), and Business 10 (1.89%). These posts were made respectively by the Philadelphia Flyers, the Carolina Hurricanes, the Edmonton Oilers, and the Chicago Blackhawks organizations. As seen in Figure 11, Business 6 posted a photo of three players in their pride logo t-shirts. Business 8 posted a rainbow graphic with the "Hockey is for Everyone" logo on it, Business 2 posted a photo of their goalie with rainbow stick tape on his stick, and Business 10 posted a photo of their logo (a stereotype of an Indigenous man) with rainbow colouring. Business 6, Business 8, and Business 10 also received the three highest amounts of comments from this data set, proving their user engagement to go beyond just likes.

It intrigued me to notice that two of the top four Instagram posts for user engagement featured players engaging with a cultural index representing the business's EDI values. This did not surprise me due to my experience with marketing in professional sports, and sports communications scholars have supported this observation with theory that suggests professional athletes are viewed in a way that affects how an audience perceives their communication. In their 2005 study, Feezell et al.explore "exemplarism" in order to understand the phenomena of professional athletes being socially accepted as moral exemplars, through what he calls their position as "lusory objects". They explain that it is an athlete's "character and exploits we admire within this illusory domain, rather than persons whose life outside of sports is exemplary" (p.

31). Feezell insists that we cannot rely on athletes to be held to a higher moral standard than the average person, as inherently, we admire them in a space that is different from the standard reality. However, that does not dilute the fact that viewing athletes as inherent "role models" positions their communications, in this case visual, as inherently trustworthy, and morally outstanding to the average person.

Another trend that emerged in examining the posts with the highest engagement scores was the common theme of forefronting the object that represented the team's expression of EDI values. It is apparent that as this campaign has evolved, "Hockey is for Everyone" theme nights have transformed into nights in support of the LGBTQIA+ community. This social justice cause often uses rainbow colours as a cultural index, often displayed to represent support towards the queer community. All four of the posts with the highest user engagement scores forefront an object with rainbow colouring in them. Barthes notes that "special importance must be accorded to [...] the posing of objects" (p. 201), as the way they are positioned within a photograph can affect the connoted meaning of the image. By the four posts centering the rainbow symbol in the focus of their respective images, they boldly express what many will connotatively decipher as their support for the LGBTQIA+ community.

The posts that received the lowest amount of user engagement, and were the only four to total a less than one percent engagement rate were Business 3 (0.33%) seen in Figure 11, Business 9 (0.38%), Business 7 (0.53%), and Business 4 (0.97%). Business 3 posted a photo of a graphic with lots of text and five images on it, Business 9 posted a photo of children from what appear to be (from a distance) traditionally marginalized groups standing on the blue line on the

ice with players, Business 7 posted a photo of a man signing the national anthem on the ice, and

Business 4 posted a photo of the "Hockey is for Everyone" game puck in the corner with the ice

as the background. Three out of the four of these images had the objects representing the team's

EDI values hidden in the photo. Business 7 forefronted the rainbow logo, as well as a man from a

minority group in the photo, but I speculated that because users were not familiar with this man

in the same way as they would be with team staff or players, they were not as engaged with the

image.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the posts that received the highest and lowest

comment positivity scores, as they provide more context into the sentiment of the average user's

response to the post. Business 1 and Business 4 both had five out five points available for a

comment positivity score. This surprised me because Business 1 ranked in the middle range of

data for the rest of the categories, and Business 4 had the lowest EDI score, along with low user

engagement. Both of these posts had all five top comments expressing support for what the

business was doing for the LGBTQIA+ community. However, since Business 4 did not get a lot

of engagement on their post, there was not a lot of data to warrant many negative comments. It is

more significant instead to look at the posts with the lowest comment positivity scores, which

were Business 3 and Business 7. By looking at the text of these comments, both comment

sections are reacting to larger conversations happening within the organization or in the greater

social sphere at the time. For example, Business 3 had many comments about the team's

handling of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and Business 7 had many comments about

firing the team's head coach at the time. Instead of capturing a response on what message was

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being communicated from the organization, the posts with the lowest comment positivity scores

(and lowest user engagement scores) instead caused responses to be deflected to other topics.

This is not entirely the fault of the organization, but instead speaks to the importance of

following and applying the trends that have proven to increase user engagement in these kinds of

posts, in order to maintain user focus on the EDI values being expressed.
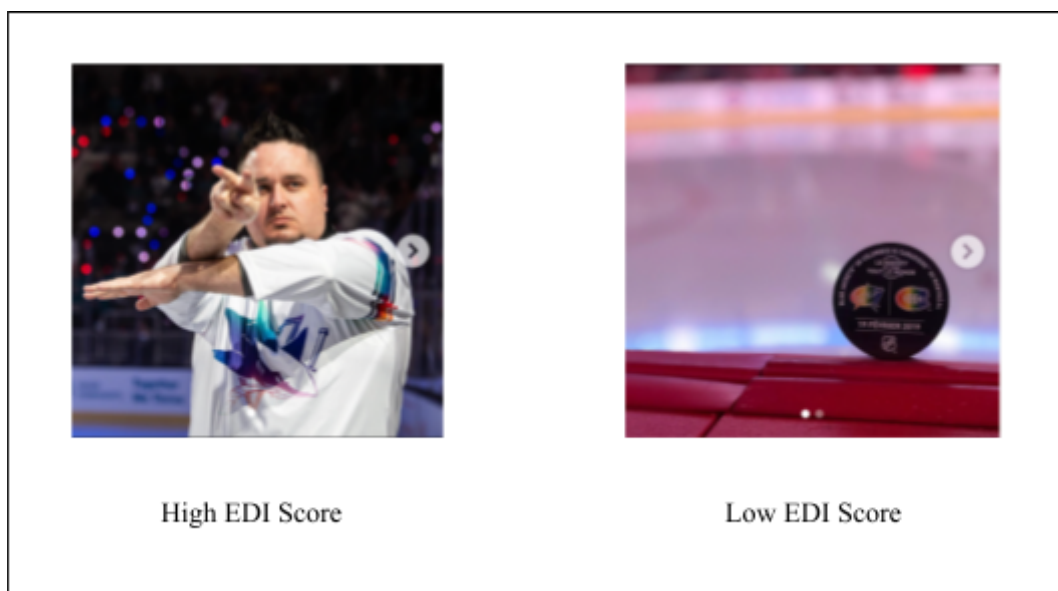
Defining Sociocultural Impact

Figure 12: High (Business #) vs. low (Business #) EDI score

The other component of this definition of success that this study discusses is the matter of

sociocultural impact. I use the word *sociocultural* to signify the measurement of contributions

made to social and cultural discourse. Figure 12 illustrates the general idea of the high versus the

low EDI or sociocultural, score. The "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign is designed to

demonstrate the NHL's expression of social responsibility in the context of equity, diversity and

inclusion within the sport. So, in order to assess what sociocultural success looks like for "Hockey is for Everyone" Instagram advertisement posts, we must analyze the data from this study through a Corporate Social Responsibility lens. Robertson (2016) argues that professional sports organizations cannot get away with simply "doing no harm", as they are inherently imposed within a greater conversation about promoting meaningful change for their stakeholder relationships to be maintained. If they do not, this can affect brand image and stakeholder relationships. Therefore, I must determine the qualities inherent to the posts that communicated meaningful change in the most effective way.

The criteria I created based off of Barthes' "connotation procedures" led to the calculation of an EDI score for each business. The businesses that had the highest EDI scores were Business 7 (6), Business 1 (5), and Business 9 (4). These posts were published respectively by the San Jose Sharks, the Vancouver Canucks, and the Columbus Blue Jackets. Looking back to the three guiding EDI principles that were pulled from an EDI communications literature review (action-based strategies, representation, and engagement), we can pull examples of how these businesses demonstrate this visually in their posts. These three posts got such high scores, because they either forefront individuals who are traditionally underrepresented in the hockey community and represent them in an authentic, empowering manner, or they display a clear, meaningful engagement with the EDI values being expressed from team personnel.

In order to demonstrate representation, Business 7 posted an image with no visual distractions from the subject, who was illustrating his identity in a manner that is authentic to his natural engagement with the sport of hockey. Desjardins (2021) studied the way

underrepresented communities respond to professional sport through their study of queer individuals attending NHL games. They found that a lack of representation, along with non-inclusive language use, affected "their interpersonal relationship with the sport", and therefore, the inclusion of authentic representation for minority groups has the ability to have a positive impact on the way marginalized communities engage with the NHL and its teams. To refer back to Barthes' thoughts on objects, the way they are presented within a photograph, the space they take up, the pose in which they are displayed, and more factors, contribute to their existence as "accepted inducers of associations of ideas" (p. 201). So when we see a man of the hearing-impaired community taking up the entire image posted by Business 7, we are more likely to understand his contribution to the sphere of influence.

Business 1 and Business 9 demonstrate the importance of illustrating positive, meaningful engagement in these posts. Business 1 shows the team mascot carrying a rainbow flag, and Business 9 shows the starting lineup of Blue Jackets players joined by a group of children, who appear to be from marginalized communities such as the disabled hockey community, athletes of colour, and female athletes. Bernstein et al. (2020) argues that "engagement in positive interactions" (p. 395) between organizations and these communities can contribute to the normalization of inclusion within an organizational environment. Having the team mascot actively engage with a symbol of inclusion in the rainbow pride flag, and posed in a way that shows him waiving the flag, (usually connoted as a gesture of support and active participation in movement for LGBTQIA+ rights), the team can demonstrate a resistance to power that acts as an exclusionary measure (Joseph, 2017).

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The businesses that scored the lowest EDI scores were Business 4 (-4) and Business 10 (-3). Neither of these businesses published a post that included people in it. Instead, the photos were of a hockey puck, and a team logo. With the ambiguous nature of both of these photos, the reader is left to assume what the EDI values of the organization are, which goes against the EDI principle of action-based strategies. Strohmayer et al. (2018) argues that successful EDI marketing campaigns have the ability to foster "diverse spaces of discussion" (p. 6). With no detail given or suggested to the reader about how the business is engaging with EDI values, there is no space for this type of meaningful conversation to occur.

Business 10 also forefronted a racist stereotype in their post, which counteracts any meaningful EDI values they are trying to express. This stereotype is the team logo, which supports the idea that the communication within an EDI campaign like this one must consider the organizational context it derives from. An NHL team must first look within its organizational culture and values before "trying to inculcate 'life lessons'" (Pardy, 2021, p. 117) that it is not actively engaged with.

Research Limitations and Further Research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study as we discuss the results and implications on this contribution to sports communications research. As this research was conducted as part of my capstone project, for completion of the Master of Arts in Communication and Technology program at the University of Alberta, I am limited in my access to resources. First, this study was conducted solely by me, with the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Thomas Barker, so there is only one perspective illustrated within the study. Another

limitation is the criteria that I created to assess EDI value expression. Due to the limited time to complete this project, I was only able to have twelve categories to assess these posts with. I recognize that with more time, I could have created a method for a more in depth analysis of these posts. Similarly, I only analyzed ten Instagram posts. This is partially due to a lack of bandwidth, and partially due to a lack of data available. Since the "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign is relatively new within the league, there is not extensive research on its impact, or posts made on Instagram about its initiatives. I also only used publicly accessible Instagram statistics, which could be expanded on in future studies with the request of further social metrics data. I did not include a semiotic analysis of the captions under each post, which could add to the overall meaning and reception of the posts. The last limitation to recognize is the absence of 1:1 correlations within my data analysis. The trends I noticed are worth looking into, but one cannot accept them as truth or predictable results. Instead, this research aims to uncover possible relationships between commercial and sociocultural success factors of "Hockey is for Everyone" Instagram posts through adductive reasoning.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

The NHL is a multi-faceted social institution that behaves both as a business, and a participant in social discourse. The NHL's "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign serves as a vehicle to express the league and its clubs' EDI values through a variety of events and initiatives. This study aimed to explore if there was a relationship between commercial and sociocultural success for "Hockey is for Everyone" Instagram advertisement posts, and what each of these definitions of success looked like through a visual semiotic analysis based on EDI traditions. The

results of this study show that there is a moderately strong negative correlation between the user engagement and successful EDI communication for these posts. This is due to a number of factors, but can be encapsulated in saying that the posts that are receiving a high EDI score, are not aligning with trends that are predominant in posts with high user engagement scores. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that it is possible to achieve both definitions of success, with the inclusion of the right characteristics in an advertisement image.

The photograph must:

Table 4

Recommendations for Successful Posts

Recommendation	Example
1. Show real engagement between EDI values and team personnel	
2. Amplify the authentic representation of marginalized communities	

3. Center objects representing EDI values at the focus of the image	
4. Avoid "exclusionary dynamics" (Bernstein et al.) including stereotypes and tokenism	
5. Be explicit in its communication of the business's EDI values and future action strategies	

Further research areas could include the impact of players on this campaign, the use of "Hockey is for Everyone" marketing materials in non-social media spaces, and how Instagram captions can contribute to the connotative meaning of a post. This research shows that overall, the NHL is doing a respectable job at promoting meaningful EDI values through their "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign, and even though my analysis shows outliers on either side of the data, the majority of teams are contributing meaningfully to social discourse in a manner that remains commercially viable.

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